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R.A.F. NARRATIVE

(FIRST DRAFT)

THE MIDDLE EAST CAMPAIGNS

VOLUME XI

MALTA

JUNE 1940 - MAY 1945

DECLASSIFIED

AIR HISTORICAL BRANCH (1)

AIR MINISTRY

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THE MIDDLE EAST CAMPAIGNS

VOLUME XI

MALTA

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MALTA

CHRONOLOGY OF EVENTS

1940

- 19 April Four Sea Gladiators issued for Hal Far Station Fighter Flight.
- 26 " Establishment of No. 3 A.A.C.U. (Anti-Aircraft Co-operation Unit)
Operational Flight laid down as 5 I.E. and 2 I.R. Swordfish.
- 3 May Four Sea Gladiators serviceable.
- 10 June Declaration of War by Italy.
- 11 June First raid on Malta by 10 Italian bombers. No significant damage.
- 28 June Italian submarine Argonauta sunk by Sunderland of No. 230 Squadron.
- 29 June The Italian submarine Rubino also sunk by a Sunderland of No. 230 Squadron.
- 30 June First operational bombing sortie by Swordfish of No. 830 Squadron against Augusta harbour.
- 2 August Arrival of Hurricane Flight of 12 aircraft from aircraft carrier H.M.S. Argus (Operation "Hurry").
- 4 " Formation of No. 261 Squadron (Hurricanes).
- 19 Sept. No. 431 (G.R.) Flight Glen Martin Unit formed. The personnel of No. 3 A.A.C.U. absorbed and their Unit disbanded.
- 23 " Arrival at Malta of Sunderland Detachment of No. 228 Squadron.
- 28 Oct. Italy invaded Greece.
- 17 Nov. Operation "White". Only four Hurricanes ~~and one Glom~~ arrived at Malta out of 12 Hurricanes ~~and two Gloms~~ flown off the aircraft carrier Argus, ~~arrived by 2 Gloms~~.
- 1 Dec, No. 148 (Wellingtons), Malta's first bomber squadron, established on the island.
- 10 " Hitler announces decision to base X Fliegerkorps in the Mediterranean.

1941

- Jan. Arrival of Luftwaffe Units in Italy and Sicily for offensive against Malta.
No. 431 (G.R.) Flight disbanded and No. 69 (G.R.) Squadron formed.
- 9 Jan. Five Swordfish flown off aircraft carrier Ark Royal
- 10 " Attack by German Ju.87s on convoy "Excess" south of Malta.
Illustrious seriously damaged.
Supply ship Essex arrived Malta. The Essex was later severely damaged by air attack.

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1941 (Contd.)

- 12 Jan. German air strength on Sicily 255 aircraft. Attack by Wellingtons on German-occupied airfield at Catania.
- 16 " First heavy German attack on Malta. Beginning of the Illustrious blitz
- 23 " Illustrious sails from Malta for Alexandria.
- 27 " First combined operation between Malta's reconnaissance and strike aircraft. The Ingo (German 3,950 tons) sunk by the F.A.A. Swordfish of Nos. 830 and 806 Squadrons.
- 12 Feb. Me.109 fighters make first appearance over Malta as escort to German bombers.
- 15 Feb. S.S. Juventus (Italian 4,920 tons) sunk by Swordfish of No. 830 Squadron.
- 26 Feb. Severe German raid on Luqa destroyed six Wellingtons and damaged another nine aircraft.
- 9 Mar. Recall of No. 148 Squadron (Wellington) to Middle East.
- 23 Mar. Arrival of convoy ^{M.} M.W. 6 at Malta. Enemy raids intensified. The supply ships City of Lincoln and Perthshire seriously damaged. Move of No. 228 Squadron back to the Middle East.
- 3 April Operation "Winch". 12 Hurricanes arrived safely at Malta.
- 12 " Return of Wellingtons of No. 148 Squadron to Malta. Attacks mounted against Tripoli.
- 21 " British forces begin withdrawal from Crete (Operation "Demon"). Evacuation completed by the end of month.
- 24 " Operation "Dunlop". 23 Hurricanes arrived at Malta.
- 27 " Arrival of Blenheims of No. 21 Squadron Detachment.
- 1 May No. 252 Squadron Detachment (Beaufighters) arrived at Malta.
- 11 " Blenheims of No. 21 Squadron leave Malta for U.K.
- 16 " Arrival as replacement for No. 21 Squadron of Detachment from No. 139 Squadron.
- 18 " Between 18 and 27 May majority of German air force units sent to North Africa or Greece.
- 20 " Germans begin invasion of Crete. Completed by 1 June.
- 21 " Operation "Splice". 46 Hurricanes arrived at Malta but only four retained, together with the pilots of No. 249 Squadron. Detachment of No. 82 Squadron (Blenheims) arrived at Malta.
- 22 " Italian ship Perseo (4,857 tons) bombed and sunk by Blenheims of No. 139 Squadron. Sinking shared with Royal Navy.
- 25 " Air Vice-Marshal H. P. Lloyd, M.C., D.F.C., arrived to take command as A.O.C. Malta vice Air Vice-Marshal F. H. N. Maynard, C.B., A.F.C.

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1941 (Contd.)

- 26 May Blenheims of Nos. 82 and 139 Squadrons sank 6,342-ton Italian M/V. Marco Foscarini.
- 30 " Blenheims sank 3,314-tons cargo vessel S.S. Florida II.
- 3 June Italian M/V^S Montello (6,117 tons^S) and Beatrice C (6,132 tons) sunk by Blenheims of Nos. 82 and 139 Squadrons.
- 6 June No. 46 Squadron arrived from U.K. (Operation "Rocket").
- 18 June Operation "Tracer". 43 Hurricanes landed safely at Malta. 34 flew on to Middle East.
- 27 June Operation "Railway" (First Phase). 21 Hurricanes arrived safely at Malta.
- 30 June Operation "Railway" (Second Phase). 35 Hurricanes arrived at Malta.
- 1 July Eritrea (Italian 2,517 tons) sunk by Wellingtons of No. 148 Squadron in bombing attack on Tripoli.
- 3 July Sparta (German 1,724 tons) sunk in combined Wellington and Swordfish attack on Tripoli.
- 22 July Preussen (German 8,230 tons) sunk by Blenheims of No. 110¹¹⁰ Squadron. ~~100~~
- 22 July Brarena (Italian-registered Norwegian 6,996 tons) sunk by combined Blenheim and Swordfish attacks.
- 24 July Operation "Substance". Six ships totalling 60,000 tons gross arrived safely at Malta (Melbourne Star, Sydney Star, City of Pretoria, Port Chalmers, Durham, Deucalion).
- 26 July Abortive attack on Malta Harbour by enemy light naval forces (E-boats and midget submarines, supported by the Diana, a fast torpedo-boat carrier).
- August Bombing offensive maintained against Tripoli.
- 2 August Arrival of Force 'X' at Malta with 70 officers, 1,676 O.Rs. and 140 tons of stores (Operation "Style").
- 2 August Malta Night Fighter Flight formed (No. 1435 Flight). First success scored on 5 August.
- 5 August Nita (Italian 6,813 tons) sunk by combined strike Blenheims and Swordfish.
- 6 August Arrival of Wellingtons No. 38 Squadron.
- 10/11 Aug. California (Italian 13,060 tons) sunk at Catania by Fleet Air Arm Swordfish. She was reported to have been a hospital ship but did not feature in the Italian naval order of battle.
- 17 August ^O
Maddalena Adero (Italian 5,479 tons) sunk by Fleet Air Arm Swordfish.
- 30 August Heavy raid on Tripoli by Wellingtons. Four ships sunk including the Italian RIV of 6,630 tons.

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1941

- Sept. Bomb racks fitted to Hurricanes and beginning of fighter-bomber raids on Sicily.
- 3 Andrea Gritti (Italian 6,338 tons) and Pietro Barbaro (Italian 6,330 tons) sunk by Fleet Air Arm Swordfish.
- 11 Sept. Alfredo Oriani (Italian 3,059 tons) sunk by Blenheims.
- 12 Sept. Caffaro (Italian 6,476 tons) sunk by combined strike Blenheims, Wellingtons and Swordfish. Three Blenheims lost.
- 14 Sept. Niccolo Odero (Italian 6,003 tons) sunk by Wellingtons of No. 38 Squadron in bombing attack on Tripoli night 13 September.
- 19 Sept.
- 20 Sept. Monselet (French 3,372 tons) sunk by Blenheims of No. 107 Squadron.
- 23 Sept. The blockade runner Empire Gullemot arrived Malta.
→ Marigola (Italian 5,996 tons) damaged by Swordfish and sunk by submarine gun fire (shared).
- 28 Sept. Halberd convoy arrived Malta (72,500 tons gross) Clan Macdonald, Clan Ferguson, Ajax, City of Lincoln, Rowallan Castle, Dunedin Star, City of Calcutta, H.M.S. Breconshire. The Imperial Star (12,500 tons) was torpedoed and had to be sunk.
- 5 October Rialto (Italian 6,099 tons) sunk by No. 830 Squadron Fleet Air Arm.
- 11 Oct. Casaregis (Italian 6,485 tons) sunk by No. 830 Squadron Fleet Air Arm.
- 14 Oct. Sainsizza (Italian 7,933 tons) sunk by No. 830 Squadron Fleet Air Arm.
Comando Supremo (General Cavallero) gave orders for a study on the invasion of Malta (Operation "C.3") to be prepared.
- 16 Oct. Operation "Callboy". Eleven Albacores and one Swordfish flown to Malta from the Ark Royal.
- 17 Oct. Move of No. 104 Squadron to Malta begun in preparation for Operation "Crusader".
- 18 Oct. Caterina (Italian 4,786 tons) sunk by No. 830 Squadron and submarine.
- 21 Oct. Arrival of Force K at Malta.
Heavy Wellington raid on Naples. 34 tons of bombs dropped including 4,000-lbs.
- 23 Oct. Achille (Italian 2,415 tons) sunk by Blenheims of No. 107 Squadron.
- 25 Oct. No. 38 Squadron (Wellingtons) returned to Egypt.
- 29 Oct. Order given by Hitler for the transfer of Luftflotte 2 from the Russian front to the Mediterranean. (Fuehrer Directive No. 38).
- 5 November Anna Zippitelli (Italian 1,019 tons) sunk by Blenheims.
- 9 Nov. Destruction of enemy convoy of seven ships totalling 40,000 tons gross by Force K.

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- 12 Nov. Operations "Pantaloone" and "Callboy". Transfer of 34 Hurricanes together with the pilots of Nos. 242, 258 and 605 Squadrons to Malta in the aircraft carrier Ark Royal.
- 13 Nov. Ark Royal torpedoed.
- 14 Nov. Ark Royal sank at 06.13 hours on the 14th. She was only 25 miles from Gibraltar.
- 18 Nov. Operation "Crusader" launched by General Auchinleck.
- 25 Nov. Battleship Barham sunk by U.331 with loss of 860 officers and men.
- 28 Nov. Berbera (Italian tanker 2,093 tons) damaged and sunk by Blenheims of 18 and 107 Squadrons.
Priaruggia (Italian 1196 tons) sunk in the course of raid by Wellingtons on Benghazi.
- 30 Nov. Capo Faro (Italian 3,476 tons) sunk by Blenheims of No. 18 Squadron.
- December Offensive against enemy ports and bases continued.
- 1 Dec. Iridio Mantovani (Italian tanker 10,540 tons) sunk by Blenheims and the cruiser Aurora.
- 8 Dec. Beginning of enemy withdrawal towards Gazala.
- 9 Dec. Tobruk relieved.
- 12 Dec. Italian cruiser ^SBarbiano and Giussano sunk by Malta Force Group I.
- 14 Dec. Cruiser Gallatea sunk.
- 17 Dec. Lina (Italian 1,235 tons) sunk by Fleet Air Arm.
- 18 Dec. Battleships Queen Elizabeth and Valiant seriously damaged in Alexandria by Italian "human-torpedo" attack.
The blockade runner Breconshire reached Malta.
- 19 Dec. Force K ran into a mine field near Tripoli. The flag ship Neptune and the destroyer Kandahar sunk. The cruisers Aurora and Penelope damaged.
An important enemy convoy reached Tripoli safely.
- 21 Dec. Beginning of Luftwaffe's second air offensive against Malta.
- 23 Dec. Eighth Army enter Benghazi.
- 26 Dec. Heavy enemy raid on Luqa. Six aircraft destroyed and five damaged.
- 29 Dec. Another heavy air raid on Luqa. Fifteen aircraft destroyed on the ground.
- 1942
January Arrival of personnel of Nos. 242 and 605 Squadrons.
Visit by Grp. Capt. B. E. Embry to Malta and recommendation made that Hurricane squadrons should be re-armed with Spitfires.
Enemy flew 1,973 sorties against Malta (591 bomber, 1,145 fighter and 237 recce). Six R.A.F. aircraft destroyed and 54 damaged.

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5 January Operation "M.F.2" to pass Glengyle in to Malta and bring out the Breconshire.

6/7 Jan. Perla (Italian 5,741 tons) sunk by Albacore of No. 8²8 Squadron.

19 Jan. Convoy M.F.3 arrived Grand Harbour with 24,000 tons of stores. The Thermopylae set on fire and had to be sunk. The enemy launched a series of attacks on the Harbour with 72 aircraft.

21 Jan. Rommel launched his counter-offensive.

24 Jan. Motor liner Victoria ("The pearl of our merchant fleet": Ciano) sunk in course of strikes by Beauforts of No. 39 Squadron and Albacores of No. 826 Squadron.

25 Jan. Seven Hurricanes ^{shot} ~~brought~~ down by Me.109s (approximately one quarter of Malta's serviceable fighters). Operation M.F. 4 to pass the Breconshire into Malta with fuel and stores and bring out the Glengyle and Rowallan Castle.

28 Jan. Benghazi recaptured by enemy forces.

February Luftwaffe flew 2,447 sorties against Malta (518 bomber, 1,606 fighter and 323 Recce). Luqa attacked 142 times, Ta Kali 37, Hal Far 23, and Krendi 'Q' site 20 times.

No. 69 Squadron carried out 85 reconnaissance flights. By the end of February left with only three serviceable aircraft.

3 Feb. Napoli of 6,142 tons sunk by Albacores of ^{No.} 828 Squadron and R.N. submarine (shared).

4 Feb. Rommel's advance brought to a halt at Gazala.

12 Feb. February convoy to Malta (M.W.9) left Alexandria. None of the three M.V.'s in the convoy arrived. The Glan Campbell was damaged and had to put into Tobruk. The Glan Chattan and Rowallan Castle were so badly disabled that they had to be sunk by their escorts.

14 Feb. Ariosto (Italian 4,115 tons) sunk by Albacores of No. 828 Squadron and R.N. submarine (shared).

15 Feb. Wellingtons of No. 40 Squadron left for Middle East. A heavy series of raids on the island involving 165 aircraft.

22 February No. 37 Squadron (Wellingtons) arrived from the Middle East. No. 21 Squadron (Blenheims) transferred to the Middle East. They had lost eight aircraft in February.

March Enemy sorties rise to 4,927. R.A.F.'s average serviceability throughout March only 12. The R.A.F. lost 12 fighters in combat (9 pilots killed) and 46 destroyed on the ground. In the bombing the R.A.F. lost 28 killed and 34 wounded.

2/3 March Brilliant bombing strike by Wellingtons of No. 37 Squadron on Palermo. 13,000 tons of enemy shipping sunk (Cuma) (German 6,652 tons), Securitas (Italian 5,366 tons), and Tre Marie (Italian 1,086 tons).

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- 7 March Operation "Quarter"/"Spotter". The first batch of Spitfires (15) reached Malta, together with seven Blenheims.
- 8 March Continuous alerts at Luqa from dawn till dusk.
- 9 March Heavy bombing of Luqa continued. Seven Wellingtons burnt out and four damaged.
- 10 March The first fighter squadron to become operational with Spitfires at Malta (No. 249). The re-arming of this Squadron was completed by 17 March.
- 13/14 Mar. No. 37 Squadron Detachment carried out their last operations. They then returned to Egypt.
- 17/18 Mar. ~~Achaid~~ (German 1,778 tons) sunk by Swordfish of No. 830 Squadron and a mine (shared).
- 20 March In series of devastating raids on Ta Kali on 20/21 March, in which estimated 1,500 bombs dropped, nearly all the buildings on the airfield were demolished.
- 21 March Operation "Scantling"/"Picket" (first phase). Nine Spitfires reached Malta, together with two escorting Blenheims.
- 23 March Operation "Fullsize". The Breconshire, Pampas and Talabot (22,500 tons) arrived at Malta. The Glan Campbell of 7,500 tons lost.
- 24 March No. 185 Squadron re-armed with Hurricane II (Canon).
- 26 March ~~Severe damage~~ ~~Spitfire damaged~~ and casualties at Hal Far. 29 killed or missing. Nevertheless, Hurricanes airborne that same afternoon. Massed raids by 326 German aircraft to sink three remaining ships of Vian Convoy. Talabot and Pampas sunk. The cruiser Penelope seriously damaged.
- 27 March The Breconshire sunk in harbour. Move of No. 229 Squadron (Hurricanes) to Malta from the Middle East.
- 31 March Another very heavy raid on Hal Far.
- April The Spring blitz at its height. Total of 9,599 sorties flown against Malta and 6,500 tons of bombs dropped. 44 aircraft destroyed on the ground and 82 damaged. A further 20 fighters were destroyed in combat. The Luftwaffe lost 45 aircraft in action.
- 1 April Heavy raid on Hal Far. Two aircraft destroyed and ten damaged. Airfield extensively cratered and rendered temporarily unserviceable.
- 3 April Ta Kali airfield heavily bombed and rendered temporarily unserviceable. A number of aircraft destroyed and damaged.
- 4 April Three Wellingtons collided at Luqa and were destroyed. Airfield at Hal Far again badly cratered.

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1942 (Contd.)

- 6 April Serious damage at Luqa, to buildings and installations.
- 7 April More raids on Luqa and many buildings demolished. Extensive damage at Kalafrana. Torpedo Section, Officers' Mess, M.T. Section and the north and south slipways hit.
- 8 April Kalafrana again heavily bombed. The only two Air/Sea Rescue aircraft lost.
- 11 April Heavy raids on Luqa and 9 aircraft burnt out and 4 damaged. Six Hurricanes destroyed or badly damaged at Hal Far.
- 12 April Runways and dispersal areas badly ^{re}crated at Luqa. Three Wellingtons burnt out. More serious damage to buildings at Hal Far.
- 15 April Award of the George Cross Medal to Malta.
- 18 April Five aircraft destroyed at Luqa. The stores hangar set on fire at Kalafrana and the Sunderland hangar hit.
- 19 April Extensive damage to barrack blocks at Hal Far.
- 20 April Operation "Calendar". 46 Spitfires reached Malta, together with pilots of Nos. 601 and 603 Squadrons, from the U.S. aircraft carrier Wasp. Series of devastating raids launched on Luqa and Ta Kali. By the 23rd, nine of the Spitfires had been destroyed on the ground and 29 damaged.
- 21 April The main runway at Luqa badly ^{re}crated and two Wellingtons destroyed. Some 50 Ju. 88s dropped 200 bombs on Ta Kali airfield. Runways extensively ^{re}crated. Four Spitfires destroyed on the ground and five damaged.

Arrival of No. 148 Squadron Detachment of 10 Wellingtons at Malta. By 26th April all but two had been destroyed.
- 22 April Workshops at Luqa badly damaged and four aircraft burnt out.
- 23 April Extensive damage to workshops and buildings at Ta Kali. More aircraft destroyed and damaged. Food short. Beginning of move of German units from Sicily to North Africa and Russia.
- 26 April In the course of heavy raids on Kalafrana one Officer and three O.Rs. killed and one Officer and eight O.Rs. injured, together with two civilians killed and 13 injured. The 10th Submarine Flotilla left Malta for Alexandria. Recall of Detachment of No. 148 Squadron to the Middle East.
- 27 April One of the most concentrated series of ~~attacks~~ ^{attacks} on Luqa. Officers' Mess, Sergeants' Quarters and ~~Technical~~ ^{Technical} Section demolished.
- May The Royal Air Force resumed its air offensive. Sharp drop in tonnage of stores arriving in North Africa for the Panzer Army.
- 7 May Lord Gort, V.C., appointed Governor and Commander-in-Chief Malta in succession to Lt.-Gen. Sir William Dobbie.
- 9 May First phase of Operation "Oppidan" and "Hansford" completed. Arrival of 60 Spitfires at Malta from aircraft carriers Wasp and Eagle. The Spitfires were operational within 35 minutes and flew 134 sorties.

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1942 (Contd.)

- 10 May Announcement by Field Marshal Kesselring "Our task completed". The second German air offensive against Malta called off. Raids still continued but at considerably reduced intensity. From this date the Royal Air Force regain air superiority over the island. Arrival of Welshman at Malta with urgently-needed stores. She was covered by Spitfires from "Oppidan". Luftwaffe had 12 aircraft shot down.
- 18 May Second phase of Operations "Oppidan" and "Hansford". 16 Spitfires flown to Malta.
- 24 May Return of Wellingtons to Malta (Detachment of No. 104 Squadron).
- 26 May Operation "Theseus" launched by Rommel. The switch of Luftflotte 2 units from Sicily to North Africa completed. A noticeable lull in air operations against Malta.
- 30/31 May Gino Allegri (Italian 6,836 tons) sunk by Wellington of No. 221 Squadron Detachment and submarine Proteus.

June

- 3 June Operation "Tilden"/"Style". 27 Spitfires reached Malta from the aircraft carrier Eagle. A Detachment of Wellingtons of No. 38 Squadron arrived from the Middle East.
- 9 June Operation "Maintop"/"Salient". 32 Spitfires reached Malta from the aircraft carrier Eagle.
- 10-12 June No. 217 Squadron (Beauforts) transferred to Malta.
- 11 June Arrival of 11 Beaufighters of No. 235 Squadron at Malta.
- 14-17 June Operations "Harpoon" and "Vigorous". The June convoys to Malta. Only two ships from "Harpoon", the Western convoy (Troilus 7,500 tons, and Orari 10,500 tons), together with the special service mine-layer Welshman arrived. Operation "Vigorous", the east-west convoy, had to be abandoned. ~~Six merchant vessels (Burdwan 6,000 tons, Chant 5,500 tons, Panimer 8,000 tons, Kentucky 5,500 tons, out of Operation "Harpoon", and Bhutan 6,000 tons and AALEKIRK 7,000 tons from Operation "Vigorous")]~~
- 21 June Capture of Tobruk by Panzer Army. Reichenfels (German 7,744 tons) sunk by Beauforts of No. 217 Squadron. Rommel's decision to continue with the conquest of Egypt.

July The third German air assault against Malta. They flew 2,851 sorties and dropped 695 tons of bombs and 2,300 incendiaries. The Luftwaffe lost 37 aircraft over Malta. The Royal Air Force had 36 Spitfires shot down in combat. The attacks were concentrated on airfields in an attempt to ground the island's fighter defence.

2 July Nine airmen killed and 11 injured in attack on Ta Kali airfield.

4 July Beginning of Luftwaffe's third air blitz against Malta.

6 July Total of 180 sorties flown against Malta.

13 July Three aircraft destroyed and eight damaged in an air attack.

14 July A marked decrease in the number of raids. The Welshman makes her third trip to Malta.

15 July Air Vice-Marshal K. R. Park assumed command as Air Officer Commanding Malta. Air Vice-Marshal Hugh Pugh Lloyd left Malta that same evening. Operation "Colima"/"Pinpoint". 31 Spitfires reached Malta.

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1942 (Contd.)

- 21 July Operation "Knapsack"/"Insect". A further 28 Spitfires reached Malta.
- 22 July Return of the 10th Submarine Flotilla to Malta.
- 23 July The blitz resumed until 27 July. Three aircraft destroyed and 22 damaged. No. 1435 (Night Fighter) Flight upgraded to No. 1435 Squadron.
- 24 July ^PVettor Pisani (Italian 6,339 tons) sunk by Beauforts of Nos. 86 and 219 Squadrons, escorted by Beaufighters of No. 235 Squadron.
- August
- 9 August First news of "Pedestal" Convoy reached the Italian Admiralty.
- 10 August The "Pedestal" Convoy cleared the Strait of Gibraltar.
- 11 August Operation "Bellows". 37 Spitfires arrived at Malta. The aircraft carrier Eagle torpedoed by U.73. Attacks by Beaufighters of No. 248 Squadron on Sicilian air bases. Six enemy aircraft destroyed.
- 12 August Destroyer Wolverine ~~sunk~~ ^{sank the Italian submarine} Dagabur. The M.V. Deucalion, 7,500 tons, damaged and eventually sunk. The Italian submarine Cobalto sunk by the Ithurial. The destroyer Foresight disabled and finally sunk by her escort. The cruiser Cairo sunk. The Empire Hope and the Glan Ferguson sunk.
- 13 August ^{The HAIRARARA sunk by bombs.} The Italian cruisers Bolzano and Muzio Attendolo damaged by R.N. submarine P.42. The Manchester torpedoed by E-boats and scuttled. The Glenorchy, Wairangi, Almeria, Lykes, Rochester Castle, Santa Eliza and Dorset torpedoed by E-boats. The Rochester Castle managed to reach Malta, together with the Port Chalmers and Melbourne Star, but the rest were lost.
- 14 August The Brisbane Star arrived at Malta. She had been damaged by torpedo on the 12th. Ohio (tanker 10,000 tons) arrived at Malta after being damaged on the 12th and 13th August.
- 17 August Offensive shipping strikes from Malta resumed. The Rosalino Pilo (Italian 8,236 tons) seriously damaged by Beauforts of No. 86 Squadron and Beaufighters of Nos. 235 and 252 Squadrons, and sunk by R.N. submarine. Operation "Headlong"/"Baritone". Arrival of 29 Spitfires at Malta.
- 21 August Unloading of "Pedestal" convoy completed. Stocks of petrol amount to 973,000 gallons. Pozarica (Italian 7,800 tons) sunk by Beauforts of No. 39 Squadron.
- 27 August ^{DIEP!} ~~Beaufort~~ (Italian 1,527 tons) sunk by Beauforts of No. 39 Squadron.
- 30th August San Andrea (Italian 5,077 tons) sunk by Beauforts of No. 39 Squadron. Rommel launched last offensive in Egypt at 22.00 hours (Battle of Alam el Halfa).
- September
- 3 Sept. Monti (Italian 4,301 tons) severely damaged in course of attacks by Wellingtons, Swordfish and Albacores. She was finally beached south of Locri.
- 6 Sept. Manara (Italian 7,000 tons) torpedoed by Beauforts of No. 39 Squadron. She was eventually beached.
- /12 Sept.

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1942 (Contd.)

- 12 Sept. Transfer of 1st Submarine Flotilla to Malta.
- 14 September Hitler's decision to launch the third Axis air offensive against Malta.
- 17 Sept. Carbonia (Italian 1,237 tons) sunk by Beaufighters of No. 227 Squadron.
- 28/29 Sept. Ravenna (Italian 1,148 tons) bombed by Wellingtons of No. 69 Squadron and finally beached.
- October The October blitz against Malta. Between 11 and 19 October the Luftwaffe flew 2,400 sorties against the island. They lost 46 aircraft shot down. The R.A.F. lost 30 Spitfires (17 pilots safe). No single airfield was put out of action for more than half an hour and only two aircraft were destroyed on the ground. This air offensive was called off only four days before the battle of El Alamein. At the height of the blitz it was necessary to use 10 German fighters as escort to every bomber, so that the whole of the Luftwaffe's Sicily-based fighter force was in the air at once.
- 7/8 Oct. Titania (Italian 5,397 tons) sunk by combined submarine and Fleet Air Arm attack.
- 11 Oct. Luftwaffe launched third and final air offensive against Malta. Raids started at dawn and continued throughout the day. 257 sorties flown. German units lost nine aircraft.
- 12 Oct. Attacks concentrated on airfields. One Spitfire destroyed and a number of aircraft damaged. The Luftwaffe lost 15 aircraft and a single German bomber squadron lost six aircraft.
- 13 Oct. Attacks by 219 enemy aircraft. The main target the airfield at Luqa. Damage negligible. Spitfires flew 107 sorties.
- 14 Oct. 220 sorties flown against Malta. Airfield at Ta Kali rendered temporarily unserviceable. Five enemy aircraft shot down.
- 15 Oct. The Luftwaffe makes a supreme attack to beat down Malta's air defences. The A.O.C's policy of forward interception successful. The G.A.F. flew 250 sorties and the R.A.F. 110. Four German aircraft were shot down for the loss of four Spitfires. The Italian losses not known.
- 23 Oct. Amsterdam (8,676 tons) severely damaged by Albacore of No. 828 Squadron, Fleet Air Arm, and subsequently beached.
- 16 Oct. The whole German strength of 50 fighters was used to escort six bombers. The serviceable Spitfire force reduced to 46. These flew 125 sorties against 260 by the enemy. Only one aircraft was slightly damaged on the ground as a result of all this enemy air activity. By this date the use of the Ju.88 had been given up in favour of fighter bombers.
- 17 Oct. The enemy flew 245 sorties and the Spitfires 103. Six German bombers shot down for the loss of three Spitfires.
- 18 Oct. Success of forward interception. 80 enemy aircraft in single raid forced to return to base when still 15 miles from Malta. Another raid comprising 90 aircraft also turned back.
- 18/19 Oct. Panico (tanker 8,000 tons) attacked by Wellingtons of No. 69 Squadron and so severely damaged that she had to be beached.
- /19 Oct.

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1942 (Contd.)

- 19 October The last day of the blitz. A number of enemy aircraft refused combat. 210 aircraft attacked Malta. For the first time some of the formations were wholly Italian. A very high level of interception achieved and enemy bombers were forced to jettison their bombs. The raids abandoned as proving too costly.
- 23 Oct. The Eighth Army's "Lightfoot" offensive launched at El Alamein 22.00 hours.
- 28 Oct. / ~~Luisiano~~ ^{Luisiano} (Italian tanker 2,552 tons) sunk by a Wellington of No. 69 Squadron.
- 29 Oct. Operation "Train". Reinforcement of Malta with 29 Spitfires from the aircraft carrier Furious.
- November
- Introduction of the Spitfire bomber at Malta. Wellingtons of No. 238 Wing flew 219 sorties in support of Operation "Torch".
- 2 Nov. The Eighth Army's Operation "Supercharge" launched at El Alamein.
- 6 Nov. Beaufighters of Nos. 227 and 272 Squadrons reached Malta in anticipation of Operation "Stoneage".
- 7/8 Nov. Eve of "Torch". Attack by Wellingtons of Nos. 40 and 104 Squadrons on Elmas airfield, Sardinia.
- 8 Nov. The "Torch" landings in French North-West Africa.
- 9 Nov. The first German air units reached Tunisia (a dive-bomber Gruppe and two Gruppen of single-engined fighters). Attack by Beaufighters of No. 272 Squadron on El Aouina airport Tunis. Three aircraft destroyed including one Me.323.
- 12 Nov. The blockade runner ~~Manman~~ reached Malta. No. 39 Squadron resumed operations from Malta.
- 16 Nov. Another successful raid on El Aouina by Beaufighters of No. 272 Squadron. Four aircraft destroyed.
- 17/18 Nov. Giulio Giordani (Italian tanker 10,534 tons) sunk by Fleet Air Arm Albacores.
- 18 Nov. Blockade runner Welshman reached Malta.
- 20 Nov. Operation "Stoneage" (Convoy "M.W.13") consisting of four merchant ships (Denbighshire 8,983 tons, Benton 9,312 tons, Mormacmoon 7,939 tons and Robin Locksley 7,101 tons) reached Malta. Operational strength of aircraft under command of Fliegerfuhrer Tunis 213 compared with 162 with Fliegerfuhrer Afrika.
- 22/23 Nov. Favorita (Italian 3,576 tons) disabled by a Wellington from Malta and sunk by H.M. submarine Splendid.
- 24/25 Nov. Luigi (Italian 4,283 tons) sunk by ^e Wellingtons of No. 69 Squadron.
- 25 Nov. Algerine (Italian 1,371 tons) sunk by Beaufighters from Malta.
- December
- 1 Dec. Audace (Italian 1,459 tons) sunk by Beaufighters of No. 227 Squadron.
- 2 Dec. Puccini (Italian 2,422 tons) and Veloce (Italian 5,464 tons) sunk by Fleet Air Arm Albacores.
- /3 Dec.

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- 3 December Palmaiola (Italian 1,880 tons) and Minerva (Italian 1,905 tons) sunk by Fleet Air Arm Albacores.
- 5 December Convoy "M.W. 14" of five ships reached Malta.
- 6 Dec. Convoy "M.W. 15"
- 9 Dec. Convoy "M.W. 16"
- 13 Dec. Foscolo (Italian 4,500 tons) sunk by Fleet Air Arm Albacores. Macedonia (Italian 2,875 tons) shared between Fleet Air Arm and H.M. submarine Umbra.
- 13/14 Dec. Ste. Bernadette (German ex-French, tanker 1,596 tons), and St. Gerando (German ex-French 4,300 tons) sunk in course of a raid on La Goulette by Wellingtons of Nos. 40 and 104 Squadrons.
- 18 Dec. No. 248 (G.R. Wing re-formed as Naval Co-operation Wing. ~~FAA~~)
- 21 Dec. Etruria (Italian 2,633 tons) sunk by Albacores of the R.N.A.S.
- 28/29 Dec. Iseo (Italian 2,366 tons) sunk by Albacores of Nos. 821 and 828 Squadrons.

1943

- January Malta's Spitfire bombers carried out daily attacks against targets in Sicily and Southern Italy. Mosquitos and Beaufighters busy on intruder operations.
- 14 Jan. Casablanca Conference ("Symbol") began at Anfa, Morocco, and lasted until 24 January. Decisions were made to launch invasion of Sicily and also to reorganise command in the Mediterranean. Italian submarine Narvalo (810 tons) attacked and captured by a Beaufort of No. 39 Squadron and sunk by destroyers Hursley and Packenham.
- 15/16 Jan. Tripoli bombed by Wellingtons of Nos. 40 and 104 Squadrons. The 8,329-ton Italian M.V. Agostino Bertani was set on fire.
- 19 Jan. Edda (Italian 6,107 tons) seriously damaged by Albacore of No. 821 Squadron. She was later sunk by the submarine Unbroken.
- 21 Jan. Wellingtons of No. 238 Wing (Nos. 40 and 104 Squadrons) returned to Egypt.
- 21/22 Jan. Ruhr (German ^{5,594}~~8,224~~ tons) sunk by Beaufort of No. 39 Squadron and Albacore of No. 821 Squadron.
- 23/24 Jan. Verona (Italian 4,459 tons) and the Pistoia (Italian 2,448 tons) sunk by combined strike of Wellingtons of No. 221 Squadron and Beauforts of No. 39 Squadron.
- February Offensive by Malta-based fighters continued.
- 1 Feb. Pozzuoli (Italian 5,345 tons) attacked and sunk by Wellingtons of No. 221 Squadron. The Wellington Flight of No. 69 Squadron attached to No. 458 Squadron.
- 8 Feb. No. 683 Squadron (P.R.U.) formed at Luqa from No. 69 Squadron's Flight of Spitfires Mk. V.
- 11 Feb. Decision to re-site the Operations Room at Malta.

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1943 (Contd.)

15/16 February Capo Orso (Italian 3,149 tons) sunk by Wellingtons of No. 221 Squadron.

18 Feb. Malta a separate Air Command under Med. Air Command (M.A.C.).

17/18 Feb. Col di Lana (Italian 5,800 tons) sunk by a Wellington of No. 221 Squadron.

21 Feb. Thorsheimer (German ex-Norwegian tanker 9,955 tons) sunk by Beauforts of No. 39 Squadron.

24 Feb. Alcamo (ex-^{St. Francois} ~~St. Francois~~ ^{St. Francois} Italian ex-French 6,987 tons, sunk by Beauforts of No. 39 Squadron assisted by Wellingtons of Nos. 221 and 458 Squadrons.

March Numerous attacks by fighters against targets in Sicily and southern Italy. 74 locomotives destroyed or damaged.

8 Mar. Administrative plan for Operation "Husky" circulated. Malta's air strength to be considerably reinforced.

12/13 March. Sterope (Italian tanker 10,495 tons) seriously damaged by Beauforts of No. 39 Squadron and Albacores of No. 828 Squadron Fleet Air Arm.

13/14 Mar. Caraibe (German ex-French 4,048 tons) sunk by Albacores of No. 828 Squadron.

16 Mar. Directive to Governor of Malta. His status as Governor and Commander-in-Chief Malta reaffirmed.

21/22 Mar. Manzeni (Italian 4,550 tons) sunk by Wellington of No. 221 Squadron.

April 191 sorties flown by Spitfire bombers against targets in southern Italy and Sicily. Mosquitos flew over 100 sorties on intruder patrols.

11/12 April Fabiano (Italian ex-French Mayenne 2,943 tons) sunk by Wellington of No. 458 Squadron.

16/17 April Monginevro (Italian 5,324 tons) shared between an Albacore of No. 821 Squadron and a M.T.B.

18/19 April Mostaganem (German ex-French 1,942 tons) shared between a Wellington of No. 221 Squadron and a submarine.

May Spitfire bombers flew 112 sorties against Lampedusa and Sicilian targets. Mosquitos of No. 23 Squadron flew 78 sorties on intruder patrols.

6 May Spitfires from Malta acted as escort to Liberators of IXth Bomber Command, U.S.A.A.F. from North Africa in raid on docks at Reggio di Calabria.

11 May Spitfires from Malta (47) acted as escort to bombers of IXth Bomber Command in attack on Catania.

12 May All organised resistance in Tunisia ends. General von Arnim taken prisoner.

13 May End of hostilities in North Africa. General Messe Commander-in-Chief, Italian Forces, surrenders. 50 Spitfires provide escort to Liberators in attack on Sicilian port of Augusta.

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1943 (Contd.)

- 21 May Bombs dropped on Malta. Series of sweeps by 120 Spitfires over airfields of south-east Sicily. No enemy fighters brought to combat.
- 26 May Revised directive issued to Governor of Malta. Naval and Air Commanders to remain under respective Commanders-in-Chief.
- 31 May: Malta bombed. Damage negligible.
- June Reinforcements to Malta's air strength in preparation for Operation "Husky". Arrival of Nos. 239, 244, 322 and 324 Wings (Spitfires), and No. 600 Squadron (Beaufighters) and No. 256 Squadron (Mosquitos). Malta's single-engined fighter force increased from five to 23 Spitfire Squadrons.
- Escort and diversionary sweeps by Spitfires for U.S.A.A.F. IXth Bomber Command continued.
- 19/20 Velino (Italian Naval tanker 1,339 tons) sunk by Albacore of No. 828 Squadron.
- July 33rd Pursuit Group U.S.A.A.F. (Kittyhawks) moved to Pantelleria. 31st Pursuit Group U.S.A.A.F. (Spitfires) moved to newly completed airfield on Island of Gozo. By 3 July all Spitfire squadrons moved to Malta. By D-day the force assembled on the Islands of Malta, Gozo and Pantelleria, including F.A.A. and U.S.A.A.F., comprised 38½ squadrons or 670 aircraft.
- Fighters' bomber and then light bomber squadrons called forward from North Africa as airfields became available in Sicily. By the end of the month only five Spitfire squadrons were retained in Malta, for protection of shipping and local air defence.
- By end of July Malta-based aircraft had flown 9,950 sorties.
- 9/10 July Opening phase of Operation "Husky". Airborne assault on Sicily involving 450 transport aircraft and gliders.
- 10 July At first light airborne landings commenced. Aircraft under the control of A.H.Q. Malta flew 1,165 sorties.
- 12/13 July German night bombers particularly active. Switch of fighter squadrons to Sicily began. Nos. 145 S.A.A.F. and 601 Spitfire Squadrons transferred to Pachino.
- transferred* 14 July 33rd Pursuit Group U.S.A.A.F. left Pantelleria for Licata. Nos. 43, 93 and 243 Squadrons to Comiso.
- 15 July By fifth day of invasion enemy air opposition completely broken.
- 31st Pursuit Group U.S.A.A.F. moved from Gozo to Licata and Ponte Olivo.
- 16 July Nos. 417 R.C.A.F. *Squadron* left Luqa for Pachino.
- 17/18 July *Italian* The ~~submarine~~ submarine Romolo (2,200 tons) sunk by Wellingtons of No. 221 Squadron.
- /19-20 July

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1943 (Contd.)

19/20 July Raid on Malta by 25 Ju.88s and He.111s. No military damage.

20 July No. 322 Spitfire Wing, (Nos. 81, 152, 154, 232 and 242 Squadrons) left Ta Kali for Lentini between 20 and 22 July. Light bomber Wings, Nos. 3 S.A.A.F., 232 Wing, and 47th Group U.S.A.A.F. transferred to Malta between 20/23 July.

25 July Resignation of Mussolini.

25/26 July Another raid on Malta by 25 enemy aircraft. No significant damage.

August

3 Aug. Beginning of Italian evacuation of Sicily.

9/10 Aug. Allied shipping in harbours of Augusta and Syracuse raided by German bombers.

10 Aug. Between 10 and 12 August No. 323 Wing and 47th Group U.S.A.A.F. transferred to Sicily.

11 Aug. *Beginning of*
Major German evacuation of Sicily. ~~Messina~~

17 August Messina captured. End of German evacuation and the occupation of Sicily completed.

September

3 Sept. Allied landings in Italy. Italian Armistice signed at Cassibile, Syracuse.

8 Sept. Italian surrender.

9 Sept. Landings at Salerno (Operation "Avalanche").

The Italian battleship Roma sunk by German aircraft north of Sardinia.

10/11 Sept. Surrender of the Italian fleet. Main units reached Malta.

October

1 Oct. Naples captured. The fighting ^{begun} ~~begins~~ to move rapidly out of range of Malta-based aircraft.

13 Oct. Italy declared war on Germany and the Italians accepted as co-belligerents.

15 Oct. Allied Air Forces in Sicily, previously controlled by M.A.C.A.F., brought under the operational control of Malta.

November Royal Air Force Stations Krendi and Safi closed down.

1944
January
6 ~~January~~ Air Marshal Sir Keith Park succeeded as A.O.C. Malta by Air Commodore J. R. Scarlett-Streatfield.

10 Jan. A.H.Q. Malta placed under the control of H.Q. M.A.C.A.F.

/1 February

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1944 (Contd.)

1 February R.A.F. Station Ta Kali closed down.

6 February Air Vice-Marshal A. H. Wann appointed Air Officer Commanding.

29 February Grp. Capt. Rhys-Jones assumed temporary command of A.H.Q. Malta.

28 March Air Vice-Marshal R. M. Foster appointed Air Officer Commanding A.H.Q. Malta.

April Sharp drop in Malta's operational activity. Only five sorties flown on a submarine hunt and 31 on anti-submarine escort and sweeps.

July Two Ju.88s shot down by No. 87 Squadron (22 and 26 July). Operational sorties averaged less than six a day.

August Two U-boats (U.466 and U.230) scuttled off the south of France on 19 and 21 August respectively.

September Operational sorties dropped to fewer than three a day.

19 Sept. U.407 sunk by destroyers.

24 Sept. U.565 and U.596, the only two remaining U-boats operating in the Mediterranean, sunk at Skaramanga Harbour opposite Salamis by U.S.A.A.F. attack.

20 October No. 210 Group incorporated in Malta Command.

November Only 24 operational sorties flown.

1945

January Operational sorties dropped to 14 - all on Air/Sea rescue.

March Only three operational sorties flown.

29 April Instrument of Surrender signed at Field Marshal Alexander's Headquarters at Caserta.

1 May German H.Q. agreed to unconditional surrender.

2 May Surrender of German armies in Italy. The cease fire ordered.

7 May Unconditional surrender of Germany.

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Glossary of Code Names - Malta

1940

Operation

- "Hurry" Reinforcement of Malta with a flight of 12 Hurricanes aircraft flown from the aircraft carrier Argus 2 August.
- "White" Reinforcement of Malta with 12 Hurricanes flown off the Argus led by 2 Skuas on 17 November. Only 4 Hurricanes and 1 Skua arrived.

1941

- "M. W. 6" The March convoy to Malta.
- "Winch" Twelve Hurricanes flown off the Ark Royal, led by 2 Skuas, on 3 April. All arrived safely.
- "Dunlop" A similar operation carried out on 27 April. All 23 Hurricanes arrived safely at Malta.
- "Demon" Withdrawal of British forces from Crete between 21 and 30 April.
- "Splice" Reinforcement of Malta on 21 May with 46 Hurricanes, together with the pilots of No. 249 Squadron. Only 4 Hurricanes retained.
- "Rocket" Reinforcement of Malta with 43 Hurricanes on 6 June.
- "Tracer" Reinforcement of Malta with 45 Hurricanes on 14 June.
- "Railway" Reinforcement of Malta with 55 Hurricanes on 27 June and 1 July.
- "Substance" The July convoy to Malta.
- "Style" Transport of 70 officers, 1,676 other ranks and 130 tons of stores to Malta by naval craft, August.
- "Halberd" The September convoy to Malta.
- "Status" (I & II) Reinforcement of Malta on 9 and 13 September with 59 Hurricanes.
- "Callboy" (1st Phase) Eleven Albacores and one Swordfish flown to Malta from the Ark Royal on 16 October.
- "Pantaloon" and "Callboy" (2nd Phase) Transfer of 34 Hurricanes and the pilots of Nos. 242, 258 and 605 Squadrons to Malta in the aircraft carrier Ark Royal on 12 November. The Ark Royal was torpedoed on the following day and sank 14 November.
- "Crusader" The Eighth Army offensive launched by General Auchinleck on 18 November.

1942

- "M.F.2." Operation to pass the "Glengyle" in to Malta and bring out the "Breconshire" January.
- "M.F.3." The January convoy to Malta.
- "M.F.4." Operation to pass the "Breconshire" in to Malta and bring out the "Glengyle" and "Rowallan Castle".
- "M.W.9." The February convoy to Malta.

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1942 (contd.)

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"Quarter"/"Spotter" Arrival of the first 15 Spitfires at Malta together with 7 Blenheims, 7 March.

"Scantling"/"Picket" Arrival of 16 Spitfires, 5 Blenheims and 2 Beauforts at Malta on 24 and 29 March.

"C. 3." (Italian) Plan for the projected invasion of Malta.

"Heroules" (German) The German version of the Italian Operation "C.3."

"Calendar" Arrival of 46 Spitfires from the aircraft carrier, Wasp 20 April.

"Oppidan"/"Hansford" Arrival of 76 Spitfires from the aircraft carriers Wasp and Eagle (9 and 18 May).

"Theseus" Rommel's offensive in Cyrenaica on 26 May.

"Tilden"/"Style" Arrival of 27 Spitfires from the aircraft carrier Eagle 4 June.

"Maintop"/"Salient" Arrival of 32 Spitfires from the aircraft carrier Eagle 9 June.

"Colima"/"Pinpoint" Arrival of 34 Spitfires from the aircraft carrier Eagle 17 July.

"Harpoon" and "Vigorous" The June convoy to Malta.

"Knapsack"/"Insect" Arrival of 28 Spitfires at Malta from the aircraft carrier Eagle 17 July.

"Pedestal" The August convoy to Malta.

"Grinnet"/"Bellows" Arrival of 37 Spitfires from the aircraft carrier Furious on 11 August. The Eagle was torpedoed and sunk.

"Headlong"/"Baritone" Arrival of 29 Spitfires from the aircraft carrier Furious on 17 August.

"Lightfoot" Eighth Army offensive at El Alamein 23 October.

"Train" Arrival of 29 Spitfires from the aircraft carrier Furious on 29 October.

"Supercharge" The Eighth Army's second offensive at El Alamein 2 November.

"Torch" Allied landings in French North Africa 8 November.

"Stoneage" The November convoy to Malta (also known as "M.W.13").

"M.W. 14, 15, 16 & 17" Convoys to Malta in December.

1943

"Symbol" The Casablanca Conference January.

"Retribution"/"Strangle" Naval and air plan to prevent any large-scale evacuation of Axis troops from North Africa.

"Husky" Allied invasion of Sicily launched 9/10 July.

"Avalanche" Landings at Salerno 9 September.

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"Slapstick"

Occupation of Taranto 9 September.

"Achse" (German)

Plan by German High Command to meet possible defection of Italians.

"Gibbon"

Plan for the surrender of the Italian Fleet. Put into operation on 8 September.

N.B. A number of these code-names are in duplicate to cover both the naval and air responsibilities for the operation.

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PART I - INTRODUCTORY: MALTA BEFORE THE WAR

CHAPTER I
PRE-WAR POLICY

The Pre-war Significance of Malta

British possessions in the Mediterranean area are few and far between, and although boasting over three hundred miles of seaboard are almost totally lacking in the products of civilisation for which great powers frequently look to their overseas possessions. Yet between the two great wars of the 20th Century British interest in the Mediterranean was as keen as in the days when world trade centred in those waters, and her territories, although not commercially prosperous were highly valued. British interest in the Mediterranean lay chiefly, as it still does, in the fact that it was the highway to the East and to the outlying members of the Empire beyond. Her possessions there were precious because they were so situated as to command the more vulnerable stretches of the route. The cutting of the Suez Canal had opened up to shipping the only stretch of this route which had hitherto run over land, and had thereby enormously facilitated the flow of trade from the Mediterranean to the Red Sea, while Britain's purchase of the canal shares, together with her acquisition of the predominant influence in Egypt had ensured her safe passage to the East. Britain held too the key to the Western entrance to the Mediterranean: from the rock of Gibraltar British guns commanded the narrow straits dividing Europe from Africa. Between these two British possessions, however, stretched over two thousand miles of sea, and the only British port of call along the length of this all important route was the Island of Malta.

If Britain was to preserve her interests in the Mediterranean against war or threats of war, it was essential that she should maintain her naval strength in these waters, and it was through

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her connections with naval affairs that Malta first attained importance in the 20th Century. Malta's geographical position was of immense advantage to our Mediterranean Fleet: it provided a control base from which the route could be watched and protected and a connecting link for sea communications between Egypt and Gibraltar. Furthermore the Island was favourably situated for operations in the central basin of the Mediterranean. Malta, too, offered the advantages of natural harbour facilities, and safe storage could be provided in the caverns hewn out of the rock. With these advantages Malta became the chief base of the Mediterranean Fleet. She was perhaps, isolated but with the Fleet to defend her against invaders, her position, for many years, appeared safe enough.

Although ideal as a naval base, however, the island's limitations were considerable, the chief being her almost total inability to produce enough foodstuffs to supply even the moderate needs of the Maltese population, while the extra comforts and accessories of civilisation which the British population demanded were entirely beyond the scope of her industries. Consequently the Island was very heavily dependant on imports: foodstuffs, manufactured goods, machinery, fuel and war materials, all had to be brought by sea. In peace-time the question of importing food presented few problems, and even in war the vigilance of the Fleet could be trusted to keep enemy warships at bay. In the war of 1939 - 45, however, the question of supply was to be one of the biggest worries on Malta for by then a new menace had grown up, whose rapid development had done much to neutralise the security of sea power on which Malta had relied for so long.

The Effect of Air Power

Malta's peculiar position in the Mediterranean gave her advantages for offensive air operations which were, however, liable to be outweighed by the disadvantages she suffered in defence against enemy air attack. Her situation was ideal for

/ attacks

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attacks on enemy shipping passing through the Sicilian Narrows, as well as for sea reconnaissance for the Fleet in the Central Basin, and if the enemy territory were within flying distance she could be used as a base for bombing attacks against it. At the same time, however, when within range of the enemy air force the question of Malta's defence supplied problems which were liable to modify severely the advantages of her position for offensive operations. A small island area, isolated by wide stretches of sea from the nearest friendly territory, Malta was far more susceptible to air attack than a larger country. She presented a small and concentrated target relatively easy to damage effectively because her dependence on supplies by sea made replacement of the essentials of her war effort insecure. In addition, owing to her restricted area it was not possible to organise dispersal of the defence - essential to successful air warfare. Most significant of all her difficulties in air defence threatened her importance as a naval base: if, by a heavy air offensive the enemy could make the island useless for the fleet, the Navy might have to withdraw from Malta in spite of its supremacy in the Mediterranean. Thus, control of the sea route to Egypt would be lost.

The Threat from Italy

Malta's part in a war, therefore, depended primarily on her position vis-à-vis the enemy, but from 1935 onwards it became clear that she would in all likelihood be only too well within range of the opposing air force. The potential enemy was not far to seek: the aggressively national policies of Germany and Italy were already regarded with suspicion and as Mussolini cast his eyes across the Mediterranean in search of a new Roman Empire, Britain began to prepare for opposition. Italy's apparent aims and methods were contrary to Britain's concepts of international

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peace, and soon, when the possibilities of war were under discussion, "War in the Mediterranean" came to mean "War with Italy".

With her nearest neighbour as the potential enemy Malta's position could hardly have been more vulnerable: only sixty miles of water separated her from Sicily, a matter of minutes by air. From the point of view of the Italian Air Force in Sicily, Malta should have been easy prey. All the important objectives were crowded together and there was no hinterland from which reserves might be called up or fighter operations organised away from the main battle area. Furthermore, the Island's sea supply lines, on which she depended for her existence as well as for her war effort, were also within easy range of Italian aircraft operating not only from Sicily but from Sardinia in the west and Libya in the east. By contrast, the Italian effort could rely on a steady source of supply. Behind the Sicilian airfields lay all the products of industrial Italy, and reserve forces could be called up from more distant airfields where likelihood of attack was remote.

Hostile activities from Malta were bound to be effected by the weaknesses of her position. Her air force had to be crowded together on a few small airfields while her offensive units were faced with a variety of targets which a small force could hardly attack constantly or heavily enough to neutralise the enemy's air threat. At the same time her effort was hampered by routine problems such as supply, repair and dispersal which reached abnormal proportions on a small and isolated island.

In the years before the war it was accepted that if the navy was to continue to use Malta as a base some form of air defence would be essential. The first question was therefore whether

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the Island could be so defended from air attack as to allow the fleet to remain there: if not, should she have any air defence at all? If she was to remain a naval base a minimum scale of air defence would have to be determined. These were the questions involved in the consideration of Malta's part in a war. The discussions on the subject from 1935 until the outbreak of war show clearly the main factors of the problem and explain how it came about that in June 1940, when faced with war against Italy, Malta had received no aircraft for her defence.

/ Policy



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Policy Developments

With the culmination of the Italo-Abyssinian crisis in 1935, the question whether Great Britain should oppose Italy's designs by force, led to the serious consideration of the position in the Mediterranean. Previously Malta had played an important part in that theatre as the headquarters of the Mediterranean Fleet, and consequently her position in a war with Italy figured prominently in the discussions that now took place. In the previous year, Malta had been described as the main base of the Fleet in time of war, although, in a survey of the position vis à vis Italy it was suggested that some modifications in the use of Malta might be necessary. It was stated, in particular, that it was not a feasible operation, without effective support from other air bases, to defend a small island area within range of the metropolitan air force of a Great Power, and that therefore, in the absence of effective defence, the use of Malta as a naval base might be seriously prejudiced. This maxim of defence against air power was of great importance in future policy decisions, and one on which, later, the air and naval staffs failed to agree. During the immediate crisis of 1935 however, it was accepted. By the summer of that year the naval staff had become increasingly doubtful whether Malta could be used by the Fleet in a war with Italy, and the navy moved its headquarters to the Eastern Mediterranean.

Although the intention of using Malta as a naval base had been relinquished, consideration had still to be given to the defence of the Island for its own sake. The vulnerability of Malta in the event of air attack from Sicily and Southern Italy gave rise to the question whether Malta was to be defended at all. The defence of the Island was advocated, however, for three main reasons:-

- (i) There was at Malta a valuable accumulation of naval resources which should be preserved if possible.

/ (ii)

~~G.I.D. 402-C~~

A.H.B./18/4/3

~~G.I.D.~~~~149th Meeting~~

A.H.B./18/5/1

~~G.I.D.~~~~149th Meeting~~

A.H.B./18/3/7

- (ii) it was considered that if Malta were defended she would present to the enemy a diversionary target favourable to the operations of our fleet, and
- (iii) to abandon Malta without any attempt at defence, ^{to} would inflict a severe blow ~~on~~ our prestige, even if it were only a temporary measure.

Ibid

Accordingly, in the summer of 1935, the reinforcement recommended for local defence, including a fighter squadron, were sent to the Island. After the crisis had subsided the Fleet returned to Malta, and the emergency defences were withdrawn. The policy for Malta ~~was~~, however, ^{ed} ~~to~~ remain uncertain.

~~C.O.S. 655~~
~~(S.P.)~~

A.H.B./IB/6/1

During the years that followed, up to 1939, the Island's defences were regularly reviewed by the C.O.S. committee, with a view to gradual improvement. This was part of the general policy for defended ports abroad and was mainly concerned with ^{and} passive defences. Meanwhile, ~~however~~, the C.-in-C. ^{ed} A.O.C. Mediterranean frequently brought forward the war-time policy of their commands for discussion, and plans for air and naval co-operation were kept in mind. From 1937 onwards, however, it had become an accepted fact that in the event of war with Italy the Fleet would take up its headquarters in the Eastern Mediterranean, and this decision coloured the whole of the Mediterranean, Air Policy. In July 1937, Air Commodore Maltby, A.O.C. Mediterranean wrote to Air Ministry to discuss the methods of removing essential stores from Malta in the event of the outbreak of war and the departure of the Fleet. He considered then, ⁽¹⁾ that unless a high degree of protection against air attack were provided, air forces would be far more profitably employed elsewhere, including No. 202 (London Flying Boat) Squadron which could not be expected to survive alone in Malta for more than a few days.

~~C.O.S. 220th~~
~~Meeting~~

A.H.B./IB/5/9

A.M. File
S.41415
11A and 12A

/In

(1) This was then the one operational squadron at Malta.

21A

In August an Air Council letter to the A.O.C. revealed the intention of the Ministry regarding Air Policy in the Mediterranean. It was considered that it would not be justifiable to improve the strategic situation in the Mediterranean if this could only be done at the expense of the Air Defence of Great Britain, and that if it were possible to release fighter squadrons for service abroad it would probably be necessary to send all of them to the Middle East. It was admitted, however, that political considerations might, in practice, require the diversion of a small number of fighter aircraft to Malta itself. The disposal of the Flying Boat Squadron had not yet been decided. It might leave for the Eastern Mediterranean on the outbreak of war, or it might have to remain at Malta for the first few weeks at least to carry out reconnaissance in the Malta channel.

A.M. File
S.44534
1B

In March 1938 ^{the} A.O.C. Mediterranean was informed that no land-plan reinforcements were contemplated for the Island, but that sufficient personnel and equipment should be held at Malta to permit the operation of one additional (London Flying Boat) squadron which would be supplied with flying crews only. The A.O.C. now felt that it was time to define more clearly the extent of his command in time of war, and on 9 April he submitted his proposals to Air Ministry. His main object was to make clear the responsibilities of his command in the Western and Eastern Basins in the event of war, and, to advocate a measure of re-organisation whereby the co-ordination of the Middle East and Mediterranean commands could be based on a peace-time system easily adaptable to war-time conditions. Having made various suggestions concerning responsibilities in peace-time and in a war in which normal trade would flow through the Mediterranean, the A.O.C. continued:-

A.M. File
S.44534
1A

/ Should

9

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Should a war occur, however, in which Malta is seriously threatened, e.g. by Italy, trade is unlikely to flow through the Mediterranean in any appreciable quantity. The main problem will be to guard the Eastern and Western extremities of the Mediterranean. Moreover Malta will become an invested fortress no longer tenable as a naval base and useless for my command to exercise control from, either in the Eastern or Western Basins. Furthermore the defence of Malta virtually becomes a political rather than a military necessity, the object being to prevent the Island's being captured, this is a military problem, in which the R.A.F. has a very small part, so small that it does not justify my Headquarters Staff remaining in the Island for the purpose. My command would be better employed in controlling air operations either in the Eastern or Western Basin. It would of course be necessary for a small staff to remain to deal with the air defence of the Island.

My suggestions, submitted without knowledge of your intentions about reinforcements for Middle East or air activity in the Western Mediterranean, are that this Headquarters should move to the Western Basin and take charge there, continuing to exercise as much control in Malta as would be practicable. Middle East I suggest should continue to look after the Eastern Basin.

This arrangement vests this command as well as Middle East Command with responsibility in a sphere in peace which will be its responsibility in war with the consequent advantage that preparation in peace and execution in war remain in the same hands.

During April, however, plans had been completed at Air Ministry for the expansion of the Middle East Command. These plans centred round the proposal to upgrade the rank of the A.O.C. Middle East from Air Vice-Marshal to Air Marshal, and to confer on him powers of command over the Middle East and Mediterranean theatres in peace time relative to those of an Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief in time of war. The new system thus proposed was made known to the A.O.Cs.-in-C. in the Middle East, in an Air Ministry letter⁽¹⁾ dated 23 April, 1938. At the same time it was pointed out that although the plan had been approved the appointment of an Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief would not take place immediately. In the interim, however, in order that as much as possible of the new procedure should be put into operation without delay the Air Officer Commanding, Middle East, was vested with

A.M. File
S.43159
7A

Ibid
15D

(1) The letter explaining the alterations in the command and the motives for their introduction is given at Appendix 1

some of the powers later to be conferred on the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief.

The appointment of Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief was not filled until April 1939, when Air Marshal W.G.S. Mitchell replaced Air Vice-Marshal H.R. Nicholl, Air Officer Commanding, Middle East. The A.O.C.-in-C. then assumed additional responsibility for the co-ordination of reinforcement plans and inter-command training as formerly proposed. In the Air Council letter of May 1939, which set out the full responsibilities of the appointment, its authority was however still limited in two important respects:-

- (i) The issue of orders for the execution of reinforcement plans in an emergency was to remain the responsibility of the Air Ministry.
- (ii) For the time being, the provision of defence measures in each command was to continue to be dealt with direct between Air Officers Commanding and the Air Ministry.

Question relating to the defence of Malta were thus left to the Air Ministry and up to the outbreak of war with Italy when the instructions to the A.O.C.-in-C. were raised it remained a matter for an Air Ministry decision whether to send fighters to Malta.

In January 1939 the Joint Defence Committee had recommended that in view of the general European situation a fighter squadron of 16 I.E. should be sent to Malta. It was accepted at the time, however, that the Squadron could not be expected at Malta until 1940 and in July 1939 a further decision to send four fighter squadrons was made. The discussions that led up to this decision, however, disclosed a ^{ty}diversion_h of opinion between the Naval and Air Staff: the Naval Staff showed renewed anxiety to secure Malta as a base for the Fleet, and advocated strong defence measures; the Air Staff, however, were of the opinion that no measures of defence could ensure Malta for the Fleet against an enemy so favourably situated for air attack as Italy: it was a

Ibid
46B

~~C.I.D. 506-C~~
~~(INC. 497)~~

A.H.B./18/4/3

/ question

question whether the money and resources should be expended on so doubtful an enterprise. Two plans for defending the Island were submitted by the C.O.S. Sub-Committee to overcome the difficulty of disagreement; the lesser included one fighter squadron, but was not expected to prevent the destruction of the dockyard: the wider scheme included four fighter squadrons, but it was stated that the committee could not agree that even this scale of defence would secure Malta for the use of the Fleet. The wider scheme was approved by the C.I.D. and the measures to be taken for carrying it out were ordered. This appears to have been a final decision and no further discussions on the subject were held prior to the outbreak of war with Germany. Malta was informed immediately of the decision in a letter from Air Ministry, in which was stated that it would not be possible to implement this in full for some time.

A.H.B./IB/1/7

No more was heard of fighters for Malta until January 1940, when the War Office took up the question once more, and applied to the Treasury for financial sanction for carrying out the C.I.D.

A.H.B./IIJ/12/67

decision. In February, however, the subject was brought up at a meeting at Air Ministry, when it was decided that both Middle East and India had priority of reinforcements over Malta, except in the case of war with Italy. Nothing in fact seemed to be materialising from the C.I.D. plans, and a letter from the A.O.C. Mediterranean, ^{F.H.M.} Air Commodore (now Air Vice-Marshal) Maynard to Air Ministry in May 1940 shows that the situation was no better understood at Malta. In March Air Commodore Maynard had asked Air Ministry for a fighter defence unit for Malta, but had been told that for the time being with commitments in other theatres, it was not possible to provide an R.A.F. Fighter Unit at Malta. Desiring some clarification of the situation he begged for further explanation:

Ibid
35A

I should like, however, to know what the Air Council policy really is regarding fighter aircraft for the defence of this Island. I believe that the question of fighters for Malta has been considerably discussed in the past and it was agreed that four fighter

/ squadrons

squadrons were desirable for local defence. We were told, since the war started, that this scheme was in abeyance, and though such a decision quite understandable, now, however, it appears that the C.I.D. provision, so far as fighters are concerned, has been ignored, and in consequence no fighter aircraft will ever be provided for fighter defence.

In his reply, dated 16 May, the Director of Operations Overseas, Air Commodore Coryton, explained Air Ministry's difficulties.

The Air Defence of Malta is being constantly borne in mind and was reconsidered only recently by the D.C.O.S. committee, which reaffirmed the decision previously given, that four fighter squadrons should be eventually stationed at Malta.

As you know our main object in the defence of Malta, is to make it secure as a naval base, the idea being that if we provide sufficient defences, attacks on Malta will be so costly that the Italians might not consider them worthwhile. As you know the Air Ministry opinion has been that whatever defences are provided for Malta, it will be impossible to make it useable as a Fleet base I think the experience of the past few weeks has amply proved the Air Ministry view to be a correct one.

For the present, whilst we are so short of fighters to defend other vital areas, we are simply unable to provide any for Malta, as from the wide point of view, unless we can make Malta useable, we should not, in fact, waste our meagre resources.

From this evidence it would appear that although the defence of Malta had been agreed upon as a matter of general policy, there had been so many demands upon resources that some schemes had had to be deferred. The Air Ministry, whose task it was to implement the scheme for Malta, had been unable to do so whilst yet more urgent demands were waiting, and this inescapable deferment appears to have been further justified or strengthened by the Air Staff opinion, held before and after the C.I.D. approval of the defence scheme, that Malta could not be made safe for the Fleet. It seems reasonable to conclude, from Coryton's letter, that Air Ministry was largely, if not entirely, responsible for the deferment of the scheme, and that they considered it was, at the time, their only course of action.

/ Even

~~Air Ministry's
attitude after
Italy's entry
into the war~~

Even after Italy's entry into the war it was still maintained that Egypt, where there were already three Fighter Squadrons, was to be reinforced rather than Malta. This attitude was first made plain over the question of diverting to ^{the} Malta some fighters which were en route to Middle East. On 11 June 1940, when Italy entered the war, there were still no fighters in Malta, but on that day Sir Arthur Longmore was appointed A.O.C.-in-C. Middle East and received the A.O.C.-in-C's charter, giving the Air Council's instructions as to his responsibilities. In Clause 9 of this charter it was stated:-

~~M.F.5.
D.O. 1000.~~

Air Min. File
S.36003/II
1A-14A

You may also draw on, or interchange, the resources of these Commands (Aden, Iraq and the Mediterranean) as circumstances may require.

Consequently, in answer to a plea for fighters from Malta, the A.O.C.-in-C. Middle East arranged to divert five aircraft which were en route to Egypt, but his orders were overruled by Air Ministry, which, while admitting the A.O.C.-in-C's powers maintained that as a matter of policy, the defence of the Fleet at Alexandria was still the prior concern of the forces under his command, and that the reinforcements being sent to the Middle East were primarily for that purpose. Air Ministry, in fact, were sufficiently determined on their attitude regarding Malta's importance to overrule the orders of the A.O.C.-in-C. They did not change this policy until the Malta fighter defence unit, consisting of four F.A.A. Sea Gladiators, and hastily established as a last resort, had shown its capabilities and until the C.-in-C. Mediterranean had made a particular plea for Malta's defence on the grounds that it was invaluable for reconnaissance work.

Ibid

It seems clear then, that the lack of fighters at Malta was due to an Air Ministry decision. There is no need to doubt that had there been sufficient aircraft resources at their disposal, the Ministry would have complied speedily with the C.I.D. proposals and Malta would have had her fighters. The final policy

/ decision

decision, however, was made too soon before the war to allow much time for a build up of resources. In the circumstances therefore, Air Ministry was hard pressed to find reinforcements to comply with the demands for aircraft, and it became necessary to meet the most urgent demands first: Malta was not considered of prior importance, and it was only when her usefulness became apparent that the real effort was made to supply her with fighter defence.

Air Policy in the Mediterranean

Side by side with the question of the defence of Malta ran that of the employment of air forces in the Mediterranean. It was considered that if the Fleet was to operate naval units from the Island in a war against Italy, air reconnaissance would be essential, and, even if it were decided to withdraw the Fleet to the Eastern Mediterranean, air reconnaissance from Malta could play an important part in the Island's defence against invasion. In July 1937, it was the view of the A.O.C. Mediterranean, Air Commodore Maltby supported by the C.-in-C. Mediterranean that in the event of war with Italy Malta would be untenable as a naval base and that, although a few fighters should be provided to maintain morale and to discourage deliberate and unhampered bombing, with the Fleet at Alexandria, other air units, including No. 202 F.B. Squadron would be more profitably employed and more likely to survive at some other base. At Air Ministry, however, it was considered that the maintenance of air reconnaissance at Malta at least during the first few weeks of war would be of great value, and although the disposal of the Flying Boat Squadron had not yet been resolved, the A.O.C. was asked to examine the possibility of wide dispersal of the boats in the bays and inlets round the Island. In March 1938, it was decided that in an emergency a second squadron of flying boats would be sent to Malta for reconnaissance in the Central Mediterranean,

Ibid
9A 21A
and min. 14.

~~Air Ministry~~
~~H.Q. Med.~~
~~3.198/Air~~
\$

/ but

but when the Czechoslovakian crisis arose in September both Fleet Air Arm reserves at Malta and No. 202 Squadron were sent to Alexandria for co-operation with the Fleet.

In October 1938, in order to make full use of the lessons learnt in the recent emergency, it was decided to hold a conference at Cairo at which representatives from Air Ministry and the commands concerned would attend. As a preliminary to this the A.O.C's in the Middle East theatre were asked to consider what improvements were necessary to achieve a higher state of war readiness in their commands. In his reply the A.O.C. Malta emphasised that the removal of No. 202 Squadron to Egypt had denuded Malta of all effective sea reconnaissance at a time when it might have been urgently required, while the absence of fighter aircraft laid the Island open to bombing attacks without active opposition. In war, the effect of both these deficiencies might be detrimental to morale. In spite of the A.O.C's representations however it was still assumed that, on the outbreak of war, the G.R. Squadron at Malta would move to Alexandria, and the conference recommended that with this in view H.Q. Mediterranean should arrange for creating, in the Middle East, a group headquarters formation to administer this and any other G.R. units in the Middle East, besides any units at Gibraltar and disembarked F.A.A. units in Egypt, except fighter.

By 1939 the increased tension of the international situation had lent a new urgency to planning, and the need for air reinforcement in the Mediterranean was recognised as immediate. In the Chiefs of Staffs European Appreciation 1939-40 it was recommended that the naval requirements of aircraft for co-operation with the Fleet in the Mediterranean should include the provision, in time of peace, of general reconnaissance squadrons at Malta, Gibraltar and Alexandria.

/ Several

A.M. File
C.S.1157
1A, 2B, 4A,
9A

Several meetings were held between the Naval and Air Staffs during the spring, to discuss this question during which the wide divergence of opinion already mentioned ⁽⁴⁾ was disclosed. From the sudden decision on the part of the naval authorities to use Malta as a base for surface units, if it could be adequately defended, it followed that such units would have to be supported by air reconnaissance units. As has been seen, however, the Air Authorities held the view that no scale of defence at Malta could render it a secure base for the Fleet, and they were consequently unwilling to allot additional units to the Island while the defence policy remained unsettled. It was eventually agreed, however, that an extra squadron must be sent to the Mediterranean, even at the cost of depleting home resources. The Navy then declared its readiness to accept a reduction in Coastal Command, and it was decided to send to Malta part of No. 228 Squadron which was re-equipping with Sunderlands.

A.M. File.
S.44534
129B

On the assumption that Flying Boats would be based on Malta in a war with Italy, as well as No. 212 G.R. Land Squadron due to form in the Mediterranean in December 1939, the C.-in-C. Mediterranean's plan for Mediterranean air reconnaissance current in August, included operations from Alexandria and Malta in approximately equal proportions. The chief tasks to be carried out were patrols between Malta and Cephalonia, ⁽²⁾ patrols of the east and west entrances to the Aegean, protection of advance surface forces, anti-submarine patrols off Malta and Alexandria, sighting of Italian ports and miscellaneous duties such as shadowing and long distance reconnaissance for the Fleet. It was calculated that the Malta Cephalonia patrol could be carried out only by aircraft operating from Malta, whereas the Aegean patrols could be undertaken equally well by aircraft based on

(1) Page

(2) See Map

/ Alexandria

Alexandria. Other tasks would have to be carried out from Malta as and when the strategic situation and the operations of the Fleet demanded. (1)

Ibid
121A and 123A

During August, the increasing gravity of the situation demanded the reconsideration of reconnaissance plans for the emergency and it was ~~now~~^{then} admitted that No. 212 Squadron was not likely to be immediately available for operations in the event of a war in the near future. It was ~~therefore~~ decided to send the remaining Sunderlands of No. 228 Squadron from Pembroke Dock to Malta, so that the crews should become accustomed to their job and its conditions. At the outbreak of war with Germany, therefore, Nos. 202 and 228 Flying Boat Squadrons were in the Mediterranean, but the emergency in Central Europe and Italy's neutrality pushed Mediterranean affairs into the background. The two squadrons were diverted to more urgent tasks, No. 228 returning^{ed} to Pembroke Dock and No. 202 moving^{ed} to Gibraltar, where a group headquarters, No. 200 was formed to operate the G.R. aircraft there. At Gibraltar, the London Flying Boat Squadron operated under the control of the Flag Officer Commanding, North Atlantic and returned to Malta for overhaul, the A.O.C. Malta retaining only administrative control of the squadron. Also at Gibraltar was a detachment of No. 3 A.A.C.U. ^(Anti-Aircraft Co-operation Unit) Swordfish from Malta, and these were retained to assist in G.R. operations. The remainder of the unit, based at Malta, was used for naval co-operation as far as the regulations allowed.

Ibid
130A

As the war progressed, and Italy's attitude gradually became more and more hostile, attention was once again drawn towards the Mediterranean. In May 1940 No. 230 Flying Boat Squadron arrived from China for operations under No. 201 Group at Alexandria, ~~(2)~~ and during the same month it was proposed to

(1) When Naval Co-operation was eventually introduced at Malta, it was based on these lines.

~~(2)~~

S E C R E T

Ibid
151A

~~REMARK~~

~~S. 498/Air M.A.~~

~~36A~~

~~RE. M. F.~~

~~S. 455B-1~~

~~2A~~

A.H.B. II J 1/165/132

transfer four boats of No. 228 Squadron back to the Mediterranean.

Hearing of this proposal, the C.-in-C., Mediterranean requested

that the squadron should be based at Malta, as had been the

intention if war had broken out in that theatre in September 1939.

Commenting on this request the A.O.C. Malta, Air Commodore

Maynard, pointed out that dispersion was limited to a few fair

weather anchorages outside effective A.A. protection, that the

original scheme for basing flying boats on the island had assumed

the presence of fighter aircraft, and that it was improbable that

effective and continuous reconnaissance of large sea areas in the

Central Mediterranean could be maintained by one Sunderland

Flying Boat Squadron. It was eventually decided, between

Admiral Cunningham C.-in-C., Mediterranean, and Air Marshal

Longmore, A.O.C.-in-C. Middle East, that the squadron should

proceed to Alexandria with the possibility of using Tunis or Malta

to operate aircraft on attachment. Thus, at the outbreak of war

with Italy Malta had not ^{been} given the means with which to take part

in the Mediterranean Air Policy. As in the case of Fighter

Defence, policy waited on events.

Ibid
15A

S E C R E T

CHAPTER 2MEDITERRANEAN COMMAND AT THE OUTBREAK OF
WAR WITH ITALYScope of the Command

It has been seen, in the previous Chapter, that during the pre-war years plans were kept up to date for the employment of Air Forces from Malta in the event of a war with Italy. At the same time, but on a higher level, the role of Air Headquarters Mediterranean, in the Middle East Command, was kept under consideration, and provision made for its wartime status and functions. In the Combined Plan for the Defence of Egypt the part of R.A.F. Mediterranean was outlined and the Command of the A.O.C. defined, while the relationship between the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief Middle East and the Air Officer Commanding of the subordinate commands in the Middle East theatre was further explained in the directive to Sir Arthur Longmore on the outbreak of war.

The Command of the Air Officer Commanding Mediterranean was considerably limited by the general control held by the A.O.C.-in-C., for the co-ordination of all operations in his theatre of war. The instruction from the Air Council to Sir Arthur Longmore vested in him responsibility for the preparation of plans for the employment of the units under his command together with general administrative control so far as operational requirements might dictate. Furthermore the disposal and interchange of resources within the subordinate commands enabled him to switch his operational effort from one sphere of operations to another whatever the effect on the local air situation.

Under the Command and general direction of the A.O.C.-in-C., the Air Officer Commanding Mediterranean held, therefore, somewhat limited responsibilities. Air Command in the Mediterranean became accessory to the main scheme of operations: with limited resources it would have to operate where its activities were most needed, and tend to confine itself to forwarding the efforts of the main battle. The chief functions of the Command were Naval Co-operation, and the Defence of Malta and the A.O.C. was to deal

Air Mm. File
S.43159
109A

A.H.B./B.51/161/22/4
M.S.39/10
~~Air Force~~
~~Initial Outline~~
~~Plan - Combined~~
~~Plan for~~
~~Defence of~~
~~Egypt~~

S E C R E T

direct with ^{the} C.-in-C. Mediterranean regarding the operation of all aircraft allotted for Naval Co-operation, except for those of No. 201 Group at Alexandria which came under control of H.Q. Middle East. It was also intended that the A.O.C. should co-operate with the French in bombing Italy, with the object of deterring Italian attacks on allied bases, but as events turned out the capitulation of the French put an end to this plan. R.A.F. Mediterranean Command was to consist of a Headquarters at Malta, or, if possible, at the Fleet base: No. 200 Group at Gibraltar which had one G.R. Flying Boat Squadron (No. 202): and, in the absence of the A.O.C. with the fleet, a Group H.Q. at Malta to carry on local air defence and the operation of all units under the general direction of A.O.C. Mediterranean. Disembarked F.A.A. aircraft also came under the operational control of the A.O.C.

Such were the powers of A.O.C. Mediterranean as defined in June 1940; in actual fact, however the operational activities which the Command was to carry out were severely limited by the lack of aircraft. Even the air defence of the island, the sine qua non of all other operations, was provided for in the first place by the unexpected discovery of four F.A.A. Gladiators at Kalafrana, and was subsequently maintained by ingenuity in the maintenance and repair of these and other machines. The aircraft which were necessary for fulfilling the functions of the command were urgently needed elsewhere and it was only by degrees that operational units arrived at Malta.

Radar.
R.D.F.

In one respect Malta's defences were well equipped compared with other British strongholds: an R.D.F. system had been sent to the island in March 1939 and was in good working order when war broke out. On a small island R.D.F. protection was particularly necessary because of the lack of defensive air depth:

/ other

A.M. File
S.47124
21A

A.M. File
S.40952
42A

S E C R E T

A.M. File
S.47124
1060

other reasons for the early supply of R.D.F. at Malta were her isolated positions, the absence of other methods of long-warning for raids, and her situation on the Sicily-Tripoli air-route, from which enemy aircraft movements could be followed by R.D.F.

The system on Malta consisted of No. 241 Transportable Radio Unit which was effective over an area of fifty miles all round for aircraft at 5,000 feet. It had a range of seventy miles for aircraft at 10,000 feet and of thirty miles at 2,000 feet. There was no method of height finding at first, and a watch of only twelve to sixteen hours was possible until the arrival of No. 242 T.R.U. in July when the twenty-four hour watch was introduced. Low cover was also inadequate and although the necessary equipment was ordered, it did not arrive until Dec. 1940.

Landing Grounds.

A.M. File
S.36003/I
133A

In spite of the shadowy reinforcement prospects of Mediterranean Command, landing grounds for four fighter Squadrons were ready at the outbreak of hostilities and plans were under consideration for improved dispersal by additional strip landing areas. Of the three aerodromes Luqa alone had

A.M. File
S.198/Air.I
15A

A.H.B./IIJ5/113/5/54(A) permanent runways, both Hal Far and Ta Kali having soil surfaces which were liable to be put out of use for short periods by heavy rain. On the outbreak of war the Gladiators were stationed at Hal Far with the F.A.A. aircraft, but on the arrival of Hurricanes the flight was moved to Luqa which was opened up on 28th June as it was the most suitable for operating modern fighters. At the time Luqa was capable of holding two fighter squadrons and it became an independent station on 18th August 1940.

It has been seen that by June both when Italy entered the war, the plans for increasing the strength of the R.A.F. in Malta had not materialised, and that Air Ministry's attitude towards the possibilities of the island was still doubtful.

/The

The peacetime units were therefore the only Air Forces at the command of the A.O.C., and from these somewhat meagre resources he had to prepare the defence of Malta and to organise such other operations as were possible.

Fighter Defence

The paramount necessity, a fighter defence unit, provided A.H.B./IIJ5/113/5/54(A) the greatest problem since there were no fighters on the island. By a piece of good fortune, however, four Sea Gladiators of the F.A.A. were discovered in packing cases at Kalafrana and the C.-in-C. Mediterranean agreed to lend them to the R.A.F. for the purpose of forming a fighter flight. The formation of the flight in May some time before war broke out appears to have been due to a request from the Governor for local defence of the Island should the Mediterranean situation deteriorate to the point of actual operations. Such a possibility had been suggested on 30th April in a telegram from the Chiefs of Staff to Malta and other Middle East Commands, which ordered that steps should be taken forthwith to complete the measures necessary to meet the eventuality of Italian hostilities.

S/198/Air.I

Ibid 33.

A.H.B./IIJ5/101/104

A.H.B./IIJ5/113/5/54

There were no personnel on the island with any experience of fighter aircraft or of the methods of combat but six pilots with experience in Flying Boats were drawn from the personnel of No.3 A.A.C.U. and on 4th June after a month's training the Fighter Flight was formed at Hal Far. The Sea Gladiators remained the only fighter aircraft until the arrival of four Hurricanes towards the end of the month.

Naval Co-operation

A.M. File
S.44534
134A
Hal Far Stn.
O.R.B.
No. 2 A.A.C.U.
O.R.B.

The Naval Co-operation duties of R.A.F. Mediterranean Command had been carried out, since the beginning of the war with Germany, by the operational flight of No.3 A.A.C.U., with personnel of Hal Far Station Flight and an aircraft establishment of 5 I.E., 2 I.R. Swordfish: the operations consisted mainly of short anti-submarine patrols. A detachment of No.3 A.A.C.U. was at

/Gibraltar

SECRET

Gibraltar on Italy's entry into the war, but it remained there under the control of No. 200 Group until it was incorporated into No. 202 Squadron in October.

No. 200 Group.

No. 200 Group
O.R.B.

S. 198/4/Air

No. 200 Group, Gibraltar, was formed from personnel from Malta under Group Captain Barrington in September 1939. It consisted of No. 202 Squadron and No. 3 A.A.C.U. detachment, but although a part of R.A.F. Mediterranean Command, by June 1940 it was operating under the immediate direction of the Flag Officer Commanding, North Atlantic. For this reason, early in July the A.O.C. Mediterranean suggested to Air Ministry that the Group should be transferred to another command. He explained that he had never been in a position to direct the Group's operations, and that now, with the virtual severance of sea communications between Malta and Gibraltar, administration from R.A.F. H.Q. Mediterranean, was equally impracticable. His suggestion was accepted and No. 200 Group was transferred to the administrative control of Coastal Command on the 12th of August 1940.

Flying Boats.

S. 198/Air I

As has been seen there were no Flying Boats based at Malta, on the outbreak of war, but the occasional use of the island as a temporary operational base had been provided for. The seaplane base at Kalafrana^a was suitable for this, although, owing to repair and maintenance limitations, it was not yet possible to operate Sunderlands permanently from there as they would have to return to Alexandria for overhaul. As a temporary operational base, however, Malta began to be used by the Sunderland squadrons (Nos. 228 and 230) of No. 201 Group, Alexandria, on 27th June.

No. 830 Squadron.

Hal Far Stn.
O.R.B.

An important addition to the flying units at Malta was No. 830 Squadron, F.A.A. Swordfish. It arrived at Hal Far as No. 767 F.A.A. training Squadron at the end of June, 1940, and commenced operations in the shape of anti-submarine patrols

/within

SECRET

within a few days. ^{the} On 1st July it was re-formed as No. 830 Squadron with an I.E. of ten Swordfish and from then onwards began a series of operations which steadily increased in frequency as the war progressed. It was, for some time, Malta's only offensive unit, particularly against enemy ports, and the success it achieved was of great importance in helping to maintain our air offensive against enemy communications between Italy and Libya.

Besides the aircraft of the established units, a few others of various types operated from the island including a French Latecoere Seaplane, a F.A.A. Skua and a Hudson which arrived as escort to the first flights of Hurricane reinforcements. These were used mainly for reconnaissance and the Hudson proved particularly useful for co-operations with the Navy until it was lost in August. In a report on Reconnaissance in October, Air Commodore Maynard observed that it was owing to the fortunate possession of the Latecoere and Skua aircraft that it had been possible to meet many of the reconnaissance requirements.

A.H.B./IJS/113/5/54(A)
~~S.247/36/1/Air~~
 A.H.B./IJS/113/5/54(A)
~~S.247/36/1/Air~~

The diversity of aircraft and engine types, however, complicated still more the work of maintenance and repair, and during the first four months of war the technical side of R.A.F. Mediterranean showed a high degree of ingenuity in devising repair and replacement, largely through the adaption of spares from one type of engine to suit another.

The Enemy Force and The Enemy Estimate of Malta's Possibilities

In contrast to the few aircraft at Malta, the enemy force in Sicily at the outbreak of war was considerable. The chief constituents were the Sicilian Air Force and the 2nd Squadron, which, although separate entities, carrying out their operations independently, were amalgamated in the Italian Order of Battle for 10th June which is reproduced at Appendix III. This Order of Battle

Official strength
 Returns of the
 I.A.F. Superaered.

/may

may be said to represent the potential force available for operations against Malta, But although there is no direct evidence to show that particular units were detailed for this special task, it would appear from the records of the 2nd Squadron that its aircraft played a considerable part in attacks on the island.

On 10 June 1940, the Italian Air Force in Sicily totalled two hundred and five aircraft, a hundred and thirty-seven of which were S.79 bombers, the rest being C.R.32, C.R.42 and M.C.200 fighters. These aircraft were distributed amongst six aerodromes in Sicily, and there was also an autonomous Dive Bomber Group on the Island of Pantell^earia, though as yet this unit had no aircraft. ~~(t)~~ This was the air force which threatened Malta's security at the outbreak of war and against which the R.A.F. was preparing to send up four sea Gladiators to repel the attackers.

A.M. (A.H.B.6)
Translation
No. VII/43

It is interesting to note that the Italian Air Ministry's estimate of Malta's air strength in June 1940 was considerably exaggerated although it was assumed that the Island's part in a war had not yet been defined. The Fighter Defence (consisting actually of the four sea Gladiators) they believed to be twenty-five fighters, a strength not attained until January 1941. Although in estimating the average number of fighters available daily from June to January the calculation of twelve was more nearly correct. It was admitted, however, that camouflage and concealment made it difficult to estimate the air strength.

The possible uses of Malta in a war against Italy were also carefully summed up, and on the whole showed more respect for the potential assets of the Island than did the appreciations drawn up by the British Chiefs of Staffs. An extract from a report runs as follows:-

~~(t) See Appendix III~~

The

SECRET

Ibid

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 (September 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 North Africa, and dominate the air bases in Sicily and South 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 Bizerta 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.

Since their reconnaissance showed the airfields at Malta crowded with M.T. vehicles, except when aircraft were actually landing, the Italians also assumed that the R.A.F. had given up all thought of offensive action and were counting on the possibility of an invasion. The movements of submarines, however, and the continuous changes in the number of steamers and escort vessels at the bases indicated that Malta had undertaken the duties of providing a port of call for shipping and hampering Italo-Libyan naval traffic.

The greatest inaccuracy shown in the Italian report is the expectation that Malta would dominate the air bases of Sicily and South Italy from the air. This may help to explain, however, the falling away of the Italian air attacks on the Island as soon as an effective fighter defence was put up, even though numerical strength was decidedly in favour of the Italians. At the same time the actual activity reported at Malta gives no suggestion that it was too much for the Italians to cope with, and is in fact shown as considerably less than the review of possible activities anticipated.

SECRET

PART II: THE ITALIAN WAR, JUNE - DECEMBER 1940CHAPTER 3THE FIRST MONTHS OF WAROutbreak of Hostilities

Hal Far Stn.
O.R.B.

The enemy commenced offensive operations against Malta on 11 June, the day after the declaration of war, when ten bombers were sent over to attack the Island. Damage was reported to be negligible, and our A.A. gunners shot down one and possibly two of the raiders. Later in the day, enemy aircraft were again over the Island, probably on reconnaissance, and on this occasion a further aircraft was destroyed by the Gladiators. From then on the

Kalafrana Stn.
O.R.B.

Italian aircraft visited the Island almost daily until the end of the month, and except for four days during that time high-level bombing raids varying from one to five per day were experienced, while on the night of the 20/21 June a series of four raids was made. By the end of June the total number of enemy attacks was forty-four, and our estimate of enemy losses over Malta amounted to nine aircraft confirmed destroyed and five unconfirmed, although these figures would appear to be optimistic compared with the enemy estimates (See Appendix IV). Our own losses were two Gladiators unserviceable, but the other two were fast wearing out, and the position might have become very difficult but for the timely addition to the Flight of four Hurricanes, reinforcements bound for the Middle East, which were retained at Malta by permission of the A.O.C.-in-C.

A.M.
S.36003/II

A.H.B./IJS/113/5/54(A)
~~H.Q. Mod.~~
~~S/247/36/4/Air~~
~~App. A.~~

A.H.B./IJS/113/291

~~DO/AM/43~~
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The enemy raids were made chiefly again the airfields, the dockyards area, and the depot and flying-boat base at Kalafrana, but the bombing was not impressive and apart from those on the first day, no serious attacks were experienced up to 18 June. During that time, the bombers were sent over without fighter escort and a form of tactical defence was employed in which one bomber of each formation fell behind as bait, and on being attacked by a fighter, dived below the rest of the formation which then fired on the pursuing aircraft with down-firing moveable guns. On ^{the} 17th however, Macchi III fighters

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 A.H.J./1000
 A.M.W.I.S.
 No. 42

escorted the bombers, but although they had opportunities of attacking the Gladiators, they showed no anxiety to do so. Most of the bombing was carried out from a high level, a shallow dive being made over the target during the release of the bombs, followed by a rapid dive to avoid combat. Fighters were sometimes used to precede the bombers in order to draw off our fighters before the raid began, a manoeuvre which became more popular as our successes against the bombers continued. The heaviest raids of the month took place on ^{the} 22nd and 23rd, by some sixty bombers in formation, with fighter escorts. On the latter date an Italian Macchi fighter was shot down by one of the Gladiators.

Prospects at the end of June

Although ^{Malta's} ~~the~~ air activity against the enemy during June had been unexpectedly successful considering the superior numbers of the Italians, it was obvious that the Fighter Flight could not continue its scale of defence much longer. Already there was little or no margin for respite either for the pilots or for the repair of aircraft, and the general war situation suggested that attacks would probably increase. As the Governor and C.-in-C., General Dobbie, pointed out in a letter to War Office on ^{the} 29th, the French developments, particularly in North Africa, had brought Malta into greater prominence and it was reasonable to fear increased attention from Italy now that she no longer had her once-powerful neighbour to deal with. The question was whether Malta could be given the necessary aircraft to continue the defence having regard to the desperate need for aircraft in the defence of Britain. It involved a decision of some moment to send precious reinforcements away to face odds which were already heavy and which might well become overwhelming very shortly. At the same time, however, if it was hoped to retain the Island, there was not a moment to lose for strengthening the defences. Thus Air Ministry found itself faced with the same familiar

R.M. File.
 S.36003/II
 15A

/ problem

problem, but when the question was brought to notice in July, it had to be answered quickly and Malta's immediate fate did not hang in the balance for long.

Changing Attitude towards Malta

The decision to reinforce Malta was made before the end of July, and the transportation of the reinforcements recognised as a primary concern. This decisive action, although solving the problem of immediate defence only, nevertheless paved the way to a change of attitude at Air Ministry regarding Malta. At the outbreak of war with Italy, Air authorities were still staunch to their former opinion that no valuable reinforcements should be allotted for the defence of Malta when they might more justifiably be sent to support enterprises more likely to succeed, and while Malta's future role in the war was still doubtful. The events of June and July, however, affected this policy sufficiently to bring about the formulation of emergency reinforcement plans which, in turn, served to lead to a policy which recognised and accepted the advantages of using the Island as fully as possible for as long as circumstances permitted.

The striking achievements of the four Sea Gladiators were not alone enough to convince the Ministry of the validity of Malta's claim for stronger air defence, in spite of the encouraging affect these successes had had on the Maltese population. Requests for fighters had been made by the Governor, the A.O.C. and the A.O.C.-in-C., all based chiefly on the importance of upholding the morale of the Island's population, but the Air Ministry had held to its policy of sending the Middle East's reinforcements to Egypt for the defence of the Fleet at Alexandria. Since the defence of the Fleet was primarily the concern of the C.-in-C., Mediterranean, General Dobbie requested Admiral Cunningham to add his support to these petitions. Accordingly a further signal was dispatched, this time from the Naval C.-in-C., pointing out that Malta might have to risk

/ attempts

A.M. File.
S.36003 II
1A - 10A

11A

13A

S E C R E T

A.M. File
S. 62092
A.

attempts at invasion when naval help was not immediately available. As a result of these requests, Malta was informed on 16 June that arrangements were being made for the dispatch of six tropical Hurricanes by air, together with two Hudsons carrying spares. On the date fixed for the flight, however, the Hurricanes' orders were rescinded, and the Hudsons proceeded alone. Malta now had spares, however, which was important, and when four Hurricanes landed at the Island on a similar flight to the Middle East, she was allowed to retain them. These were the only reinforcing aircraft received until early in August, but some recognition of Malta's needs had now been shown.

R.H.B./B.T.S/113/5/54(A)
~~H.Q. Med.~~
~~S. 247/36/1/1/1/1~~
~~App. A.~~

A.M. File
S. 36003 II
18A

At the end of June, C.-in-C., Mediterranean sent a further request for fighters, pointing out the need for using Malta as a fuelling base for naval craft and flying-boats. The policy of refuelling at night only was severely restricting operations in the Central Mediterranean, at a time when the collapse of France had increased the importance of intercepting enemy communications between Italy and Libya. A draft reply made out at Air Ministry showed that the position was not encouraging, it stated that no fighters were available, and that even if they had been, the problem of getting them to Malta depended on the Admiralty's willingness to send a fast convoy through the Mediterranean, or to transport the fighters on a carrier as far as Gibraltar, where they could be flown off to continue the journey by air. The other means of transport was via Nigeria to Egypt, and thence to Malta. Thus much of the responsibility for supplying fighters to Malta rested, in the immediate crisis, with the Navy.

24C

Meanwhile, however, a long term Air Policy for Malta was again under consideration at Air Ministry. In a minute to the Plans section, Wing Commander N.V. Moreton pointed out the advantages of a well-defended Malta to our air

A.M. File
S. 36003/II
Min. No. 20

/effort

S E C R E T

effort in the Mediterranean. The four Sea Gladiators had ~~not~~ carried on the fighter defence unaided for a month of war and had caused more damage to enemy aircraft than they had received themselves, while the Island had suffered very little ~~damage~~ from enemy attacks. W/Cdr. ^MMoreton suggested that under the protection of the prescribed four fighter squadrons, in place of the four Gladiators, Malta could be rendered comparatively safe, at least from Italian attacks.

He went on to suggest three main advantages which could be derived from developing Malta as an air base. Firstly, the Island could be invaluable as a link in the air route to the Middle East. It had already been used for refuelling aircraft on special flights to Egypt, and if adequately defended the route could be developed into a regular means of reinforcement for aircraft and key personnel. Also, with strong defences, Malta might be used as a base for raids on Italy. One squadron of Wellingtons could operate as far afield as Rome and Naples, and the effect of such raids by a few aircraft every night might be great, compared with the effort expended. Lastly, Malta still had valuable dockyard facilities which might be put to use if properly defended, and if the Navy could use Malta for its light forces, its position athwart the Italian communication with North Africa could give us enormous advantages. In any case, W/Cdr. Moreton suggested that if well-defended, Malta would be a running sore in the side of Italy and might lead to a large expenditure of the enemy effort against it. He did not assume, however, that fighters and bombers could be made available immediately, but he considered that once the present crisis had been overcome we should be in a position to think about taking the offensive, and with England and Egypt secure Malta would be invaluable for direct attacks against Italy. He therefore advocated investigation into methods of reinforcing Malta in the

/ future

future, and emphasised the necessity ~~at the present moment~~ of making sure the Island was not lost to us in the meantime.

D.O.(0) Folder
R#B/IIJ5/14/3
1541/7 July

The most urgent appeal at the time came from Malta itself. On 7 July the Vice-Admiral, Malta, sent ^{the} Admiralty, and the C.-in-C. Mediterranean a summary of the position at the Island, and pointed out that to retain it, immediate action might be necessary. So far morale was good and the scale of attack had not been heavy, although it had considerably disorganised work/in the dockyard and had made Malta unsafe for the operation of submarines, through the inability to provide maintenance repairs and to allow rest after long patrols. If the enemy were to commence intensive bombing however, and the ^{existing} ~~present~~ defences could not prevent it, the civilian morale might break very quickly, in which case the security of the fortress would be imperilled, the population might even become hostile and it would be better to evacuate the island than to be forced to abandon it by the Maltese. The Vice-Admiral visualised three possibilities for Malta's future.

- (i) evacuating it if its value to the Fleet ^{was} ~~was~~ considered insufficient to justify the amount of defence required.
- (ii) to defend it for as long as possible with existing defences
- (iii) to provide it with defences on a scale to make successful defence possible.

Dismissing the first and second of these possibilities, he considered that the only solution was to provide an adequate number of fighter and anti-aircraft guns as approved by the C.I.D., and that early action was essential or otherwise there would be no aerodromes available from which to operate. Finally he pointed out that fighters at Malta would bind up an appreciable part of the enemy's Air Force, that if Malta were not in our hands, aircraft ^{then} ~~now~~ in Sicily would be released for

/ action

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action elsewhere, and that if the island were defended properly it would provide the Fleet with a base which should be of much value, while the dockyard could be used to a considerable extent.

R.H.B./IIJ5/14/3
7/7/40

A.M. File
S.36003/II
Minutes 20-32

Whether or not as a direct result of these arguments, by the 7th July, ^{the} Admiralty was examining a proposal to send a fast convoy to Malta and the Middle East, and Air Ministry, having taken up with reservation and modifications many of Wing Commander Moreton's proposals, was hastily arranging to dispatch a fighter flight for Malta in the convoy.

Operation 'Hurry' - Reinforcement

The air reinforcement plan which eventually took shape was that of sending a Hurricane flight of 8 I.E., 4 I.R. to Malta on the aircraft carrier, H.M.S. Argus. The route was to be via Gibraltar, where the stores and ground personnel would be disembarked to continue the journey ^{by} ~~via~~ submarine through the Mediterranean or by ship round the Cape. The Argus would proceed into the Mediterranean until within the Hurricanes' range of Malta, when the aircraft would be flown off ~~the~~, to complete the journey by air. In spite of the considerable risks which the experiment involved, it was successfully carried out and on 2 August the twelve Hurricanes landed on Malta. ⁽¹⁾ The message from Malta to the naval authorities read:

A.M. File
S.5123
45A

'Party arrived. Regret one Hurricane crashed.

Now we can get on with the work. Thank you.'

The crashed Hurricane which was first pronounced beyond repair was later made serviceable and the flight was established as No. 261 Squadron on 4 August.

The Defence Continues

Whilst the plan for reinforcements were going forward, Malta had to carry on the defence as best she could with a diminishing number of fighters. During July, thirty-nine enemy raids were

(1) For details see Appendix No. IX.

/ experienced

SECRET

D.O.(O) Folder
8./IIJ5/14/4
X9047
2.8.40.

D.O. (0)
A.H.B./IIJ5/14/3
22.7.40

experienced, most of them being high level attacks, but on 4 July the enemy made his first low-level machine-gun attack, with Halfar as the main target: little damage was reported however. On 22 July, the Governor's estimate of enemy casualties from the outbreak of war was eleven aircraft confirmed destroyed⁽¹⁾ and at least nine unconfirmed.

D.O. (0)
A.H.B./IIJ5/14/4
13.7.40

Our fighter effort, however, was waning badly, in spite of every possible improvisation in repairs and with spare parts.

M.E. Daily
Opsum

On 13 July only one Hurricane was serviceable and on 16th another was entirely written off.

D.O. (0)
A.H.B./IIJ5/14/3
22.7.40

In a telegram to the War Office on 22 July, the Governor of Malta outlined the success since the beginning of the war with Italy, and praised all services for their high morale and attention to duty under attack. Of the Air Defence he wrote that the magnificent work by R.A.F. fighters, and steady and increasingly accurate fire by the A.A. gunners, had taken a considerable toll of enemy casualties, with the result that the R.A.F. had forced the enemy to escort small formations of bombers with large numbers of fighters, and the Italian's respect for the A.A. had been proved by the tremendous height at which they were compelled to fly while over the Island. The Governor ended, however, on a note of warning: Although his report was encouraging, minimisation of the success of Italian raids might result in intensification of attack, and he suggested that the Italian dream of intensive damage inflicted might be allowed to continue in view of Malta's meagre defences.

Enemy Tactics

D.O. (0)
A.H.B./IIJ5/14/3
22.7.40

As regard their raids, it must be said for the enemy, that bombers operating against the Island endeavoured to direct their

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- (1) This would appear to be a fairly accurate assessment: according to the Italian Air Ministry returns losses by enemy action in the Sicilian Air Force up to 14 July were nine aircraft destroyed, and six more were lost up to 31 August.

For Italian Air Force losses see App. IV.

/ attacks

SECRET

attacks against military objectives, but their bombing was inaccurate and the damage to these targets superficial, although some damage to civilian property was caused.

During the first weeks of the war, enemy tactics underwent various changes, indicating to some extent a healthy respect for ^{Malta's} fighters and A.A. gunners. Single bomber raids, and formation raids with fighter escort began to be replaced in July by what were termed 'enticing' tactics. Large formations of ^{Malta's} fighters were sent over presumably to draw ~~our~~ outnumbered aircraft into unequal combat. These formations were stepped up by flights, the higher flights at the rear often being difficult to see, and unfortunately at first our fighters failed to observe them, and on attacking the lower flights had great difficulty in disengaging owing to attacks by the remaining enemy fighters from above. In any case there were not sufficient R.A.F. fighters to risk losses against enemy fighters when there were hostile bombers to be dealt with, and our aircraft were forced to adopt the policy of leaving these formations alone, and confining attacks to those which included bombers amongst them. Considering the small force by which they were opposed, the Italian pilots took much trouble to outwit our fighters to avoid meeting them in single combat, a fact which might be taken as a tribute to the Malta Defences in their first contacts with an enemy vastly superior in numbers. ⁽¹⁾

Malta's Offensive Effort(a) Swordfish

Halpar Stn.
O.R.B.

No offensive striking unit had been provided for the R.A.F. at Malta at the beginning of the war, but the Island made the best of its good fortunes as the possessor of No. 830 F.A.A. Swordfish Squadron. The Swordfish commenced operations within a day or two of their arrival with reconnaissance and anti-submarine patrols, and on the night of 30 June they carried out

(1) A table of enemy raids is given at Appendix V.

/ their

M.E.W.I.S.
No. 11
A.H.B./II G/1/1
H.Q. Med.
H.Q.U.24/Air
36A
A.H.B./II JI/113/5/96

M.E.W.I.S.
No. 3
A.H.B./II G/1/1

their first offensive action against Italian territory in a raid on Augusta harbour. Objectives were the Oil Refinery and important naval oil tanks and our aircraft started a fire in the refinery area, and later big clouds of brown smoke were observed.

ibid No. 4

This attack was followed by a raid on Catania ^{dirfield} ~~squadrons~~ on 6 July, when hits were obtained on two hangars and four fires were started. On 13 August, however, three Swordfish were lost in an attack on shipping in Augusta harbour, and the squadron ceased its bombing raids for the time being.

ibid No. 9

(b) Flying Boats.

Nos. 228 and 230
Sqns. O.R.Bs

Although no Flying-Boat Squadrons were established at Malta, Sunderlands from No. 201 Group Alexandria began using the Island as an operational base during the first weeks of war, in accordance with the proposal agreed between the A.O.C.-in-C. Middle East, and the C.-in-C. Mediterranean in May. ~~(Not to be used)~~ The advantages of using Malta in this way for long-distance searches and reconnaissance patrols were enhanced during the first days of activity by a series of happy successes against enemy naval units. Long-distance searches for the Italian Fleet, and reconnaissance patrols to Zante, Corfu and the approaches to the Adriatic soon became routine work to the Sunderlands, and reconnaissance was carried out to Crete and Tobruk during the flight between Malta and Alexandria, as well as other anti-submarine patrols and close escort to convoys.

Operations began on 27 June when the first Sunderland was dispatched to Malta for the protection of an East-bound convoy from the Island. On the following day this Sunderland sank a submarine the ^{Argonauta} ~~Argenta~~, while on patrol near Zante, while another Sunderland while en route to Malta for patrols gave a sighting report of enemy vessels which enabled our cruiser force to intercept three enemy destroyers, one of which was sunk by our ships. The two Sunderlands continued patrols from Malta and on 29th one of them sank the submarine Rubino ⁽¹⁾ and machine-gunned

ARGONAUTA /

(1) Details of the sinking of both these submarines are given at Appendix VII.

/ another

SECRET

another while returning to base with survivors. On 1 July another Sunderland returning to Alexandria from Malta sighted and attacked an Italian destroyer near Tobruk, and after a near miss had been scored the destroyer stopped. Yet another submarine was successfully damaged by bombs from a Sunderland on 9 July when a direct hit was scored abaft the conning-tower.

This round of successes had to suffice the flying-boats for some time, for although patrols were continued, there were no more encounters for many weeks. The fact that it was possible to use Malta as a base for these flying-boats, however, had widened considerably the scope of the reconnaissance patrols and consequently contributed to these early successes against the enemy.

Establishment of a General Reconnaissance Flight

*At Ministry
S-198/11-1
7**

The dispatch of a fighter flight to Malta encouraged the A.O.C. to request further reinforcements for his command, and on 1 August he sent a signal to Air Ministry pointing out that the shortage of aircraft and personnel was severely limiting operations. Naval Co-operation was suffering particularly and Air Commodore Maynard suggested that a striking force and a General Reconnaissance Land-plane Unit were needed to fill the gap. He considered that a land-based G.R. unit could carry out more continuously and economically much of the Sea Reconnaissance ~~now~~ undertaken by the Sunderlands whose activities were limited because they could not operate away from Alexandria for long. It was also necessary that the A.O.C. should be in a position to answer sudden calls from naval flag officers operating in the vicinity who were obviously unaware of the paucity and limitations of air forces at Malta. ^{that} At ~~the~~ ^{single} moment the only aircraft available for many such operations was the Hudson. Air Commodore Maynard went on to describe the activities of his air forces under the ^{existing} ~~present~~ conditions. As matters ^{then} ~~now~~ stood he could carry out nothing but local reconnaissance, except what could be undertaken by the one Hudson, which was invaluable for checking shipping concentrations

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SECRET

SECRET

in Sicily, for information which was constantly required by local naval and military commanders, while targets which invited attention in Sicily could only be attacked by the Fleet Air Arm Swordfish Squadron, and the scope of such operations was very limited. In point of fact Malta had none of the aircraft which had been assigned to her in the pre-war plans, and those she had were not necessarily designed for the duties they ~~had~~ had to perform. Nevertheless calls were constantly made upon the R.A.F. at the island and had to be answered as far as possible.

ibid 47

Meanwhile, at Middle East Headquarters it had been arranged that a liaison visit to Air Ministry should be made by Group Captain Wigglesworth to discuss the future prospects and policy of the command. On 3 August Air Marshal Longmore informed Air Commodore Maynard of the impending visit, adding that Group Captain H.E.P. Wigglesworth would pass through Malta, on his way to the United Kingdom, to discuss the requests he should make on behalf of R.A.F. Mediterranean. In his proposals, Air Marshal Longmore had suggested Malta should have four fighter squadrons, one General Reconnaissance (Land) Squadron, and one Torpedo-Bomber/General-Reconnaissance Squadron, presuming this was the maximum force that could be efficiently operated in the existing conditions. Excluding flying-boats this was, in fact, the allotted force for Malta in the long-term policy explained to Air Commodore Maynard by Air Commodore Coryton in his letter concerning fighter defence dated 16 May 1940, ~~which was~~ and, as such, it could hardly expect immediate fulfilment. In their discussions at Malta, however, Air Commodore Maynard and Group Captain Wigglesworth agreed to confine their request to two Squadrons, one General Reconnaissance (Land plane) and one TB/G.R. type. They emphasised the necessity of maintaining two separate elements, one for reconnaissance in the Central Mediterranean, the other as a striking force forming an integral part of the defence of Malta and for attacks on shipping and objectives in Italy.

Ibid 52

/ After

SECRET

~~Ref: Sec~~
A.M.S.198/Air II
2A and 5A

After consultations at Air Ministry, Group Captain Wigglesworth signalled to Middle East and Malta, that it had been decided to send to Malta as the Reconnaissance Unit a flight of 3 I.E., 3 I.R., Glen Martins, which would be suitable for special photographic reconnaissance and general reconnaissance in the Central Mediterranean. Although the number of planes would probably be inadequate, it was hoped that more would be available later. As regards the TB/GR unit it was thought unlikely that one would be ready for some time, and No. 830 Squadron was to be regarded as the striking force. No. 3 A.A.C.U. was to be disbanded and its Swordfish ^{were} ^{to} go ~~to~~ No. 830 Squadron. Of its personnel, three crews were to be returned to the United Kingdom to make up for the loss ^{of} there ^{of} the three Glen Martin crews, and the rest of the establishment was to be transferred to the Glen Martin Unit. Shortage of personnel was plainly a great problem and was further indicated in the arrangements for flying out the Glen Martins, for of the six crews needed for this flight, three were to return to the United Kingdom with the three from No. 3 A.A.C.U. Thus, although reinforced with aircraft, Malta would have no increase in personnel. During these negotiations ^{the} A.O.C. Malta requested that the Glen Martins should be fitted with bomb-racks, but as this would cause delay in despatch it was decided to send the first three aircraft without and the second three with racks. This was in the long run an unfortunate decision for Malta, for although on 19 September the flight was duly formed with a strength of three Glen Martins and an extra Skua, the other aircraft failed to materialise and none arrived till December.

Review of Reconnaissance Situation

The establishment at Malta of No. 431 Flight, the Glen Martin Unit, provided an appropriate occasion for a review of the air reconnaissance situation with a view to improvement and extension. Accordingly, ^{the} A.O.C.-in-C., Middle East informed the A.O.C. of C.-in-C. Mediterranean's requirements under the new conditions, giving them in order of priority. They were:

~~Ref: A.M.F.1e~~
S.45581
25A

/ (a)

- (a) Daily ~~water-tight~~ reconnaissance of the Ionian Sea on the lines of the existing patrol
- (b) Occasional reconnaissance of Taranto, Bari, Brindizi, Messina, Augusta and Tripoli
- (c) Reconnaissance by Swordfish, whenever possible, to enable ⁺ Torpedo-Bomber ⁶ attacks to be carried out against ships passing between Malta and Tunisia.

The A.O.C. was ^{also} asked for his ^{views} ~~comments~~ on the number of Sunderlands needed at Malta to back up the Glen Martins, and on the methods whereby sea reconnaissance of the Mediterranean might be controlled by a central authority with whom ^{the} C.-in-C., Mediterranean would communicate direct for all requirements.

ibid 27a

In replying, on 17 September, to this signal from Middle East Air Commodore Maynard set out his views on reconnaissance from Malta at some length; ^{He} ~~he~~ dealt first with the Glen Martins. These had by now carried out some operations from Malta, as they had commenced their activities a few days before the flight was officially formed on 19 September, but the A.O.C. considered that the arrival of three out of the six aircraft allotted had not materially changed the scale of systematic long-distance reconnaissance that could be carried out in the Central Mediterranean. The Glen Martins were liable to a high degree of unserviceability, as no spares had yet arrived, and as the pilots had no relief by automatic pilot, they were unsuitable for long periods of reconnaissance over the sea. Air Commodore Maynard therefore considered that the Ionian Sea reconnaissance could best be carried out by Sunderlands, of which five would be necessary to make the patrol watertight. He considered that the Glen Martins were excellent for the occasional reconnaissance of Italian ports and that such patrols could be maintained by the 3 I.E., 3 I.R., promised if maintenance difficulties could be solved. As regards the Malta-Tunisia reconnaissance however, the most probable route,

/ between

between Cape Bon and Pantellaria, represented the extreme range of the Swordfish and left no margin for search, while the striking force range was too short to be of any use against shipping on ^{that} ~~this~~ route. Failing the arrival of a TB/GR Squadron which was the only entirely satisfactory answer to this problem, Air Commodore Maynard advocated the transfer to Malta of one squadron of Sunderlands with the maintenance staff necessary to back it.

ibid 30A

After consultation between ^{the} A.O.C.-in-C. and ^{the} C.-in-C., Mediterranean the following policy was decided on: The Ionian Sea Reconnaissance was to be carried out by the Glen Martins with a backing of three Sunderlands of No. 228 Squadron which were to use Malta as an advance operational base; The occasional reconnaissance of specified Italian ports was to be undertaken when requirements dictated, while the Malta-Tunisia reconnaissance was to cover the general area lying between Malta and the Kerkenna Islands and was to be undertaken as practicable by Swordfish fitted with extra tanks giving a range of about nine hundred miles. The new reconnaissance plan was to commence as soon as possible.

Nos. 432 Flt
and 228 Sqdn
O.R.Bs

On 23 September the Sunderland detachment from No. 228 Squadron arrived at Malta to undertake patrols in conjunction with No. 431 Flight. The Glen Martins undertook the majority of the North Eastern patrols to Albania and the Ionian Sea, besides the sighting of ports in Sicily, Italy and occasionally North Africa. The Sunderlands did a few patrols to the Greek coast and the patrols between Malta and Alexandria which were carried out via Crete and could be made to fit into some extent, with essential journeys to Egypt for repair and overhaul.

Air Min. File
M.E. S.45581
48A

On 12 October Air Commodore Maynard reported to R.A.F. H.Q. Middle East ⁱⁿ on the general situation resulting from the new organisation and the reconnaissance operations achieved. Activity since the new policy had been put into operation had been fairly satisfactory, for the Ionian patrol had been carried out daily

/ since

since 28 September, and required one Sunderland sortie and two Glen Martin and two Swordfish sorties. These had all been made as well as additional sorties required for the naval operation M.B.5., but the A.O.C. was apprehensive as to the ability to continue on this basis unless additional Glen Martins or more Sunderlands became available, It was only through the fortunate possession of the Skua and a Latecoere French Seaplane that it had been possible to meet the naval requirements for reconnaissance of Italian ports for this operation. He emphasised, therefore, the need for a complete Sunderland Squadron at Malta not only to increase strength but because under the ^{existing} ~~present~~ arrangement the Sunderlands were separated from their maintenance and administrative personnel, a difficulty which had so far been overcome by impromptu methods which were not really good enough and which ought to be discontinued as soon as possible. The Glen Martin situation was, however, infinitely worse. It appeared that ^{the} C.-in-C. Mediterranean had been informed that all six of the promised aircraft were at Malta, while the real position was that only three had arrived and of these only one now survived. This aircraft was being worked to death and its life could no longer be guaranteed. As regards the Swordfish, they were still awaiting the long-range tanks which would enable them to carry out the western patrol between Malta and Tunisia.

The A.O.C.'s report was not entirely favourable to the new reconnaissance scheme, but it is fair to say that the grounds for his criticisms rested almost wholly on the inadequacy of the number of aircraft allotted for the tasks and on maintenance difficulties. He made no complaint concerning the feasibility of the scheme, but he was anxious to make it thoroughly practicable. In spite of his warnings of an inevitable decline in aircraft strength, and, consequently, in operational activity, his report showed a very satisfactory account of the reconnaissance

/ operations

operations in the first weeks under the new scheme. Perhaps, in perspective, the most significant fact remained unmentioned. Malta, whose very survival had seemed doubtful at the beginning of the war, had become the main base for reconnaissance work in the Central Mediterranean. Her survival was still doubtful, she still had less than one ^S Squadron of fighters to defend her in the air, and now at least the decision had been made that while she could be defended advantage should be taken of her strategic position. In the face of increased enemy attacks offensive operations might have to be discontinued while the armed forces concentrated on defence, but while the opportunity lasted the R.A.F. was able to commence its role as a vital weapon for cutting the enemy supply routes to North Africa, on which the Italian war effort in the Middle East largely depended.

Nos. 228 Sqdn
& 431 Flt
O.R.Bs

Throughout the autumn of 1940, in spite of the shortage of aircraft, the reconnaissance units at Malta carried out extensive patrols almost daily. The area of search ~~was~~ extended from Naples to Tripoli, and from Cape Carbonara in Sardinia to the Ionian Sea and the Greek coast, thence northwards to the southeast Italian ports of Bari, Brindisi and Taranto where, by November the enemy was collecting his forces and supplies for the campaign against Greece.

R. M. File
S.45581
52A

By mid-October, however, it had become impossible to make the Ionian patrol secure with ^{the available} ~~present~~ reconnaissance resources, and the A.O.C.-in-Chief offered the loan of two Blenheims to help overcome these difficulties. But even with these in service there were still no reserve aircraft to replace casualties, while commitments were further increased at this juncture by a proposal of the Vice Admiral, Malta, to institute more regular reconnaissance of Tripoli and the sea area towards Tunisia. The Ionian patrol had ~~been~~ been carried out daily since 28 September without any convoy movements being observed and it was felt that the main enemy shipping route might lie along the Tunisian and Tripolitanian coasts. This proposal, however, was liable to increase the

ibid 51A

ibid 53A

/ strain

ibid
57Aibid
59AA.H.B./I.S.1/183/285
~~18/10/45~~
19A

strain on the air effort from Malta, for whereas the A.O.C. had hoped to be able to cease the Ionian patrol for a while in order to undertake the westward reconnaissance, C.-in-C. Mediterranean was anxious that it should be continued and that a westward patrol should be made by the miscellaneous aircraft at Malta, whenever this was possible without prejudice to the Ionian patrol. In order to explain to the A.O.C.-in-C. the difficulties under which these patrols were made and to prevent over-optimistic estimates of reconnaissance sorties, Air Commodore Maynard enumerated the aircraft at his disposal. They amounted to one Maryland, one Blenheim, one Skua, one French Seaplane, the Swordfish (which were of local value only as the promised long-range tanks had not yet arrived) and enough Sunderlands to keep one going daily. This was hardly an adequate force to supply the many demands made on R.A.F. Mediterranean, and in a report to Admiralty on 5 October Admiral Cunningham had already made clear the unsatisfactory state of reconnaissance arrangements. He had pointed out in particular how, on 29 September, R.A.F. shore-based reconnaissance had failed to locate the enemy although he was at sea with his entire fleet. He maintained that the Central Mediterranean Reconnaissance had so far been a failure for it had not yet succeeded in spotting a single convoy on its way across to Libya, and although it was suspected that they might be going in dribble^ets via Pantellaria Channel and Tripoli, and then coasting to Benghazi, this was still supposition, and it was obvious that what was needed was all round reconnaissance from Malta.

ibid
22A

Sir Arthur Longmore was inclined to object to this judgement on the reconnaissance effort, and suggested that the main factor in the problem was not the shortage and ineffectiveness of aircraft but the very vulnerable position of Malta. On the other hand Air Commodore Maynard had been pleading for reinforcements since reconnaissance from the Island had commenced and it was mainly the difficulty of providing enough aircraft to fulfil requirements that worried him.

At the end of October the Italian invasion of Greece and H.M. Government's decision to give immediate support to the Greeks, increased the reconnaissance requirements of the Fleet and led the A.O.C. Malta to request once again that the additional Glen Martins, which he understood were now ready, should be dispatched at the earliest possible moment. Meanwhile the Officer Commanding No. 228 Squadron visited R.A.F. Middle East to arrange for the addition of Sunderlands to the detachment of flying-boats at Malta, in view of the Swordfish and Glen Martin limitations. The result of this visit was the decision to locate the whole of the squadron temporarily at Malta and on 3 November the unit came under the control of ^{the} A.O.C. Mediterranean for operations and administration. By then two reinforcing Glen Martins had arrived and the Blenheims were also retained to assist in new commitments particularly reconnaissance sorties in connection with the Wellington bombing raids.

The first two weeks of November saw intense reconnaissance activity from Malta in conjunction with the Fleet, which was carrying out various operations to coincide with the passage of four convoys through the Central Mediterranean. The operations were planned to end with a naval air attack on the Italian Fleet in Taranto harbour, and the Malta reconnaissance aircraft were responsible for patrolling the routes of the four convoys and for making special reconnaissance of Taranto to report any movements of the Italian units. From the beginning of the month until the 11th, the night of the raid, aircraft of No. 431 Flight visited the port on all but two days, besides making searches in the Ionian sea and towards the Greek coasts. Flying Boats of No. 228 Squadron also carried out similar patrols and on the nights of 11th and 12th they made two special moonlight sorties to watch the movements of Italian shipping. The naval attack on the 11th, met with considerable success and, after visiting Taranto on the 12th, a Maryland reported one Cavour class battleship down by the stern and another of the Littorio class surrounded by small craft and

/ evidently

ibid
69Aibid
73Aibid
78AAdmiralty
Battle Summary
No. 10Nos. 431 Flt.
228 Sqn.
O.R.Bs

A.H. 8/1151/183/225
25A

evidently in difficulty. It was later confirmed that one Littorio class battleship had been badly damaged. On ^{the} 14th, the C.-in-C. Mediterranean signalled: 'Air reconnaissance from Malta during recent operations of the Fleet was most valuable and I realise much of it was carried out under adverse weather conditions. Request you will convey my appreciation to all concerned. The reconnaissance of Taranto was particularly useful.'

A. Min. File
S.45581
89A

ibid
100A

A. Min. File
S.45581
117A

ibid
119A

After this series of naval operations had ended Admiral Cunningham was able to reduce his reconnaissance requirements, and the two Blenheims at Malta were sent on to ^{the} Middle East. Air Commodore Maynard was still anxious for the future, however, and foresaw that the resumption of heavy commitments at short notice might require further reinforcements. The Latecoere French seaplane had been lost and the A.O.C. reckoned that the maximum number of reconnaissance aircraft available per day would now be three Sunderlands and one Glen Martin. His apprehensions concerning the resumption of intense activity were justified at the end of the month when further naval operations were carried out in conjunction with convoy movements and heavy demands were made once more on the reconnaissance units at Malta. Events during these operations served to emphasise yet more clearly than before the inadequacy of the reconnaissance in the Central Mediterranean causing Admiral Cunningham to report strongly on the matter to Admiralty, particularly regarding the shortage of Glen Martins. He cast no criticism on A.O.C. Mediterranean and the Reconnaissance aircraft, who had done wonders, but these, he said, could not be expected to continue work at this pressure let alone to increase the scope of their activities to the scale so urgently needed. He submitted that it must either be decided to curtail our operations in the Mediterranean to conform to the reconnaissance available, or else air reconnaissance reinforcements to Malta must have absolute priority. At the same time the Officer Commanding No. 228 Squadron informed Air Ministry through H.Q. Malta that if the operational effort required from this

/ Squadron

Squadron continued on the same scale as for the ^{previous} ~~last~~ two months, it might not be possible, owing to the much needed overhaul of some of his aircraft, to meet the requirements of ^{the} C.-in-C. Mediterranean. To overcome this difficulty arrangements were made for the overhaul of the Sunderlands in the United Kingdom, and the problem of the Glen Martins was also lessened early in the New Year when reinforcements began to be speeded up.

Meanwhile, during December, R.A.F. Malta complied as far as possible ^{with} ~~to~~ naval demands, using the few aircraft available. Further naval operations took place in the middle of the month demanding special reconnaissance from the units, but by ^{that} ~~this~~ time Air Ministry had stated the intention of sending ~~immediate~~ ^{immediately,} Glen Martin reinforcements, and although these delayed their appearance until the New Year, the definite decision to dispatch them was reassuring for the future. // By the end of 1940 it had apparently been accepted that Malta was ~~now~~ an important reconnaissance base for co-operation with the Fleet, and should be reinforced as an operational base in spite of the risk of inviting enemy counter-measures beyond the strength of ^{the island's} ~~her~~ defences.

Lull in Enemy Activity

While efforts were being made ~~by our Air authorities~~ ^{the} to increase the R.A.F. effort from Malta, Italian activity over the Island was declining. The enemy offensive began to diminish in strength in August when, although warnings of approaching aircraft were frequently given at Malta, few raiders crossed the coast, and only a small number of attacks was actually carried out. These however, caused some damage to parked aircraft, particularly Swordfish, three being damaged and two destroyed. The decline in activity continued during September and October and consequently our fighter defence operations were also able to decrease, and a reasonably constant serviceability rate was maintained among the Hurricanes. In September only twelve out of twenty-four warnings developed into raids, and in the first half of

ibid
121A

~~REF.~~ A.M. File.
S.45581
~~1-1-30~~

~~REF.~~ A.M. File
S.45581
~~1-1-30~~

A.A.B./IIJ5/1/1
M.E.W.I.S. No. 2
A.M.W.I.S. No.

Kalafrana
Station O.R.B.

~~REF.~~
A.A.B./IIJ5/5

Kalafrana
Station O.R.B.

/ October

October only one attack was experienced. ^{Ref time} By ~~now~~ four months of war had been experienced and as had been seen Malta, far from being vanquished, was beginning to strike out on her own account.

Summary of the First Four Months of War

Enemy Activity

~~H.Q. Med.~~
~~S. 247/56/1/1/1~~
A.H.B./IIJS/113/5/54(A)

Between 11 June and 11 October 1940 Malta experienced a hundred and sixty-one alerts of which seventy-two developed into daylight raids and thirteen were night bombing attacks. During this time according to our estimates, fighters accounted for twenty-two enemy aircraft destroyed and nine damaged, while A.A. fire destroyed three and damaged four - all these aircraft except one being claimed by the end of September. It would appear, however, that our claims were too high, as enemy records show a total of only twenty-one aircraft lost up to the beginning of October, nineteen by enemy action and two from unknown causes (see Appendix IV). On the other hand our casualties through enemy action were low: two Hurricanes and one Gladiator were destroyed in the air and six aircraft on the ground. On 12 October the Hurricane strength was thirteen aircraft although losses had been suffered through other causes.

Night Fighter Effort

16.2.
~~S. 247/56/1/1/1~~

In view of night-bombing which occurred during moonlight in the early weeks of the war, a night fighter effort was worked up. On the first occasion when it was used a Hurricane made a determined attack on an Italian S.79 which was last seen flying very low and apparently in great difficulty. The next attack, some weeks later, failed entirely as the enemy turned back on being caught in the searchlights. In a further attack a bomber was shot down by a Hurricane and another appeared to be badly damaged, and no further enemy aircraft crossed the coast at night.

Operations from Malta

Offensive operations during this period consisted of the Swordfish raids against Sicily and the Sunderland anti-shipping patrols. ~~Reconnaissance activities by the~~ Reconnaissance activities by the

/ Glen

Glen Martins, Sunderlands and Swordfish together amounted to a hundred and fifty sorties and casualties were one Swordfish shot down and one Sunderland damaged, although on 12 October Air Commodore Maynard reported that he had only one Glen Martin serviceable.

By the end of four months of war the R.A.F. at Malta was developing a steadily increasing air effort. The defences had survived the first tests against Italian raids and had thus made practicable the establishment of reconnaissance and striking units at the Island, and these had carried out many valuable sorties and had achieved initial successes against the enemy. The Italian raids, however, were only a fore taste of what was to come. They were nothing compared ^{with} ~~to~~ the German onslaughts which Malta would have to face in 1941. But although the future might be serious, for the time being an opportunity was provided for the development of activity and the building-up of resources for the future.

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S E C R E T

CHAPTER 4

RENEWED ACTIVITY - OCTOBER TO DECEMBER 1940

During the last two months of the year the tempo of the war gradually increased again at Malta. The main causes were Italy's invasion of Greece on 28 October, and our offensive in the Western Desert early in December. H.M. Government decided to support the Greeks actively as soon as hostilities began, and consequently large consignments of reinforcements had to be taken from the British Forces in Egypt to supply the new campaign. This meant that the Middle East forces, which had never yet equalled the enemy in strength were now further depleted, and the delivery of reinforcements became more urgent than ever for now the new deficiencies had to be filled up in addition to the tasks of gradually building up the Middle East forces generally.

These new commitments inevitably increased the demands made on the Navy, and consequently, on the reconnaissance units whose information took on an added importance. It became even more necessary to get our supply convoys through safely and to do all that was possible to destroy and hinder those of the enemy, and the units of his fleet which were menacing our shipping. In addition there was now the new responsibility of safeguarding the passage of reinforcement convoys to Greece. The increased demands on reconnaissance from Malta soon proved more than the limited number of aircraft could meet, and it became abundantly clear that additional G.R. aircraft in the Mediterranean were essential.

Meanwhile other activities besides Naval co-operation were developing at Malta. As a contribution towards the pro-Greek policy it was decided at the end of October to operate Wellington bombers from the Island as a temporary measure. The bombing effort would be directed chiefly against the Italian ports in the south-east which were supplying enemy troops in Albania. These Wellington raids constituted the Island's first sustained air offensive, but for strategic purposes, it required its own reconnaissance reports which added an extra burden to the already over-strained reconnaissance units at Malta. At the same time,

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/the

the increasingly urgent need for reinforcements meant that Malta had to deal with more ferrying-flights than hitherto.

All these new activities, however, particularly the offensive operations were bound to bring Malta more and more to the notice of the enemy and to increase the likelihood of retaliatory action. It was necessary, therefore, to strengthen the defences as far as possible, and the provision of more fighters became a prominent part of future planning. For the time being, however, enemy opportunity for offensive operations ~~was taken~~ and the lack of balance between the scale of attack from Malta and the means of defence against possible retaliation ^{had to be perforce} ~~was~~ accepted.

Future Planning

At the beginning of the war Air Ministry had adopted a cautious attitude towards the reinforcement of Malta and was unwilling to risk the slender resources available until it should appear a worthwhile project to do so. By the end of June, however, the defence had been sufficiently successful to encourage the dispatch of a fighter flight to the Island, and various plans had been put forward in the supposition that adequate defences would eventually be built up. Towards the end of August the defences still had the situation well in hand, and as Italian activity was tending to decrease, these plans ^{more} ~~were to be~~ reconsidered. ~~Towards the end of the month~~

AH8./IIJ5/14/1
25/8/40

The question of the Defence of Malta from the naval standpoint was put forward by Admiral Cunningham on 25 August in a message to Admiralty. In his view the best policy for Malta was to bring the base defences, at the earliest possible moment, to such a state that it would be possible to operate an offensive from the Island with all three services, secure in the knowledge that the defences were efficient enough to reverse any scale of retaliatory action which the enemy might produce. The C.-in-C., further considered that the rendering safe of Malta was the key to our Mediterranean strategy and that it provided the first step in developing our offensive policy. ^{As} our grip on the Mediterranean increased, so would our need of Malta. He named April 1941 as the

time when we ought to be ready to make full use of Malta ^{airfields} offensively, by which date sufficient protection and ~~aerodromes~~ should be available to work bomber and reconnaissance squadrons ^{as well as} ~~and~~ four fighter squadrons.

Air Min.
~~Secret.~~
S.198/Air-II
11A

The answer to C.-in-C., Mediterranean was contained in the conclusions to a Chiefs of Staffs Committee Meeting at the end of August. In these conclusions the Committee outlined the policy which was to be undertaken regarding the use of Malta for offensive operations, with particular reference to operations against Italy. They considered that Malta was not a suitable base for bomber operations against Italy, under ^{existing} ~~the present~~ circumstances, because most of the important targets in the north-west were nearer to the United Kingdom than to Malta and because all the long-range bombers which could be spared from the United Kingdom were urgently needed in the Middle East. Also, Malta was a valuable staging point for reinforcing aircraft, and the Committee was unwilling to take action which would precipitate attacks on a scale likely to prejudice this, as it would not be possible to provide fighter and A.A. defences on the scale necessary to give reasonable protection ~~against them~~. The Chiefs of Staff had, however, considered increasing the defensive strength of Malta, because of its great potential value as a naval base, and they agreed in principle to increasing the A.A. defences by April. The fighter strength was also to be augmented up to the total of four fighter squadrons as soon as circumstances permitted, though this was clearly a long-term project, and meanwhile A.O.C. Mediterranean had been asked to investigate the possibility of providing two additional ^{airfields} ~~aerodromes~~. Although there was no intention of stationing a bomber squadron at Malta for the time being, it was intended to establish a flight of G.R. aircraft there during the next month.

The view that the use of Malta as an offensive base should not be pressed forward with undue risk to the Island was

/ supported

~~S.O.(3)~~
 H8/IIJ5/14/1
~~22-8-40~~

A.M. File.
 S.198/A in-
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supported by the Governor, General Dobbie and Air Commodore Maynard. The chief reason was the lack of defences, both active and passive, but it was generally agreed that these should be adequately built up to permit offensive operations by April 1941. Air Commodore Maynard was very anxious that the dispatch of fighter squadrons should not be delayed until the new landing grounds were provided, as he considered that Luqa and ^{Ta Kali} ~~Ta Kali~~ airfields could each take two squadrons.

For the time being no further steps were taken for the reinforcement of Malta beyond the provision of the G.R. flight in September until, in October, the whole question of the ⁺ Reinforcement of Middle East Command was brought up for discussion on a high level, as it was necessary to decide whether the re-equipment of the Middle East should be continued, or whether all the resources available in the United Kingdom should go to supply the needs of the Metropolitan Air Force. Eventually a decision was made in favour of Middle East, and Malta, as an important part of the Command had her claims confirmed. Preparations were to be made to send out as soon as possible ground personnel and servicing equipment for four fighter squadrons, but it was still considered that to attempt offensive action prematurely would be to invite a measure of counter-attack which might neutralise our forces there. As Air Marshal Longmore pointed out in a letter to the Chief of Air Staff on 10 October, 'At Malta Maynard and his braves have put up a very good show. With (the Gladiators) some initial successes were achieved which so impressed the Air Ministry that they have gradually recognised the possibilities. Hitherto the Italians have not laid on a really full scale sustained air offensive, but, if, stimulated and perhaps assisted by the Germans, they do so I cannot see how they could avoid destroying all the aircraft in Malta'.

/ The

H.B./18/5/1
 C.O.S.(40)
 343rd Meeting
 10.10.40

The question of basing offensive forces at Malta was re-opened in October, however, when ^{the} Admiralty approached ^{the} C.-in-C. Mediterranean on the subject. It was pointed out that any intensification of ^{enemy} attacks on Egypt must depend largely on sea-borne supplies reaching Libya, but that it had proved impossible to cut these supply lines with the Fleet based at Alexandria. The Admiralty suggested, therefore, an increase of light naval forces at Malta sufficient to secure control of communications between Italy and the western ports of Libya. This would require not only adequate air reconnaissance to prevent these forces being surprised, but also sufficient fighter and A.A. defences to make the Island tenable as a base for the naval forces. // In his reply, on 5 October, Admiral Cunningham laid his finger on the centre of difficulty, the two opposing aspects of the Central Mediterranean problem, namely the cutting of Libyan ^a communications and the security of Malta. After enumerating the forces necessary for the former, the C.-in-C., went on to discuss the risks to Malta which such a policy would involve. He considered that if we were to avoid a serious threat to Malta itself, it would be necessary that in any given period the scale of attack drawn down should not be disproportionate to the state of the defence it had been possible to install. It would be only logical, therefore, to expect the full weight of Italian attack if our light forces worked effectively. He felt that in view of the way the war appeared to be about to develop, successful attacks on Libyan communications was becoming essential and hence the need for the full scale of defence to be built up as quickly as resources would permit. All that could be done, meanwhile, was to accept what disparity might exist between the scale of attack and ^{the} means of defence. The risk, in fact, must be accepted. The C.-in-C. had already stated in his letter that if such risks were to be taken it was essential that the forces at Malta should be of such effectiveness that the risk was justified.

/ War

War in Greece

As far as the R.A.F. at Malta was concerned, however, there was little likelihood of any immediate advance towards a more offensive policy. The ultimate air strength for the Island had been decided upon and Air Ministry had undertaken to supply the new units as they became available. At the end of October, however, a new development in the situation caused a change of plans at Air Ministry. The Italian invasion of Greece on ^{the} 28th was followed by H.M. Government's decision to send help to the Greeks, and as an immediate form of assistance it was decided to direct bombing raids against Italy by Wellingtons operating from Malta. The decision to risk the danger of a counter-offensive against which the defences would be inadequate was precipitated by the new emergency.

A.H.B./IIJ5/14/4
12/10/40

At the time this policy was resolved upon there was some prospect of improvement in the fighter defences. During October V. C. A.-S. the ~~Plan Chiefs of Staff~~ had included in a general plan for strengthening the defence of Malta a consignment of Hurricanes which, with the necessary personnel, would bring the fighter flight up to full squadron strength. The reinforcing operation was to be made by aircraft carrier on the same lines as operation 'Hurry' and it was to take place early in November. Malta's hopes, however, were doomed to disappointment, for when the operation took place, owing to miscalculations, ~~of the flight to Malta from Gibraltar~~ the tragic loss was incurred of eight out of the twelve Hurricanes. (1) The Island therefore had a reinforcement of only four fighters to help to face possible enemy counter-measures to the newly launched bombing activities.

The Wellington Offensive

When, on the outbreak of war between Italy and Greece, it was decided to launch a bombing offensive against Italy from Malta, the same risks were taken as those which had been discussed by the

(1) See Appendix IX

/ Chiefs

Chiefs of Staff in August, For although Malta was strategically well-placed for operating bombers against the targets in southern Italy, which had now become so important, other arguments against using the Island still held good. It has been seen that the fighter defence was no stronger than it had been in August, although plans were going forward to send more Hurricanes to strengthen No. 261 Squadron. Moreover, to the Middle East Command, Malta was now of greater importance than ever as a staging post for reinforcement flights, since more aircraft were urgently needed in North Africa to replace withdrawals to Greece. It was decided however, despite the probability of retaliatory action, to initiate bombing raids from the Island and orders were given for these to be commenced as soon as possible.

(a) The Plan ~~for~~ the Offensive

The immediate object of the Wellington raids was to provide hostile action in retaliation for the Italian offensive against Greece, and it was hoped that the raids would have a strong effect on the morale of the Italian population. With this in view the primary objectives selected by Air Ministry were Rome and Naples, although, for the time being the attacks on Rome (1) were delayed in the hope of discouraging possible raids on Athens. In the meantime the naval bases of Taranto and Brindisi and others in Sicily were to serve as additional targets, but Naples was to be the central objective in the operations. This retaliatory policy was shortly exchanged, however, for another more immediately contributory to the war in Greece, when the Wellington raids were directed to the Italian south-eastern ports for their primary targets.

The plan for the offensive was designed to exclude the necessity of basing a bomber squadron permanently at Malta, as the raids were to be carried out by the Wellington reinforcements passing through to the Middle East. At first the offensive was

(1) As it turned out, no attacks were made on Rome from Malta during this (or any other) offensive.

planned as a limited number of sorties to be carried out by a consignment of twelve Wellingtons which were scheduled to leave the United Kingdom as soon as possible. Operations were to commence immediately they became practicable and were to continue until each aircraft had completed four sorties, after which the consignment would proceed to the Middle East. It was subsequently decided, however, to make operations by reinforcement aircraft a regular feature for the next three months, and for this purpose Wellington maintenance personnel were dispatched to the Island. It was also suggested that the Squadron Leader of the first contingent, with a nucleus of flying personnel, should be retained at Malta to assist in the operations of future aircraft.

A.M. File
S.6903
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6A

Hitherto, the Middle East reinforcement Wellingtons had been flown out at the rate of six per month, but owing to the increased demand in the Middle East, it was decided to send out thirty-two aircraft in addition to the twelve which were to be flown out to perform the first offensive raids. On 4 November a further decision was made to increase the weight of attack from Malta by raising the number of Wellingtons operating temporarily from the Island to twenty-four, and the passage of the Wellingtons to Egypt after operating from Malta was to continue as fast as the weather would permit transit of the replacements from the United Kingdom.

A.M. File.
S.6700
22A

Operations Begin

The Wellingtons at Malta were originally provided for the special purpose of affording help to the Greeks by attacks on the Italian communications with Albania, and the alternative targets were to be centres of Italian population on the mainland. In actual fact, however, during the four months of their stay at Malta, while the Greek campaign was being waged, the Wellington raids against targets directly related to this policy formed but a small proportion of their offensive as a whole. Their operations became spread over a large number of targets chosen rather for their immediate strategic importance than in accordance with a

/ definite

(1)
definite long-term policy.

Following Air Ministry policy, the Wellingtons commenced their operations with two night raids against Naples on 31 October and 3 November. It was intended to follow these up with attacks on the east coast ports, but a third raid was carried out on Naples during November owing to bad weather over the primary targets. During these three raids considerable damage was done. Direct hits and fires were observed in the target area and large fires were seen at the railway station and near the oil refineries. At Bari and Brindisi, since the main object of the raids was to prevent the passage of reinforcements to Albania, the objectives were merchant shipping, the port and port facilities. Three raids were carried out against each target during November. At Brindisi bombs were dropped on the quayside and railway and between the terminus and dockyard where fires resulted. Other fires were started near fuel tanks, one of which burnt very fiercely. At Bari, direct hits were scored on the jetties causing explosions and fires. More fires were also observed on the quays and railway causing more explosions, particularly near the central railway station.

(c) Taranto

The first departure from the strict policy of attack against Italian communications with Albania was made on the night of 13 November when a special raid was directed against Taranto. On the 11th a heavy attack had been made on the Italian fleet, which was then in the port, by carrier-borne Swordfish of the F.A.A. and the Wellington operation was planned to follow up the success achieved by the Naval forces. During the raid naval oil tanks in the inner harbour were hit and fires and explosions followed. This raid, however, was only one section of Malta's part in the operation, for reconnaissance of the port by the Glen Martins was the main source of information for C.-in-C. Mediterranean. ~~(See~~
~~page~~ →.

(1) A table of operations by Wellingtons and Swordfish during the offensive is given at Appendix VI.

M.E.W.I.S.

A.H.B./II G/111

A.M. File
S.6903
61A

62A

A.M. File
S.6903
7A

In the early days of the Wellington raids, some attempt had been made to conceal from the enemy the fact that the bombers were operating from Malta and this was done by careful routeing of the aircraft to and from the target, but by 7 November, however, it was presumed that the enemy had discovered the ruse and located the bombers' base and the routeing scheme could be abandoned.

13A

This made it easier to follow the Air Ministry requirement that, on failing to locate the target, aircraft should not return to base with their bombs but should drop them on some other suitable target. In November and early December Catania, Augusta and Taranto were visited as alternative targets by single aircraft in accordance with this policy. At the end of November the selection of targets was widened by the inclusion of Messina, Tripoli and other nearby objectives, which were to be visited when bad weather prohibited operations further afield.

91A

During the month long range operations had been particularly hampered by aerodrome conditions at Malta where the shortness of the Luqa runway prevented the Wellingtons from taking off with a full load of petrol when there was no wind. While efforts were being made to lengthen the runway for long distance operations, a more immediate solution was to attack targets nearer to the Island when poor take off conditions prevailed. This plan was followed until the extension was completed in December.

33A

(d) Change in Operational Control

During November the control of the Wellington operations was handed over by Air Ministry to the A.O.C.-in-C. Middle East. His instructions, issued on 11 November, reiterated the policy that the main effort from Malta should be directed on behalf of the Greeks. The influence of the immediate strategical situation was, however, liable to be more strongly felt at the Middle East Headquarters than at Air Ministry and divergences from the original policy began to increase.

A.M. File
S.6903
57A

(e) Support of the Desert Offensive

The first raid in December was carried out against Naples, but early in the month the A.O.C., Malta was ordered to make two

H.Q. R.A.F.
M.E. O.R.B.
Dec. 40
App. 5

attacks against Tripoli and its ~~seaplane~~^{airfield} Castel Benito in support of the desert offensive, scheduled to begin on 9 December. An attack against Castel Benito and the fighter ~~seaplane~~^{airfield} at Mellana took place on 7 December, but on 13 December the Wellingtons efforts was diverted back to Naples. The primary purpose of this attack, which took temporary priority over all other targets, was to induce certain Italian battleships to leave the port during the passage of a convoy to Greece which was due to pass Malta on 30 December. This object was apparently achieved when the naval units left Naples on 18th. The A.O.C.-in-C. ~~now~~^{then} directed the bomber effort back to Tripoli and Benghazi in support of the desert offensive. Raids against Tripoli were carried out on the nights of ~~the~~^{the} 20th and 22nd. The first attack was made against Castel Benito ~~seaplane~~^{airfield} where five enemy aircraft, were destroyed and many more damaged. Two hangars and various buildings were also damaged and the ~~seaplane~~^{airfield} was reported unserviceable. At Tripoli harbour, two nights later, bombs were dropped on the Customs House and jetties, large fires and explosions following the attack. A hit on a seaplane hangar caused a large white fire, and more bombs straddled the power station and a second jetty and ~~fell~~^{other} near the railway station. The raid on Castel Benito was described by the A.O.C.-in-C., as splendid and most valuable to Western Desert operations still continuing.

(f) Swordfish Activities

No.
F.A.A. Swordfish of ~~the~~^{No.} 830 Squadron contributed to the offensive with two raids against Tripoli on the nights of the 13 and 20 December. During the former raid, they scored direct hits on two ships and damaged a destroyer and one auxiliary vessel for the loss of one aircraft, while on ~~the~~^{the} 20th hits were made on hangars at the seaplane base and on warehouses on the mole.

(g) No. 148 Squadron

During December, Malta's first bomber squadron, No. 148, was established on the Island. The establishment was brought about, in response to a plea by ~~the~~^{the} A.O.C. Mediterranean for a more settled policy for bombing operations from Malta, and for some identity

M.E.W.I.S.

A.H.B./II 6/1/1

A.H.B./II 5/183/291
~~DO/183/43~~
24A

M.E.W.I.S.

A.H.B./II 6/1/1

A.M. File

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98A and 101A

Air Commandant

for the Wellington unit. ~~A/Cdr~~^{A/Cdr} Maynard pointed out that in spite of the commendable efforts by individuals, the unit wanted cohesion and drive, and the lack of Squadron spirit was very detrimental to operations. There was no Commanding Officer and the personnel had feelings of considerable uncertainty as to their future. Air Ministry's reply to this was to arrange for the establishment of the Squadron, with personnel for both maintenance and operations, but without permanent squadron aircraft. The Wellingtons were to be retained, as hitherto, from the reinforcements to Egypt and the maximum number to be held at any one time was fixed at sixteen. The squadron was re-formed at Malta as from 1 December 1940, and its subsequent successes fully justified the decision for its establishment.

No. 148 Sqn
O.R.B.

(h) Attacks on Italian Communications

At the end of December, yet another development took place in the Wellington Operational policy. On ^{the} 29th the bombers made a further attack on Naples where the Italian battleships were again assembled. This raid was immediately followed up by a strong plea from ^{the} C.-in-C. Mediterranean for more co-operation between the Navy and ^{The Royal Air Force} ~~R.A.F.~~ in attacking enemy ports and shipping, a suggestion which was intended to affect the Middle East war generally, without paying pronounced attention to the Greek theatre. In particular, Admiral Cunningham desired the special employment of the Malta Wellingtons in this policy, because all the large Italian ports within range of Malta were used at the same time both for harbouring warships and for the assembly of supply ships. The congested shipping provided admirable targets. The effective development of this policy depended to a great extent upon the speed at which fleeting opportunities, revealed by reconnaissance, could be seized upon. ^{The Admiral} ~~and he~~^{he} suggested that ^{he} A.O.C. Mediterranean be empowered to stage attacks on these targets on his own initiative, and that he himself ^{should} ~~could~~ be in a position to request the A.O.C. direct, to attack particular targets, in order to concert his operations with those of the F.A.A. This policy

/ was

was agreed to as a temporary measure by General Wavell C.-in-C. ^{Middle East}
~~M.E.~~, and by Air Marshal Longmore, and operations against naval targets became the rule for the time being.

M.E.W.I.S.

~~SECRET~~

R.H.B./T.G./1/1

The chief targets attacked during these raids, from ^{the} 1st to the 12th January 1941, were Naples, Tripoli, Taranto and Messina. Tripoli received three visits, during which direct hits were scored on the target area and fires and large explosions reported. During the second of two attacks on Naples, bombs fell near a ⁰
Littoria-class battleship. Altogether the attacks resulted in certain damage to harbour installations and to shipping, including Naval Units. On 8 January, however an Air Ministry signal to the A.O.C.-in-C. expressed grave doubts whether the present policy would afford sufficient aid to Greece and suggested that targets should be chosen only from those ports on which depended the Italian communications with Albania. Sir Arthur Longmore decided however, to hold to his policy pending the passage of an important convoy to Greece, and by the time it became possible for him to reconsider his objectives, a new development forced him to direct his attacks against other targets. Once again strategic considerations had made it necessary to postpone the policy of using the Malta bombers for the support of Greece.

A.M. File
 S.6903
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117A

The success^{es} achieved by the Wellingtons, in the last two months of 1940 and the first weeks of 1941, were ample justification for the risk taken in basing them at Malta. It had been accurately foreseen, however, that the increased activity from the Island would stimulate the enemy's interest and induce him to take steps to counteract it. The new year had hardly begun when it was reported that the German Air Force had arrived in Italy, and that German aircraft were already based ^{on} ~~in~~ Sicily. The report was quickly borne out by the appearance of German aircraft over Malta. From ^{then} ~~now~~ on, the war entered on a new phase at the Island. The comparatively peaceful period of unilateral war with Italy was ended, and for the time being ~~and~~ a more determined enemy had ~~now~~ entered the field. For Malta this was to mean the beginning of a

SECRET

long defensive battle waged against heavy odds, during which she struggled to maintain the important air activities which had been inaugurated and developed in 1940.

Fighter Defence

During this period enemy activity remained on a moderate scale, and Malta's small fighter force was able to deal with the raids with some success. A lull in October was followed in early November by a renewal of high-level bombing in which the bombers were both preceded and escorted by fighters. The dockyard and Luqa were both attacked, but our fighters succeeded in bringing down one Macchi 200 and one S.79, after which the enemy abandoned these tactics.

~~H.Q. Med.~~
~~S. 247/36/4/Air~~
A.H. 8./II 55/113/5/54 (A)

16. d.
~~H.Q. Med.~~
~~S. 247/36/4/Air~~

By Mid-November the enemy had commenced low-flying machine-gun attacks with C.R.42 fighters, ~~and~~ At first this form of attack was disturbingly successful in damaging aircraft on the airfields, since ~~our~~ ^{the} Hurricanes were waiting high up for the bombers following the fighters. A new form of tactics was introduced, however, in which the Hurricanes remained high to intercept the bombers, and the fighters were met at a lower level by Gladiators. This policy was justified on 9 December when six Macchis, with a further six as escort, were intercepted and failed to push home their attack. The R.A.F. claimed four of the enemy destroyed, and A.A. gunners a fifth. This new form of attack was doubtless another attempt to destroy the Wellington bombing offensive from Malta which was carrying on steadily and successfully.

High level bombing raids up to the end of 1940 were directed mostly against Luqa, the dockyard and shipping, but they resulted in very little damage, and enemy fighter patrols which were apparently intended to lure our small fighter force into unequal combat did not ^{at all} ~~invariably~~ finish in favour of the enemy. Our fighters shot down a mixed bag of S.79's, C.R.42's and Macchi 200's. Night raids were infrequent up to mid-January and the raiders dropped their bombs at random. On the night of 19 December a Hurricane shot down ^a ~~an~~ S.79 in flames.

/ Malta

Malta fighter losses were not heavy during this period, but reinforcements were disappointing owing to the loss of the eight Hurricanes flown off a carrier in the Mediterranean on 17 November and although the ~~(present)~~ position was not urgent, Air Commodore Maynard showed some anxiety for the future in a signal to Air Ministry early in December. He mentioned that the C.-in-C., Mediterranean was anxious to make greater use of Malta, but was reluctant to do so before the local defences were better able to resist air attacks, and that for the same reason the C.-in-C., was opposed in principle to bombing attacks on local targets in Sicily until retaliatory action which might be directed against the dockyard could be better resisted. The A.O.C. acknowledged that additional guns were now reaching Malta, but pointed out that the main defence was undoubtedly best provided by fighter aircraft. He went on to say that owing to the unfortunate failure to reinforce No. 261 Squadron, the fighter effort was very meagre, although it had so far more than held its own and morale was very high. Any increased scale of attack, however, would be too much ^{the existing} for ~~present means~~ resources, and damage to our prestige and material might be considerable if the enemy discovered our weakness and took advantage of it.

Moreover, the position of ^{No.} 261 Squadron was likely to become difficult shortly, as the Squadron was incomplete, could never be released and operated by night as well as by day. Some pilots were tiring after six months work and their future must be considered.

Besides these difficulties enumerated by the A.O.C., Malta's position had been made more precarious by events in the Desert. The Italian advance towards Alexandria had made it impossible to fly fighter reinforcements to Malta from North Africa, so that no help could be expected from that quarter until the British Desert Offensive (planned for early December) had made possible the recapture of airfields within range of Malta. In any case, the offensive itself would need all the fighter support available.

~~SECRET~~
42A

A.H.B./JJI/183/288

SECRET

No. 261 Squadron had sufficient aircraft to attain a maximum of only nine serviceable during the greater part of the daylight hours, while only three were available for the period immediately after dawn and before dusk. To remedy the position, Air Ministry suggested an increase in the number of pilots in No. 261 Squadron, to allow for continuity of duty, and hoped also to send out twelve crated Hurricanes as soon as possible.

Rev Min. File
S.724/111
3

As it so happened, neither the reinforcing aircraft nor the pilots arrived at Malta until after the new year. Fortunately, during December 1941 enemy raids were relatively infrequent, and the situation did not deteriorate before then.

SECRET

PART III. THE FIRST GERMAN OFFENSIVE, JANUARY - MAY 1941CHAPTER 5THE 'ILLUSTRIOUS' BLITZ

Early in January 1941 a new factor was introduced into the Mediterranean war, which was to have a profound effect on the British position in that theatre, and which brought to an end all hopes of a speedy and final victory over the Italians in Libya. Towards the end of December 1940 German transport aircraft had been observed operating between Sicily and southern Italy, and it was reported that units of the Luftwaffe had arrived in Italy. These reports were confirmed beyond doubt on 10 January 1941 when a strong force of German Ju.87's made a heavy dive-bombing attack on an escorted convoy south of Malta. From that significant date, 10 January 1941, the Luftwaffe played a prominent part in the Mediterranean war and concentrated a considerable proportion of its effort against the Island.

The arrival of German air units in the Central Mediterranean was followed in due course by the German attacks on Greece and Yugoslavia, in early April. The capture of Crete which was achieved in May was carried out by German troops, and from March onwards German army and air units reinforced the Italians in the Desert under the leadership of Rommel.

German Plans

It is evident from a study of captured German documents that Hitler did not attach primary importance to the war in North Africa at this or any other time, and in January 1941 he was already planning his attack on Russia. At the same time however, the successful conduct of the Libyan campaign was desirable from a broad strategic point of view, and it was Hitler's intention to intervene in his own good time on behalf of the Italians. The Balkans, however, were of great importance to his designs on Russia. It was intended to drive the British out of Greece and Crete, so that when the invasion of the U.S.S.R. took place the Axis army would have a secure right flank.

Hitler's Con-
ferences on
Naval Affairs

/ In

SECRET

Hitler's Conference on Naval Affairs

In November 1940 it was Hitler's intention to withhold the intervention of German troops in Egypt until the Italians had reached Merse Matruh, but his plans were upset by the British offensive which began on 9 December. On 10th Hitler announced:

As a result of agreements made with our Allies German aircraft formations will operate as soon as possible from the south of Italy in the battle in the Mediterranean (for a limited time).

Their most important task is to attack the British Navy, particularly in the port of Alexandria, but also in the Suez Canal, where attacks are to be made on enemy shipping, and in the Straits between Sicily and the north coast of Africa.

Owing to the critical situation in the Mediterranean, however, it may become necessary to operate in the Ionian Sea or the Aegean Sea.

In the weeks that followed, the German preparations for intervention were justified by the steady progress of the British in the Desert. By 20 December the Italians had evacuated Gambut and British troops were closing in on Bardia. This port was occupied on 4 January, and although air units had to be withdrawn from the line for the campaign in Greece, the advance was continued until the capture of Benghazi on 7 February.

On 11 January Hitler issued the following directive:

It is essential to hold out in Tripolitania.

The X Fliegerkorps will retain Sicily as an operational base. Its most important task is to attack English naval forces and sea routes between the Western and Eastern Mediterranean.

The Italian Government has been asked to declare a mined area between Sicily and the north coast of Africa in order to facilitate the task of the X Fliegerkorps and to eliminate the possibility of incidents with neutral ships.

In this directive no reference was made to Malta, but the Island was considered the most serious menace to the supply route and its neutralisation was planned as the best means of obviating the danger. It was primarily for this reason that the German air unit, the X Fliegerkorps, was sent to Sicily in early January.

The Luftwaffe Attacks

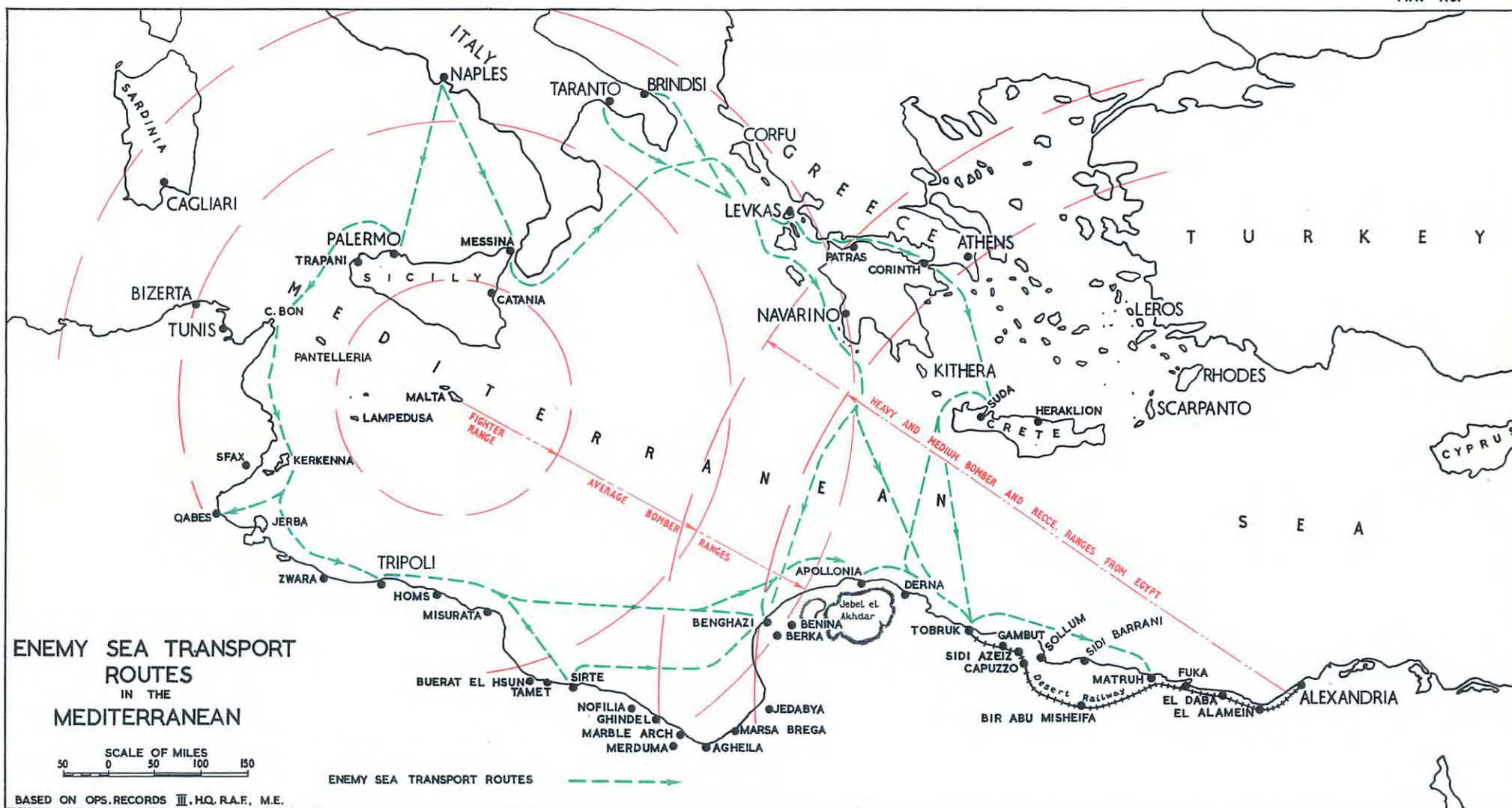
On 9 January 1941, reports of the presence of German dive-bombers in the Mediterranean were confirmed when nine Ju.87s

/ attacked

Hitler's Naval Conferences 1941

German Official Records A.H.B.6 Translation No. VII/II

SECRET



A.H.Q. Malta
O.R.B. Intsum.
App. A.

attacked a convoy in Marsaxlokk Bay, Malta. No ^d damage or casualties were suffered, and since the attack lacked determination it was concluded that the German aircraft were piloted by Italian airmen who were known to have operated Junkers from Pantell^earia. Later on the same day Macchi 200 fighter aircraft came over the Island ^{and} ^{then} six of ^{which} machine-gunned Luqa airfield causing slight damage to three Wellingtons. Five Hurricanes went up to intercept and claimed four aircraft destroyed, and (1) A.A. fire a fifth.

as has already been noted
On the following day, 10 January, the German Air Force banished all doubts of its presence in the Mediterranean by attacking in force ^{the} ^{'Excess', bound} an important convoy for Greece, about a hundred miles due West of Malta. (2) The main attack was delivered at 1240 hours by about forty Ju.87s and Ju.88s, which concentrated their efforts against H.M.A.C. Illustrious causing severe damage. The distance from the convoy to Malta was too great to permit the Hurricanes to interfere, and the Illustrious' Fulmars were heavily out-matched. After this attack, the ship was useless as a carrier and those of her aircraft already in the air at the time flew to Malta. Nine aircraft had been destroyed on board. At 1610 a second dive-bombing attack was made on the Illustrious, although six of the fifteen Junkers aircraft were held off by the ship's guns. The enemy then turned their attention to the battleships escorting the convoy, but retired on coming under fire. An hour later, however, the battleships were attacked by seventeen dive-bombers, but no direct hits were received. Three Fulmars of the original patrol from the Illustrious, directed by wireless from the battleship Valiant, came out from Malta and damaged three of these bombers returning from the attack. The Fulmars claimed to

(1) These claims were probably overestimates. According to Italian sources (see Appendix No. IV) Italian aircraft losses in the period January - March 1941 did not exceed a total of eight bombers and nine fighters. Records of the losses from day to day are not available.

(2) In this convoy, one ship the Essex was bound for Malta & three others for the / have Piraeus.

A.H.B.6
Translation
No. VII/II

have destroyed five aircraft during the day and the ships' guns three, but enemy losses were only three dive-bombers destroyed and two damaged. The Germans later described the danger from the Fulmars as scarcely worth mentioning as they were obsolescent, and counted the Naval flak responsible for their losses.

The Illustrious was too badly crippled to continue with the convoy but steering with her two main engines, she managed to limp into harbour at Malta under cover of darkness.

With the aircraft carrier a sitting-target, it was only to be expected that the Luftwaffe would return to the attack. The Malta defences had therefore to prepare for the worst.

Fortunately, however, the 11th was marked by the arrival of twelve ~~erated~~ Hurricanes, which, with the fourteen already in operation, completed for the first time, the aircraft establishment of
(1)
No. 261 Squadron.

M.E.W.I.S.
No. 31
A.H.B./II G/1/1
A.M.
File
S.50536 1A

The Luftwaffe did not immediately follow up its first success against the Illustrious, and for the next few days, when weather permitted, the enemy concentrated on reconnaissance. Unfortunately these sorties met with little opposition from the Malta Air Defences, as the German aircraft, by flying at a great height either singly or in small formations, were frequently successful in escaping radar detection.

This period of waiting, enabled repairs to go forward on the Illustrious, and also gave the R.A.F. time to determine the location and strength of the enemy. Glen Martins reconnoitred the German positions in Sicily whenever possible, and these sorties were followed up by bombing attacks by ^{No.} 148 Squadron on enemy occupied airfields. Unfortunately, the enemy force was too strong and his airfields too widely dispersed for the bomber

- (1) The pilot situation was far less satisfactory, since there were only twenty-three out of an establishment of forty-three. As the result of an appeal from Air Commodore Maynard, however, the A.O.C.-in-C. Middle East decided to convert some of his pilots to Hurricanes, for the defence of Malta.

- (2) ~~This defect in the Radar is discussed at greater length in Appendix No. V.~~

/ operations

German Air
Ministry Records

operations to have much effect on his potential effort. According to enemy sources, on 12 January there were two hundred and fifty-five German aircraft in Sicily, of which one hundred and seventy-nine were serviceable. The air units, of which there were ten, all under Fliegerkorps X, were distributed over four ^{difficult} ~~aerodromes~~. At Catania there were eighty bombers, nearly all serviceable, and twelve long-range reconnaissance aircraft with only two serviceable. Twin-engined fighters were stationed at Palermo with a strength of thirty-four aircraft of which sixteen were serviceable. The dive-bombers, of which there were eighty, with forty-two serviceable, were based at Trapani, while Comiso held another forty-nine bombers with forty-one serviceable. (See Appendix No. XII).

The Wellingtons over Sicily

A.H.Q.M.E.
O.R.B. App. 16
Jan.

A.H.B./II J1/15

On 12 January Glen Martins of No. 69 Squadron reported thirty-five aircraft at Catania and that night Wellingtons of No. 148 Squadron attacked the airfield. They claimed at least nine aircraft destroyed, damaged the runway and set hangars and buildings on fire. German losses, however, were only one bomber destroyed and three damaged, although some Italian machines may have been hit. Unfortunately the raid cost the squadron two bombers, including one of the best crews in Malta. Bad weather prevented further reconnaissance sorties until ^{the} 15th when photographs of Catania revealed about a hundred aircraft on the ground, of which twenty-five appeared to be Ju.87^s or 88s. With them were some thirty burnt out or badly damaged machines. During the bombing attack that night nine Wellingtons of 148 Squadron scored hits on aircraft and hangars. A prisoner of war subsequently divulged that during these two raids the damage inflicted was:

Three Ju.88s destroyed by fire
Four He.111s " " "
One Ju.52 " " "
One He.111 seriously damaged
One three-motor Italian transport destroyed
H.Q. Administrative building destroyed
A number of Italian aircraft seriously damaged

/ At

A.H.B./JJI/183/138 (A)
 B.O./A.M.E. 2
 H.Q. R.A.F. M.E.
 O.R.B. Jan.
 App. 13

At this time however, there was considerable pressure in London to divert the bomber effort back to the Albanian and South-East Italian ports. A German invasion of Greece through Bulgaria was believed to be imminent and it was decided to give the Greeks maximum support. On 13 January Air Marshal Longmore informed the A.O.C. Malta that the primary targets for the Wellingtons were now to be Valona, Durazzo and Brindisi. On ^{the} 16th, however, the first heavy raids of the German 'blitz' against the Illustrious took place, and Malta had her first experience of German dive-bombing. The results of this raid were sufficiently serious to put defence before all other considerations and on the following day ^{the} C.-in-C. Mediterranean appealed through the Admiralty for a return to the previous policy for the Wellingtons. He appreciated the necessity for a fully pro-Greek policy, but considered that since the orders for this had been given, the situation had radically changed. The vital thing ~~was~~ was to keep Malta in action. He therefore requested that H.M. Government should immediately consider giving first priority to the destruction of the ~~aero-~~ ^{airfields} ~~planes~~ and establishments on which the dive-bombers were based. This appeal from the chief naval authority in the Mediterranean was naturally ^{mainly} ~~(primarily)~~ concerned with the protection of naval units in or around Malta. From the naval point of view, however, the safety of the Island itself was also of great strategic importance, since the primary reason for its defence was its value as a base for naval units and for an air component, whose chief tasks included reconnaissance for the naval forces and strikes against enemy naval bases and shipping.

M.E.W.I.S.
 A.H.B./II 6/1/1

The C-in-C's request was agreed to immediately, and until the end of the month, No. 148 Squadron concentrated its effort against the German-occupied ~~aerodromes~~ ^{airfields} in Sicily. Three further attacks were made against Catania, two against Comiso and one ^{direct} ~~against~~ Augusta and Syracuse. During these raids direct hits were obtained on runways and buildings, hangars set on fire and aircraft damaged. (See Appendix No. VIII).

/ German

German Raids Begin

M.E.W.I.S.
and H.Q. Malta
O.R.B. Intsum
Apps and IJ1/15
A.H.B.

The first heavy German attack ^{on Malta} ^{January} on the 16th was carried out by seventy aircraft in two waves. The enemy force, consisting of Ju.87 and Ju.88 with escorts of C.R.42, made an intense and determined dive-bombing attack on the Grand Harbour. They scored ^a ~~only one~~ hit on the Illustrious, and one on the merchant vessel ^{and} ~~Essex~~, ~~but~~ inflicted considerable damage on civilian property. Four Hurricanes and three Fulmars from the Illustrious went up to intercept and, with the A.A. guns, shot down three enemy aircraft, ⁽¹⁾ ~~although they claimed a total of ten aircraft destroyed~~. Despite the heaviness of the attack and the strength of the fighter escorts the defending aircraft suffered no casualties.

A.M. File
S.36003/II
39A

ibid
Minute No. 33

The smallness of the fighter defence force aroused much anxiety for the safety of the Illustrious, but the possibility of sending reinforcements to the Island was complicated by the ⁽²⁾ problem of congestion on the airfields. In addition to its own aircraft the R.A.F. was accommodating the squadrons from the Illustrious, and in any case the airfields were too small to provide really satisfactory dispersal for protection against an attack. ^{the} On 16th it was decided that since there were over twenty Hurricanes and some Fulmars ^{on} at the Island, the A.O.C.-in-C. Middle East should be requested to provide six Hurricanes to be flown to Malta, but that these should be held in Egypt until they were required to replace casualties. In this way the dangers of congestion would be avoided to some extent. These Hurricanes were flown in to Malta later in the month.

A.H.B./II 4/1/1
M.E.W.I.S.
No. 31 and
A.H.Q. Malta
O.R.B.

Bad weather prevented much activity on the 17th, but on the following day the onslaught was renewed. This time the airfields formed the main objective. About eighty Ju.87s and Ju.88s, with large escorts of C.R.42s, carried out heavy raids on Luqa and Hal Far, causing severe damage to the airfields, aircraft and buildings. Six parked aircraft were destroyed and others damaged,

⁽¹⁾ They claimed ten aircraft destroyed.

⁽²⁾ For details of airfields see Appendix No. XI.

/ while

A.H.Q. Malta
O.R.B. Intsum
Oct. 40-Feb. 41
App. A

A.M.H. F./e.
~~Reported~~
S.724/1/Air
8-11

while two Fulmars were destroyed in the air. Five Hurricanes and three Fulmars intercepting the raid claimed seven Ju.87 destroyed, and A.A. guns another three. German records show only one dive-bomber destroyed. During the raids Ju.87s and Ju.88s, although escorted by C.R.42s were scarcely protected by them, and some of the dive-bombers showed complete recklessness, coming down to five hundred feet to release their bombs.

The pilot situation was rapidly becoming grave. Besides the twenty-three Hurricane pilots there were four Fulmar pilots being converted to Hurricanes. The A.O.C. also hoped to raise one or two more for conversion from local resources, and four from the (1) T.S.R. pilots of the Fleet Air Arm. Meanwhile, Air Commodore Maynard sent an urgent appeal for more fighter personnel to Air Ministry and Middle East, saying that every pilot sent immediately would be worth two later on. He emphasized that it was ~~now~~ essential to counter quickly the dive-bombing attacks. The available fighter effort was putting up a brave resistance, but the odds, which were five to fifty were too heavy, and all resources were now devoted to the fighter effort to break the 'blitz'.

By the end of that day, however, the A.O.C. was able to signal that he felt confident his forces were getting the measure of the dive-bombing. The attacks had been noticeably less determined than those of 16 January, and our claims had amounted to eleven aircraft destroyed by the fighters, and six by the gunners. According to R.A.F. calculations this brought the total for the three days of the blitz to thirty-seven while our losses (2) were two Hurricanes and two Fulmars, with one crew saved.

A.H.Q. M.E.
O.R.B. Jan. 41
App. 25

M.E.W.I.S.
AHB/II 4/1/1

On 19 January this more hopeful estimate of our fighter capabilities was again justified. Although two attacks were made on the Grand Harbour and the dockyard, both were less determined

(1) *Torpedo Spotter Reconnaissance.*

(2) These figures had been carefully checked and were considered, if anything, conservative, but German records show a total of only eleven aircraft destroyed and nine damaged up to this date.

than those of the previous day. Approximately forty Ju.87s and Ju.88s, with fighter escorts came over in the first wave, and forty Ju.88s in the second, but our fighters and A.A. guns accounted for eight enemy aircraft destroyed and one damaged.

R.A.F. Counter Offensive

In view of the successful defence and the need for continuing to use Malta as a Fleet base, Air Ministry suggested that the reinforcements waiting in Egypt should now be flown in. This was considered the best policy even if dispersal difficulties should necessitate the withdrawal of the Wellingtons for the time being, and it was emphasised that the first duty of the A.O.C.-in-C. was to maintain ^{adequate air strength} ~~a sufficient air force~~ at Malta for its defence. The

A.H.Q. M.E.
O.R.B. Jan. 41
App. 25

A.M. File
S.36003/II
44A

A.H.Q. Malta
O.R.B. & ~~MA~~ A.M.
MA. File
S.724/1/Air

A.O.C. Malta was loath to part with the bombers, ~~however~~, except as a last resort, as he intended to continue using them for hitting back at the enemy, especially in Sicily. It was agreed, therefore, that they should not be moved unless the situation became acute, and meanwhile the A.O.C.-in-C. arranged to send six Hurricanes and seven additional pilots on 23 January. Owing to bad weather, however, these reinforcements did not reach Malta until a week later (29 January). The Wellingtons continued their offensive attacks on the Luftwaffe in Sicily on the nights of 20th and 22nd, thus maintaining counter-attack as part of the defence policy.

A.H.B./IIJ1/15

M.E.W.I.S.
A.H.B./II 6/1/1

On the former night eight Wellingtons attacked Catania aerodrome, causing a number of fires among buildings, while on 22nd the bomber effort was divided between Catania, Augusta, Comiso and Syracuse. Three aircraft attacked Catania causing explosions and fires on a runway and hangars, and a large explosion followed by a fire on the railway junction. One aircraft out of three directed against Comiso bombed the target and subsequently attacked Augusta aerodrome, obtaining hits on both targets areas. A second aircraft of the same formation attacked Syracuse harbour causing a large fire.

HK/36/49/42

(1) Our claim of eighteen aircraft destroyed again far exceeded our actual achievements and our estimate of the strength of the German dive-bombers in Sicily was hardly more accurate. It was considered there were one hundred and fifty of these and one hundred long-range bombers, whereas according to enemy records, there were not more than eighty of the former, and at least a hundred and twenty of the latter.

S E C R E T

R.H.B./IHK/18/11

A.H.B.6
Translation
No. VII/54

On 23 January the Illustrious sailed from Malta and subsequently reached Alexandria under her own steam. With the departure of this target Malta enjoyed a brief respite and there was little activity during the remainder of the month.

The 'Illustrious Blitz' was over.

S E C R E T

CHAPTER 6NAVAL CO-OPERATION AND ANTI-SHIPING OPERATIONS

Although maintenance of the fighter defence was the main concern of the air authorities at Malta during the period of heavy German attacks, other aspects of the air effort ^{were} ~~was~~ not neglected and the period January - May 1941 saw the development of a systematic policy in naval co-operation and anti-shiping patrols. Beginning with tactical improvements, including a system of co-operation between reconnaissance and attacking forces, and the extension of the sea area under offensive air patrol, this policy was eventually extended to embrace an increase in the strength of the existing units and the introduction of superior types of anti-shiping aircraft.

Policy proposals

A.M.
Ref. File
S.49916 2A

The proposal for a renewed anti-shiping offensive originated at a meeting of the Commanders-in-Chief of the three services, which took place at G.H.Q., Middle East on 26 December 1940. At this meeting the need for increased reconnaissance in the Central Mediterranean was once more expressed, with the result that a joint signal was sent to the Home Authorities asking urgently for further reconnaissance aircraft, and long-range torpedo-bombers to be stationed at Malta. Meanwhile, as an immediate step towards improving the situation, it was agreed that Naval requirements for reconnaissance in the Central Mediterranean should receive priority and that R.A.F. bombing attacks from Malta should be concentrated against ports in Metropolitan Italy.

In their request to the Chiefs of Staff for reinforcements of reconnaissance aircraft, the Commanders-in-Chief pointed out that the control of sea communications in the Central Mediterranean was a matter of vital interest to all three services. Through lack

/ of

of adequate air reconnaissance and suitable long-distance bomber-torpedo aircraft, favourable opportunities for naval or air action were likely to be lost, and reinforcements and supplies would thus reach Libya unobserved and consequently immune from attack. The operations by the R.A.F. and F.A.A. against ~~merchant and warships~~ ^{shipping} in Italian and Libyan ports, although producing good results, were not in themselves sufficient, and the Commanders-in-Chief recommended that they should be augmented by the sinking of ships on passage and at assembly ports. Proposals already submitted to Air Ministry by the A.O.C.-in-C. were again recommended. They included the establishment at Malta of one full G.R. Land Squadron of Glen Martins, and one full T.B./G.R. Squadron of Beaufort type aircraft.

ibid
10A

The Chiefs of Staff agreed in principle to add one flight of seven I.E. Beauforts to Malta in addition to the flight of seven I.E. Glen Martins already promised, ⁽¹⁾ with five I.R. of both types. They hoped to dispatch the Glen Martins shortly, but could not undertake to allot any Beauforts to the Middle East Command for the time being.

No. 69 Sqdn
O.R.B.

As a step towards implementing this decision, No. 431 Flight was disbanded during January and No. 69 Squadron formed in its place, with appropriate increases in its establishment. The reinforcing aircraft, however, were slow to materialise. By the end of the month the unit's strength was only four aircraft (one aircraft having been lost) and only one Glen Martin had arrived by the end of February. Two more aircraft were lost during March, although these losses were more than made up for by the arrival during the month of reinforcing aircraft, which raised the strength to seven Glen Martins.

Reconnaissance

The operations of No. 69 Squadron during this period consisted mainly of preliminary reconnaissance of enemy ports and ~~seas~~ ^{air fields} ~~from~~ before and after Wellington and Swordfish raids. There

(1) 12 October 1940. M.E. File S.21299 Encl. 1A

/ were

were also naval requirements to meet, and, in addition, especially towards the end of the period, the Glen Martins did invaluable work in discovering enemy convoys for anti-shipping strikes by the R.A.F. The strength of the unit, however, remained seriously below

H.Q. R.A.F. M.E.
O.R.B. Feb.
App. 29

what was required for the many demands made upon it. On 22 February, ^{the} A.O.C. Malta confessed he was 'blind' to the best objectives for the Wellington raids owing to the unserviceability of all the Glen Martins. Until the arrival of the reinforcements in March, he could count on only two aircraft being serviceable on any one day, and on some days this was reduced to one. Meanwhile, the Squadron had had to take on the extra duty of reconnaissance of shipping at Tripoli in place of aircraft from Cyrenaica.

ibid
Mar. App. 8

ibid
Feb. App. 43

ibid
Jan. App. 29
and H.Q. R.A.F.
Malta O.R.B.

During January the unit had the use of a P.R. Spitfire which forced-landed at Malta while on a sortie to North Italy from the United Kingdom. While in the Mediterranean this aircraft made some useful flights, mostly photographic reconnaissance for the C.-in-C. Mediterranean. Unfortunately it was lost over Italy early in February.

Enemy opposition to the Glen Martin sorties, when encountered, was usually determined. On several occasions fighters chased the Glen Martins out to sea for long distances, sometimes venturing to within a few miles of Malta. During March, when raids against Malta were at their height the enemy instituted standing patrols of fighters round the Island to prevent the aircraft going out and to intercept them on their return. The fighter force at Malta was quite unable to give adequate protection against the heavy attacks received, and the Glen Martins' serviceability suffered heavily at a time when the aircraft were badly needed to watch for enemy aircraft movements to and from Sicily.

H.Q. Med.
S.704/Air

A.H.B./II JS/111/92(R)

Naval Requirements

The continued inadequacy of air reconnaissance and air protection for the Navy, and of anti-shipping operations by the R.A.F. were the cause of grave anxiety to C.-in-C. Mediterranean and in February he reopened the subject with the Admiralty. In

A.H.B./II JS/183/285
~~28/1/46~~
~~30/1/46~~

/ his

31A and 37A

his statement of requirements he sought to introduce a new organisation for sea reconnaissance similar to the Coastal Command in Home Waters. This organisation while co-operating with the Air Forces, would be independent of R.A.F. control, and would be provided with aircraft equipped and trained for work over the sea. This revolutionary proposal which, in fact, sought to establish a second air command in the Middle East, was strongly opposed by the A.O.C.-in-C. While admitting the inadequacy of air support the latter pointed out that under the existing system, air resources were shared out to meet the needs of all three services to the best effect possible. Any attempt to tie up aircraft of any type for one specific purpose in a subordinate Coastal Command was bound to lead to severe wastage of resources and effort. It might even lead to the Navy getting less air support when really needed, than it was now given. He supported, however, Admiral Cunningham's request for torpedo bomber and long-distance fighter aircraft.

33A

Prominent among the subjects for criticism by the Admiral was the smallness of the effort mounted against Tripoli. He pointed out that owing to the recent advance of the British forces to Benghazi it was now the only port through which the enemy could be supplied, and he suggested it should be given the same treatment as Benghazi had received in the past when R.A.F. attacks had practically precluded its use as a supply port. To this criticism Air Marshal Longmore replied that although the limited offensive against Tripoli was partly due to the shortage of bombers, it was not entirely so. Another reason was the small number of aircraft that could be employed from Malta, and this had had to be further reduced through the temporary operation of Whitleys from the Island. The airfield at Benina was also unable to operate more than four Wellingtons although additional aircraft were available. The settlement of the question in general, however, was left for Air Ministry to

/ decide

(1)
decide, and for the moment no further action was taken.

Extension of Anti-Shipping Patrols

AH.B./HJS/101/130 (A)
H.Q. Med.
S-161/Air
18A

An important development in the anti-shipping policy was the extension of 'Sink at Sight' powers, which was made early in the New Year. Up to that time, single merchant vessels or small groups unescorted could not be attacked except within a thirty mile limit which had been prescribed in August 1940. The 'Sink at Sight' order then drawn up, provided for attacks on any ships within thirty miles of the Libyan coast, and any Italian ship within thirty miles of any Italian territory in the Mediterranean. Since then, however, Sunderlands from Malta had frequently sighted enemy ships outside these limits and had been unable to attack them. Furthermore enemy shipping was constantly using Tunisian territorial waters in order to evade attack, and this was a further hindrance to the interruption of supplies.

ibid.
H.Q. Med.
S-161/Air
28A

The first step to improve the position was taken on 6 February 1941, when an Admiralty instruction was issued to the effect that south of latitude 35° 46' every enemy merchant ship could be assumed to be a military transport or auxiliary, and sunk. Towards the end of the month the area was extended to embrace the greater part of the Central Basin, and now covered the direct routes from Italy to Benghazi and Tunis, and from Italy to Sardinia. (2) The French government was informed that British Air and Naval forces might now take action against enemy shipping in all waters south of latitude 35° 46' and French ships were warned not to be at sea in this area between sunset and sunrise. The 'Sink at Sight' area was further extended at the end of April when our forces were evacuating Greece.

(1) ~~A more detailed account of the controversy over the G. in C's proposal and its developments can be found in Narrative: 'The R.A.F. in Maritime War' Volume VI.~~

(2) ~~For details see Narrative: 'The R.A.F. in Maritime War' Vol. VI.~~

/ Tactical

Tactical Improvements

Suggestions for a more accurate system of attack against enemy shipping had been brought up for discussion at Malta towards the end of 1940. As a result a new type of operation was proposed early in December, to promote the interception of fast Italian convoys plying between Italy and Benghazi. The main feature of this operation was a system of co-operation between reconnaissance and attacking aircraft. Sunderlands of No. 228 Squadron were to be detailed to find the convoys with the aid of A.S.V. apparatus, or, when possible, by moonlight. Depending on the captain's discretion, the convoys could be attacked when sighted, but if this course was not followed the flying boat would have to report the sighting to base, where a special force of F.A.A. torpedo aircraft would be held in readiness to attack. In preparation for this new type of operation No. 830 F.A.A. Squadron had to undergo a course in torpedo-bombing during December and the system was not put into practice until the New Year.

The value and scarcity of Sunderland flying-boats necessitated caution in exposing them to retaliatory fire from surface vessels, and in order to minimise the risk of loss, the A.O.C. imposed regulations on their activities against shipping. These were:-

- (i) No target should be attacked if it appeared that A.A. opposition was likely to be encountered
- (ii) The comparative value of the target was to be taken into account in relation to the extreme value and limited numbers of flying boats available.
- (iii) Merchant ships escorted by destroyers were not normally to be attacked in daylight. Attack at night was to take into account factors (i) and (ii).

The first combined operations between Malta's reconnaissance and striking aircraft took place on 27 January 1941. On that day a Sunderland on patrol towards the Tunisian coast sighted one enemy vessel and two merchant vessels north-east of the

B./IJS/101/76

~~W.S. Med.~~
~~W.S. Med.~~

No. 228 Squadron
O.R.B.

A.H.B./IJS/101/76

~~W.S. Med.~~
~~W.S. Med.~~
~~W.S. Med.~~

No. 228 Sqdn.
O.R.B. and
~~W.S. Med.~~
~~W.S. Med.~~

AHB/IJS/101/134

SECRETA.H.B. Enemy
Shipping
Losses in the
Mediterranean

Kerkennah Bank. Having reported the sighting to base, the Sunderland shadowed the ships for three hours until the arrival of the striking force from Malta. Seven Swordfish, escorted by two Fulmars, then carried out an attack with six torpedoes and a few bombs. One ship of three to four thousand tons was claimed as sunk, and another of six thousand tons was hit astern below the waterline. The sinking claim was confirmed by enemy documents. The ship was the Ingo, German, of 3,950 tons. A second ship was also reported by Lloyds as damaged. This was the Caralis, Italian, 3,510 tons. In a congratulatory signal from the Admiralty the attack was afterwards described as an excellent illustration of the correct employment of air-search and striking forces.

The Sunderlands carried out many more shipping searches, but none resulted in the dispatch of a striking force, and in March their activities were cut short by the removal of the squadron to the Middle East. Their departure was made necessary by the heavy enemy raids which took place daily during most of the month and the search duties were then taken over by Glen Martins and Swordfish.

SECRET

S E C R E TCHAPTER 7RENEWAL OF ENEMY ATTACKSVariations in Tactics

Early in February the enemy introduced a change of tactics in the commencement of night raids. From the 8th to the 16th enemy aircraft visited Malta nearly every night and delivered a total of eleven attacks in that time. During the first raid, our fighters operating one at a time through the eight hours covering the attacks, destroyed two Ju.88.s which had been illuminated by the searchlights. Following this raid it was decided that three night fighters should stand by during the hours of darkness to operate one at a time, on the approach of enemy aircraft. On the night of the 14th/15th the Grand Harbour, the dockyard and other targets were attacked by single aircraft in close succession, and considerable damage was done. Apart from the raid, however, the attacks were slight and were always carried out by single

M.E.W.I.S.
No. 35

A.H.D. / 11/11

/ aircraft



A.H.Q. Malta
O.R.B. Intsum
App. A.

aircraft. These were generally Ju.88s and He.111s which dropped bombs from high and low levels anywhere on the Island or in the sea nearby. On moonlight nights Hal Far and Luqa were located and repeatedly bombed, and the enemy several times succeeded in damaging runways and preventing aircraft from taking off. On dark nights, however, the raiders found difficulty in locating the Island and were frequently in the vicinity without apparently being aware of it. Searchlights had difficulty in picking up the German night bombers, as, unlike the Italians, they took effective evading ^{ive} ~~ing~~ action, usually coming in over the target on a long glide, and getting away by desynchronising their engines and changing throttle settings.

A.H.B./IIJ1/15
21

File

A.M. S.36003/II
46A

On 12 February, Me.109 fighters made their first appearance over the Island, as escort to German bombers. They appeared again on ^{the} 15th, with other fighters, and on ^{the} 16th two formations of six aircraft came over together. On sighting our fighters the formations each split into two, one half climbing above the Hurricanes and the other dropping below. They succeeded in shooting down one of the eight Hurricanes, and in damaging another two. For the time being daylight raids were ~~now~~ carried out almost entirely by fighter aircraft, but although these were frequently over the Island at a great height, they did not invariably invite combat and few engagements ^{took place} ~~were made~~ during the following week.

A.H.B./TG/1/1
M.E.W.I.S.
No. 37

R.A.F. Estimate of the Enemy Effort

The disappearance of the dive-bombers ~~for the time being~~, indicated that the successful defence of Malta had defeated to some extent the enemy's plans. This was commented on in a report on the first German offensive against the Island written by Air Commodore T.W. Elmhirst, who was then in the Middle East. He wrote as follows:-

"The German attacks on Malta in January 1941 appear to have followed very nearly the same programme as the frustrated attacks on England in August and September 1940. In the first place, detailed reconnaissance flights were made. Secondly, came low attacks by dive bombers,

/ in

in the main by the Ju.87 supported by the Ju.88 with a small escort of Italian fighters. Thirdly, high level bombing attacks by day with fighter escort. Fourthly, night attacks. And fifthly, night attacks with day attacks by fighter aircraft only.

The victory over the daylight raids on the 16th, 18th and 19th January can be classed as epic. The Ju.87 was completely defeated and faded out of the picture. The Ju.88's alone carried out a further daylight attack on 4th February, but were repulsed with some loss, their only success being damage to aerodrome buildings.

The relative numbers engaged and the relative losses sustained both in the air and on the ground during the period of the three main attacks are of outstanding interest.

Strength

British	21 Fighters	18 Heavy Bombers.	Total 39
German	?	200-300 bombers (1) Ju. 87, 88 & He.111	Total 300
Italian	?	Nil	Total 300 (Approx.)

Losses

British	In the air	3 fighters (one crew saved) 2 bombers (one crew saved)
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	On the ground	6
	Total	11

German	In the air	39
	On the ground	35 - 40
	Total	<u>74 - 79</u> (2)

Credit for the victory appears to be due equally to the fighters, the counter-attacking bombers and the heavy and accurate barrage put up by A.A. guns against the low-flying attacks.

Perhaps the main lesson to be learnt is that a very small force of fighters and bombers well handled with a strong A.A. defence can defend a limited objective and defeat an attacking force, even of German aircraft nearly eight times its size.

The achievements of the A.O.C. Malta was recognised on 14 February by the upgrading of his post from the rank of Air Commodore to that of Air Vice-Marshal. In replying to congratulations Air Vice-Marshal Maynard esteemed his promotion as a compliment to the work of all ranks in the Command.

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- (1) This is an over-estimate. See App. No. XIV.
 - (2) Enemy records admit only 29 aircraft lost and 14 destroyed up to 5 February.

SECRETDefence Difficulties

Although the enemy bombing effort had slackened it was obvious from the frequent fighter sorties that the enemy strategy was designed to neutralise Malta's small fighter effort, and the A.O.C. feared that ~~at the present pressure~~ the fighter force would not be able to withstand the incessant and increasing attacks by superior numbers of aircraft. He considered that a ~~complete~~ additional squadron was necessary to maintain the fighter defence, and that this squadron and in fact No. 261 Squadron as well, should be equipped with Mark II Hurricanes or Spitfires. He was seriously hampered by the inability to tackle the Me.109's above the rated height for the Mark I Hurricane. The pilot situation had improved a little, and there were thirty in No. 261 Squadron. Nineteen were available with another nine in various stages of repair, but the defence was undergoing a bad patch of receiving casualties without giving in return. Thus the fighter force, besides being inadequate, was also constantly diminishing.

ibid

A further difficulty was maintenance. If it was decided to send high-performance fighters, it was essential ^{that} ground crews should be provided to service them. With the existing ground staff, Malta could only take ^{The additional} ~~another~~ six Hurricanes which A.M. Longmore had offered, but in any case ^{they} ~~these~~ would be insufficient to solve the defence problem. Air bases were also a problem, but it was estimated that one landing-strip at Safi would be ready for use within three weeks. ~~and~~ In the meantime the A.O.C. undertook to contrive to house and operate the much needed reinforcements.

The outlook for fighter reinforcements was not, however, encouraging. Although the A.O.C.-in-C. was again instructed that the defence of Malta still had first priority, he was unable to find a complete Hurricane ^s ~~3~~ squadron for Malta, and could only hold to his offer of six Hurricanes and pilots. Meanwhile there was no prospect of immediate help from the United Kingdom. At this

A.H.Q. M.E.

O.R.B. 26 Feb. 41 juncture, too, C.-in-C. Mediterranean suggested the withdrawal of App. 48

/ the

SECRET

SECRET

the Fulmars, as they were useless against enemy fighters of superior performance. Even these aircraft, however, were considered necessary to the defence, as, with the Hurricanes for cover, they were useful against the Ju.87 which were ^{still occasionally} encountered. ~~The withdrawal of the Fulmars~~ ^{was} ~~postponed~~ ^{postponed to await the} ~~arrival of reinforcements.~~

Decline of the Wellington Offensive

The Wellington counter-offensive continued during February on a diminishing scale. At the beginning of the month, it was finally decided that ports in Albania should no longer be regarded as primary targets. As Air Commodore Maynard pointed out, bad weather had prevented operations from Malta in the Adriatic, and recent developments, particularly the German offensive against the Island, provided full employment for the bomber squadron, at Naples and Tripoli as well as in Sicily. On the 8th, however, five of the squadron's Wellingtons were sent to Middle East Command on detachment. This was partly in order to afford the crews some well-earned rest, but it was also planned to make room for some Whitley aircraft which were based on Malta for a few weeks to carry out a special operation over Italy. (1)

On the night of 11 February the Wellington operations from Malta recommenced with a raid by four aircraft on Catania, Comiso and Gela, while on the night of the 15th, Catania and Comiso were again attacked, this time by five aircraft. Fires and explosions were reported on both occasions although no results were observed at Gela.

By ~~that time~~ ^{that time}, under the developing anti-shipping policy, offensive activity was also being carried on by the Swordfish. Besides making attacks on shipping, in co-operation with Sunderlands and Marylands, No. 830 Squadron made independent patrols with torpedo-carrying aircraft supported by other aircraft carrying flares. Their ~~search~~ ^{best} hunting-ground was along the Tunisian coast

(1) See R.A.F. Narrative: 'History of Airborne Forces' Chapter II.

ibid

coast, where enemy convoys passed on their way to Tripoli, and several finds were made in these waters. On 15 February, four ^{of No. 838 Squadron,} Swordfish, on patrol towards Sousse, sighted and attacked a convoy of four merchant vessels and two escorting destroyers. A direct hit was claimed on one merchant vessel which was believed to sink. The ship, which was the S.S. ^J Juventus (Italian) of 4,920 tons was later confirmed as sunk, by Lloyds and by enemy reports. On 13 ^{March} ~~February~~ a Maryland on patrol sighted a convoy between Cape Bon in Tunisia and Cape St. ⁺ Vigo in Sicily. Eight Swordfish were dispatched to attack, but although bombs straddled the convoy no damage was reported. Other attacks were made against Tripoli. On 18/19 March, nine Swordfish attacked the harbour in conjunction with Wellington bombers from Cyrenaica. A direct hit and two near misses were reported on a 5,000-ton merchant vessel, besides other damage on the Spanish mole. Lloyds reported one ship damaged at Tripoli on this date, the Marocchino, Italian, 1,524 tons, which was hit by a torpedo.

Despite the slackening of their bombing offensive, the enemy continued the policy of enticing the Hurricanes to unequal combat with their fighter patrols, and the A.O.C. Malta was anxious to receive back the Wellington detachment in Egypt to counter the incessant enemy activity. In asking Air Ministry to sanction the removal of the Whitleys, Air Marshal Longmore described the bomber operations against Sicily as a vital factor in the defence of Malta. Air Ministry concurred with his request and the Whitleys were flown out on 16 February. The Wellingtons, however, were unable to return immediately, as some of the crews were delayed in Egypt on medical grounds, and arrangements were made for the temporary loan of five aircraft and crews from Middle East Command. // Operations were resumed on 20th when four Wellingtons visited Catania and Comiso, and on the arrival of the additional bombers, nine aircraft made an attack on Tripoli on 24th. During the raid explosions and fires were started on the customs wharf, one ship was set alight, and two more probably

AH8/II G/111
M.E.W.I.S. and
No. 148 Sqn.
O.R.B.

/ hit

hit, while a large fire was left burning on the eastern mole, and an explosion near the power station caused more fires in the town. Lloyds record one small ship of 64 tons, the Guidonia, sunk at Tripoli on 25th. This raid cost the squadron one aircraft. It was also destined to be the last attack of the series.

A.H.B./I 4/1/1
M.E.W.I.S.
No. 37

For the remainder of the month the enemy persisted in the practice of sending over fighters at a great height, and few engagements resulted. On 25 February, however, bomber activity recommenced when four Dorniers and an He.111, with an escort of Me.109's, machine-gunned the flying-boat anchorage at St. Paul's Bay. No damage was done, but on the following day thirty Ju.87's and twelve Ju.88's, with an escort of twenty to thirty fighters attacked Luqa. They destroyed six aircraft on the ~~aerodrome~~^{airfield} and damaged another nine, and we lost another three Hurricanes in the air.

No. 148 Sqn.
O.R.B.

For the Wellington Squadron this raid was a disaster. Six aircraft were burnt out and four rendered unserviceable for periods varying between three weeks and three months. The A.O.C. still hoped, however, to recommence counter-attacks against the enemy in Sicily. Some of the Wellingtons were still in Egypt, and with these and reinforcements from the United Kingdom he hoped to re-build the offensive forces. The question of returning ~~these~~ these aircraft to Malta, ~~however~~, rested on the possibility of obtaining fighter reinforcements to ensure a reasonable chance of protecting the bombers on the airfield. In the meantime, the A.O.C. decided to carry on with the Wellingtons and to review the situation at the end of the moon period.

A.H.B./I 4/1/1
M.E.W.I.S.
No. 38

The practice of making low-flying machine-gun attacks on ~~aerodromes~~^{airfields} and sea-plane bases persisted during March, and the tempo of enemy attacks continued to increase. The raids now had a dual nature as these attacks were frequently carried out by fighters escorting bomber formations. ^{the} On 5th, German dive-bombing approached its former intensity when approximately sixty

Ju.87, Ju.88 and Do.215, with about forty fighters, attacked Hal Far, destroying four aircraft on the airfield, and air force buildings. Eleven fighters went up to intercept, and with A.A. fire destroyed five enemy planes at a cost of one Hurricanes. Claims were again greatly overestimated, being sixteen destroyed and nine damaged.

Removal of the Wellingtons and Sunderlands

A.H.Q. M.E.
O.R.B. Mar. 41
App. 5

This attack was perhaps the most serious yet encountered, for it showed up more clearly than ever before, the inadequacy of the fighter defence. The combined attacks by the bombers and fighters made it impossible for the Malta fighters to cover all the targets, and when a similar raid was carried out on 7 March, A.V.M. Maynard confessed his inability to give sufficient protection to the valuable offensive aircraft based on the Island. He advocated the removal of the Sunderlands as well as the Wellingtons. He adopted this defensive measure with the greatest reluctance hoping it would prove only temporary, but emphasising that under the ~~present~~ ^{existing} circumstances the fighters could not deal with so vast a task. He described a typical example of recent raids, which had taken place only that morning. While his fighters had engaged ^{Me.109} ~~Me.~~ fighters, other ^{Messerschmitts} ~~Me.~~ had machine-gunned Sunderlands at their moorings and had attacked Glen Martins returning from reconnaissance. One of these was now unserviceable and the other had been shot down. One Sunderland was damaged and the boat guard killed while firing at attacking aircraft.

The Growing Need for Fighter Reinforcements

Although the R.A.F. aircraft casualties were small, each aircraft lost was a far more serious affair than the loss of two or three to the Luftwaffe, now that both Air Ministry and the Middle East Command were unable to supply regular reinforcements. On 7 March both the Governor and the A.O.C. Malta sent out urgent appeals for more aircraft. Since the beginning of the month ^{Malta} they had received no more than the six Hurricanes promised by the

A.H.Q. M.E.
O.R.B. Mar. 41
App. 5A and
~~B.2/10/43~~
~~46a~~

A.H.B./J.J./183/291

/ Middle

(1) The move of No. 148 Squadron aircraft to KABRIT ^{began on} ~~was transferred~~ on 23 March. No. 228 Squadron ^{to Middle East}

SECRET

Middle East, and although these had replaced, to some extent, the casualties suffered by No. 261 Squadron, they were not sufficient to effect any improvement in the situation.

On 1 March A.V.M. Maynard had stated that under the present conditions he could not hope to counter effectively the enemy's attempt to neutralise Malta's air effort. By the 7th the situation had become infinitely worse. In spite of the losses inflicted on the enemy, his activities were speedily increasing and assuming a character more and more difficult to combat, and against which only a fighter force adequate in numbers and performance could prevail. Taking full advantage of the inadequacy of the fighter force, the enemy was daily becoming bolder, ~~and~~ The A.O.C. feared that without additional fighter reinforcements the air defence of Malta could not be maintained, and its usefulness as an air and naval base would be negatived. The raids were incessant, and the strain on the limited fighter personnel very great, and although the pilots had done and were doing wonders, help was essential.

These appeals for reinforcements were supported by Admiral Cunningham. The heavy raid on the 7th had caused damage to the F.A.A. Swordfish thus preventing the laying of mines in Tripoli harbour. Moreover, from the purely naval point of view, the danger of the enemy's establishing air supremacy over the Island gave rise to serious anxiety.

In reply to the message from A.V.M. Maynard, Middle East promised to feed Malta with Hurricanes as they became available, and hoped to send a further six shortly. Meanwhile the C.A.S. informed the Governor that he was trying to get Mark II Hurricanes to Malta but that transport limitations were curtailing supplies, although the Island now had first priority in all its needs. By the 11th arrangements were ^{well in hand} ~~being made~~ for the withdrawal of the Wellingtons and Sunderlands, and most of the bombers had already left. It was decided that for the ^{time being} ~~present~~ both types should use Malta as a refuelling base only, ~~and~~ when necessary.

/ Sufficient

A.H.B./IIJ/183/291

~~DO NOT~~
~~49A~~

A.M.F./a
S.36003/II
51A

A.H.Q. M.E.
O.R.B. Mar. 41
App. 5

A.H.B./IIJ/183/291
~~DO NOT~~
49A

A.H.B./IIJ/183/271
A.O.C.-in-C.
File Corres.
with V.C.A.S.
11.3.41 and
148 Sqn. O.R.B.
A.H.B./IIJ/183/160(A).8
A.O.C./47
encl. 17A

A.H.B./II 6/1/1
M.E.W.I.S.

Sufficient maintenance personnel were left behind to refuel and maintain Wellingtons using Malta as an advanced base.

Messerschmitts continued the offensive alone on 9 March, when they machine-gunned Takali airfield, But on ^{the} 10th the main part of a night raid on Luqa and the dockyard was carried out by Ju.87s and 88s, He.111s and Do.215s, while Me.109's shot up the Sunderlands in St. Paul's Bay. During the next ten days, however, the enemy effort fell away, and although hostile aircraft were frequently over the Island or in the vicinity, there were few heavy attacks. On 21st ^{the} Macchi fighters acted as ^A escort to a Ju.88 bombing a naval craft off the Island. This was the first appearance of Italian aircraft over Malta since 1 February.

A.H.B./II J1/183/241
~~DO.215/43~~
51A

Towards the middle of the month there was anxiety at Malta ^(M.W.6) ^{the} ⁽¹⁾ concerning the protection of a convoy due on 23rd. The ships were carrying important supplies, and a week before they were due, A.V.M. Maynard asked the A.O.C.-in-C. to assist their protection by loaning a squadron of Hurricanes for a few days to cover their arrival. The object of the defenders was to show considerable fighter strength during these few days in the hope of inducing the enemy to modify his bold and harassing tactics during the unloading of supplies. Air Marshal Longmore was unable to ^{the} comply with this request, but on 18th he sent six Hurricanes to Malta, depriving one of his own few fighter squadrons for the purpose.

A.H.B./II J5/101/92
~~H.Q. Med. File~~
~~S.704/111-84~~

As had been expected, throughout the period during which the convoy was being unloaded enemy activity increased. On 22nd Ju.88s and Me.109s attacked the Grand Harbour, while on 23 March two heavy raids were carried out, the first by fifteen Ju.87s and the second by thirty, both with an escort of Me.109's. One Me.109 was claimed destroyed on 22nd and nine ^{the} ^{bombers} ^{the} ~~the~~ on 23rd, but actual enemy losses were only two dive-bombers. Our losses were heavy. *The supply ships City of Lincoln & Partholow both received direct hits.* Two Hurricanes were shot down and four were missing. Similar attacks were made on 24th, and on 27th the enemy instituted

^{safely} / standing
(1) Convoy M.W.6 arrived ^{safely} on 23 March. No loss since Jan. 10. S E C R E T

standing patrols of fighters round the Island, presumably to intercept reconnaissance from Malta. The patrols consisted of two or three formations of from three to six Me.109's or 110's some twenty miles off the coast. In spite of the importance of this convoy to Malta, however, the enemy attacks did not approach their former scale, and by the end of March, although enemy aircraft were daily in the vicinity, it was apparent that the effort had been reduced.

CHAPTER 8FURTHER DEVELOPMENT OF OFFENSIVE OPERATIONS FROM MALTAIncreased Need for Anti-Shipping Operations

April 1941 was an unpromising month for the British forces in the Middle East. It began with an enemy advance from El Agheila which was to continue to the frontier of Egypt, and the long seige of Tobruk. It ended with the withdrawal of the British forces from Greece and the beginning of the final phase of the Greek Campaign.

The events in the Eastern Mediterranean were, practically speaking, outside Malta's sphere of activity, and had little effect on her operational duties. The deteriorating situation in the Desert, however, emphasised more strongly than ever before the urgency of interrupting the enemy's supply convoys to North Africa. Owing to her strategic position athwart the main supply route, Malta assumed a larger role in this new phase of the war and commenced an offensive campaign against enemy shipping in the Central Mediterranean which was an important counter-measure to the enforced retreat of the British forces to Egypt.

Previous Attempts in Naval Co-operation

During the preceding months, preparations for the dispatch of aircraft in accordance with the policy approved in January had been slow, and only a very few Marylands had filtered through. In February, the C.-in-C. Mediterranean had protested against the serious reconnaissance situation in the Central Mediterranean. He requested that the Beauforts, whose delivery was being delayed while the crews were being trained in torpedo bombing, should be sent out immediately for use as reconnaissance aircraft only. The C.A.S., Air Chief Marshal Portal, objected to this proposal, however, and preferred the policy of increasing the supply of Glen Martins for reconnaissance as their range was greater than that of the Beauforts by twenty-two miles. Four Glen Martins were sent out during the following months.

A.M. File
S.8768 10A

/ On

ibid 15A

On 11 March Admiral Cunningham renewed his attempt to procure the anti-shipping aircraft for Malta. He pointed out that for close on two years he had been asking for a torpedo-bomber force at the Island to cover the hunting-grounds provided in the Central Mediterranean. Once such a force was established, he considered that for all practical purposes Libyan traffic would come to a standstill. The Swordfish of No. 830 F.A.A. Squadron were the only aircraft he had at Malta for anti-shipping operations, and their limited range severely restricted their operations.

A.M. File
S.8768
21A

By the beginning of April the events in the Desert had added new weight to his arguments and by ^{the} 4th a decision had been made to dispatch immediately to Malta a force of six Beauforts. Seventeen key personnel had already been sent to the Island and the remainder, with stores, were expected to reach Middle East by the end of May. Such was the importance attached to the neutralisation of Tripoli as a supply port, that it was accepted that the Beauforts would become a wasting asset owing to the inadequacy of maintenance facilities at Malta. It was emphasised that the main purpose of the Beauforts was to be the mining of the harbour at Tripoli and not attacks on shipping at sea.

No. 148 Sqdn.
O.R.B.

With the advance of the enemy to the Tobruk - El Adem road however, a new problem developed. After the evacuation of the Wellingtons from Malta in March, they had operated against ^{Middle East} Tripoli from El Adem, with other squadrons of ~~the~~ Command. Now, however, it became impossible to operate aircraft from this airfield, and no base remained from which the Wellingtons could reach the port. After a vain attempt to obtain longer-range bombers from the United Kingdom it was decided that, in spite of the heavy risks involved, a detachment of Wellingtons should return to Malta to carry on the offensive from there. These aircraft began to arrive on 12 April and by the 16th ten aircraft were operating from Luqa.

A.H.S. / J.J. / 94 / 183
D/A.O.C.-in-C.
C.O.S. Tels. 47A

/ The

30A and 33A

The presence of the Wellingtons at Luqa now complicated the plans for sending the Beauforts. On 9 April Air Ministry proposed to send twelve aircraft instead of six, a suggestion readily accepted by Middle East. At Malta, however, the A.O.C. feared that the consequent crowding of the airfield would invite heavy enemy attacks unless the Wellingtons were removed and it was agreed to return to the original proposal of sending six only. Plans were thus completed for the dispatch of the aircraft, when on 16th instructions were issued for the cancellation of the flight.

ibid 55Be
A.H.B./IIK/36/46/54

A New Policy Initiated

This last minute reversal of plans followed the announcement of a new overall policy for interrupting the enemy's lines of communication through the Central Mediterranean. On 16 April the Prime Minister issued a directive to the Commanders-in-Chief, Middle East, in which were laid down the methods and forces to be employed in the new effort to interrupt enemy supplies. It was pointed out, first of all, that if the enemy were allowed to continue to nourish the invasion of Cyrenaica and Egypt they would certainly be able to bring superior armoured forces to bear on our armies, with very serious consequences. If, however, their sea communications were cut, and those along the coast road between Tripoli and El Agheila constantly harassed there was no reason why they should not themselves sustain a major defeat.

The directive went on to enumerate the tasks of the various forces in the Middle East under the new plan. The Mediterranean Fleet, under Admiral Cunningham, was to stop all sea-borne traffic between Italy and North Africa by the fullest use of surface craft, aided, so far as possible, by aircraft and submarines. For this all-important objective heavy losses in battleships, cruisers and destroyers, were, if necessary, to be accepted. The harbour at Tripoli was to be rendered unusable by recurrent bombardment, and blocking and mining, while enemy convoys passing to and fro from Africa were to be attacked by cruisers, destroyers and submarines aided by the Fleet Air Arm and the R.A.F. Every

convoy that got through would be considered a serious ^h Naval failure.

In order to control the sea communications across the Mediterranean, it was necessary that suitable naval forces should be based on Malta. To this end the highest strength was to be maintained in fighters of the latest and best quality that the Malta ~~airfield~~ ^{airfields} could contain, ~~and~~ The duty of affording fighter protection to the Naval Forces holding Malta was to have priority over the use of the ~~airfields~~ ^{airfields} by bombers engaged in attacking Tripoli.

In accordance with this directive the delivery of the Beauforts was cancelled, and the priority for delivery, originally assigned to them, was given to fighter aircraft. The idea of establishing anti-shipping aircraft was not given up, however, and at the Chiefs of Staff's meeting on 23 April it was proposed that a detachment of Blenheims should be sent to the Island to carry out attacks against shipping on passage. This type of aircraft was more practicable at this time, as it would not be hindered by the shortage of torpedoes at Malta, and also, there were more Blenheims available than Beauforts. The Blenheim flight was, however, to be contingent on minelaying operations in Tripoli harbour by the F.A.A. Swordfish. It was agreed, that the tactics of sinking ships in transit was more effective and involved less effort, than any other form of supply cutting. ^{The Vice Chief of the Naval Staff} ~~V.C.N.S.~~ for example believed that a successful attack on a ship in transit by an aircraft was worth more than the effort of fifty aircraft against the same cargo when safely discharged on land. ~~The arrival of the Blenheims at the end of April marked the beginning of the long air campaign against the enemy supply routes which was to last until the end of the year.~~

Operations Against Enemy Communications

(a) Operations Against Tripoli

During the last three weeks of April the greater part of the offensive from Malta was carried out by ^{No. 148 Squadron} ~~the~~ Wellington detachment. With the help of information gained by Glen Martin reconnaissance

/ sorties

A.H.B./IHK/36/46
51, 52, 54.

A.H.B./IB/5/H
C.O.S. 114th
Mtg. 23 Apr.

A.M. File
S.6700
70 etc and
R.A.F. Station
Luqa O.R.B.

Admiralty
Report. The
War at Sea

H.Q.R.A.F. M.E.
Fortnightly
Opsums,
M.E.W.I.S.
~~H.Q. War File~~
~~S.247/37/41~~

A.H.B./IJS/113/5/127

sorties, the Wellingtons mounted six attacks, all against Tripoli, during their stay at Malta. To begin with the number of aircraft operating was small, and in the first raid, on the night of 13th/14th only three bombers took part. Bombs straddled the customs house and the power station and many others fell among shipping in the harbour, setting fire to a large merchant vessel which was left burning fiercely. On the following night four Wellingtons attacked the ^hharbour setting another ship on fire and scoring hits on the customs wharf on the northern mole and on a breakwater east of the customs house.

By 16 April more bombers had arrived at the Island, and on the 16/17th seven Wellingtons took part in the attack in co-operation with two Swordfish of No. 830 Squadron, one of which carried flares and the other a torpedo. Several bombs hit the Spanish mole, causing a heavy explosion and a fire, while another bomb hit a medium sized tanker in the harbour causing an explosion and setting fire to the vessel which burned fiercely for over an hour. The results of the torpedo were unobserved, but Lloyds recorded one vessel of 149 tons sunk, the Romagna. On ^{the} 18th/19th and 20th/21st eight Wellingtons took part in two raids on Tripoli, the second being the prelude to a naval bombardment of the harbour at dawn. Results were not observed in the first attack, but in the second several fires were started. According to Lloyds, on 20/21st during either the air or surface force attack the Italian ship Marocchino, 1,524 tons was sunk. ⁽¹⁾ The ship had been seriously damaged in an air raid from Malta on 19 March. The last two raids of the series took place on ^{the} 23rd/24th and 24th/25th and were carried out by only two Wellingtons each night, a further two Wellingtons being prevented from taking off on the first occasion by an enemy raid, and on the second by bad weather. On the night of the 23rd bombs were dropped among shipping and an explosion was observed on the south side of the harbour. On the following night hits were scored on the customs warehouse, and sea plane hangars and government offices were straddled. A large fire on the Spanish mole was still burning

(1) listed as shaned with the Royal Navy. / when

when the aircraft left the target. In order to make room for the Blenheims and Beaufighters the detachment returned to Egypt on ~~the~~ 27th and 28th having carried out over thirty sorties against

No. 148 Sqn.
O.R.B.

H.Q. R.A.F. M.E.
Fortnightly
Opsums

Tripoli without loss to themselves.

Despite the losses inflicted by combined naval and R.A.F. attacks, the enemy continued to ship supplies and reinforcements to Tripoli. By the end of April he had succeeded in strongly reinforcing his army in Libya, and our defences in the Western Desert were seriously threatened by the weight of the forces he had been able to throw into his advance across Cyrenaica. The Wellington effort against Tripoli had inflicted damage on the harbour facilities, but this was not enough, and it was decided to augment the attacks on the harbour with the mining of the harbour entrance and its approaches by Swordfish. Meanwhile, attacks on shipping in transit could be carried out by the Blenheim detachment.

H.Q. Med. File
S.247/37/1/AIR

A.H.B./IJ5/113/5/107

The mining operations by the Swordfish against Tripoli began on the night of 2 May and were continued on the following four nights and again on ^{the} 10th. On every occasion one aircraft carried flares, the other being armed with a single mine each. Owing to various difficulties, mainly in locating the target, the aircraft were not always able to plant their mines, but during the series of operations thirteen out of fifteen mines were laid. On night of ^{the} 25th Swordfish laid two mines in Lampedusa Harbour.

(b) Arrival of the Blenheims

A.M. File
S.6700 70A,
71A

The Blenheim detachment, consisting of six aircraft of No. 21 Squadron, arrived at Luqa on 27 April. To avoid heavy maintenance commitments it was arranged that they should be returned, and replaced by six others from the United Kingdom before major overhauls became due, and that this system of replacement should continue for the following detachments for the time being. It was emphasised that the sole purpose of the Blenheims was to attack enemy sea communications, and a senior commander was sent out with the flight to act as the A.O.C.'s adviser on the conduct of all operations, the technique of which

/ had

had been highly developed. The detachments were all chosen from Squadrons of No. 2 Group which was responsible for the conduct of similar operations against shipping from the United Kingdom.

The anti-shipping campaign which now began was, in its first month, carried out mainly by the Blenheims, although Swordfish of No. 830 Squadron undertook several operations against convoys, as well as the mining operations at Tripoli. Both units, however, owed much of their success to the Marylands⁽¹⁾ of No. 69 Squadron whose reconnaissance patrols were invaluable in seeking out shipping targets for the striking forces to attack. Reconnaissance was, in fact, a vital part of the new offensive and the Maryland Squadron, which had not yet been reinforced sufficiently to answer all the day to day requirements from various sources, was now given additional and specialised duties to perform.

(c) The Part Played by Reconnaissance

Squadron

No. 69 Sqdn.
O.R.B.

Up to the end of March the tasks of No. 69^A had consisted mainly of the long-distance patrols to Greece, South-east Italy and the Ionian sea, with occasional special reconnaissance of enemy ports. Towards the end of the month these duties had been increased by the enforced departure of the Sunderland flying-boats to the Middle East, and although the Squadron was reinforced by four aircraft in March, it was still below establishment in both personnel and aircraft. At the beginning of April little change was made in the patrol routine, but as the month progressed the Marylands became involved in the new policy for cutting enemy sea communications, and the nature of the reconnaissance duties began to change. Patrols to Western Sicily, Cape Bon and the east Tunisian coast became more frequent and began to replace those to the eastward. On^{the} 20th a system of westward patrols was ordered by Middle East by which it was hoped to obtain accurate information about the movements of shipping. From then on Marylands from Malta were to patrol

H.Q.R.A.F. M.E.
O.R.B. App. 42
Apr.

(1) Previously these aircraft were called Glen Martins

Palermo and Trapani twice weekly, and, forty-eight hours after these patrols, they were to carry out photographic reconnaissance of Zuara, Tripoli and Misurata.

No. 69 Sqn.
O.R.B.

By that time the Marylands were reconnoitring over the eastern sea route from Sicily to Tripoli nearly every day and frequently three different parts of the route were patrolled in one day in separate sorties. This meant a considerable increase in the Squadron's activities compared with the daily patrol eastward which had been the average for past months. On 24 April^{the} A.O.C. Malta reported that the number of Marylands ~~now~~ available was unlikely to be sufficient to meet the increased calls for reconnaissance caused by the removal of the Sunderlands and the recent decision to make greater use of the naval base at Malta. Out of an establishment of 7 I.E., 5 I.R., the Squadron had seven aircraft of which one was written off. That night, enemy raids reduced the number of serviceable aircraft to five, the sixth being unserviceable for a long period. Air Ministry could do little to help however. With a few exceptions, all the Marylands available had been allotted to Middle East and Malta, and the majority of them were then en route via Takoradi, and although it was hoped that two would be ready to fly out from England by the end of April, others were being held up by repairs. The situation improved slightly when the squadron took over a Mark I Hurricane for use on short patrols, mostly over Sicily, and a second Hurricane was acquired in May for training purposes.

ibid
26/4

ibid
26/4

H.Q. R.A.F. M.E.
O.R.B. App. 11
May

Towards the end of April, No. 69 Squadron patrols westward towards the Greek coast and the Ionian Sea became fewer and fewer and early in May a new system of reconnaissance for these areas was introduced. Marylands of No. 204 Group, in the Western Desert, operating from Matruh were to patrol to Zante, then alter course for Malta, alighting there at the end of the patrol. A second aircraft was to leave Malta at the same time and carry out the patrol in reverse. This new system left No. 69 Squadron

/ free

free to carry out patrols to the westward of Malta.

The new patrols by No. 69 Squadron were undoubtedly successful. Hardly a day passed without one or two sightings being made, ranging from small merchant vessels to large escorted convoy or cruiser and destroyer forces. During April little immediate use could be made of the information thus obtained, but with the arrival of the Blenheims in May a system of co-operation between them and the Marylands resulted in many attacks on shipping by the Blenheims.

(d) Blenheim and Swordfish Strikes

H.Q. R.A.F. M.E.
Daily, Weekly &
Fortnightly
Operational
Summaries.

A.H.B./II 6/11

The Blenheims commenced their operations on 1 May, when six aircraft made a bombing attack on a 3,000-ton merchant vessel and a destroyer near the Kerkennah Islands. Three direct hits on the destroyer and one on the merchant vessel caused both to stop but no reports of damage or sinkings were made by Lloyds. On the following day a hundred and forty miles S.W. of Malta four Blenheims attacked a convoy of two destroyers, one patrol vessel and six merchant vessels, obtaining hits on one destroyer and three ships of 8,000, 4,000 and 2,000 tons.

Beaufighters from Malta escorted the Blenheims on 7 May when five aircraft attacked eight small merchant vessels near Pantelleria. Hits were scored on two vessels, both of which were left listing badly and the damage was later assessed as one vessel of 3,000 tons sunk, and two of 1,500 tons damaged. The sinking is not substantiated by enemy documents.

ibid

~~H.Q. Med. File~~

~~S. 2.7/37/5/11~~

and

~~S. 2.7/37/5/11~~

A.H.B./II 5/113/5/107

The Swordfish made two attacks during the month. On the 7th four aircraft set out to make a torpedo attack on a convoy sighted by a Maryland outside Lampedusa Harbour. When the Swordfish arrived, however, the convoy had entered the harbour, and although a torpedo was launched through the harbour entrance, no results were seen. On the night of 12/13 May four Swordfish were dispatched to attack a convoy of merchant vessels and destroyers north of Tripoli. A destroyer, and a merchant vessel of 8,000 tons were believed hit, and a heavy explosion was observed on board the latter which was believed to be

~~badly damaged~~ No

SECRET

~~badly~~
badly

badly damaged. No damage was reported by Lloyds. Swordfish also planted two mines at the entrance to Lampedusa harbour on the night of ^{the} 25th.

~~H.Q. Med. File~~

~~S. 247/37/41~~

~~H.Q. R.A.F. M.E.~~

A.H.B./II J5/101/134

One attack was carried out by Wellingtons during the month, when, on the night of the 10th, four aircraft visited Tripoli harbour. Hits on the Spanish mole resulted in an explosion and several fires, but results of bombs dropped over the harbour could not be observed. Three of the Wellingtons taking part were on a ferrying flight to the Middle East, the fourth was one of No. 148 Squadron.

H.Q. R.A.F. Med.
O.R.B.

The Blenheims of No. 21 Squadron left Malta for England on 11 May and were replaced on the 16th by a detachment from No. 139 Squadron. These commenced activities on the 22nd when four aircraft bombed a merchant vessel near Pantelleria. This vessel had been hit by a submarine torpedo. Eight direct hits resulted in four explosions and much smoke, and the vessel was confirmed as sunk. (1)

H.Q. R.A.F. M.E.
Opsums.

She was the Italian ship, Perseo, 4,857 tons. On the 27th a small vessel of 500 tons was attacked off the Kerkennah Islands by two aircraft, and was left apparently on fire amidships. No report was made by Lloyds.

A.H.B./II J5/14/11
and
A.M. File
S.6700

75A

79A

By now the Blenheim detachment had been augmented by an additional flight of aircraft. It had been proposed early in the month that the number of aircraft should be made up to twelve, but the increase had had to be delayed until a consignment of Wellington reinforcements had been passed through to ^{the} Middle East. On 13 May, however, the A.O.C. reported that he was able to receive the additional flight as well as the replacement flight

/from

(1) Listed as 'shared' Royal Navy and R.A.F.

from No. 139 Squadron which was now due. Arrangements were made for the dispatch of the second flight, and five aircraft of No. 82 Squadron arrived on 21 May, a sixth having been lost in the sea enroute. By that time also, extra maintenance personnel had reached Malta, thus reducing considerably one of the R.A.F.'s main operational problems.

H.Q. R.A.F. M.E.
Opsums.

Two Blenheims were lost during an operation on 26 May when five aircraft of No. 82 Squadron and one of No. 139 Squadron bombed a convoy a hundred and forty miles south of Malta. The aircraft obtained a total of seven direct hits on two ships of 6,000 and 8,000 tons. Enemy reports show that the 6,342 ton ship, the Marco Foscarini, Italian, was sunk. Towards the end of the month the operations were directed against shipping in or near Sfax. On the 28th a merchant vessel in the harbour was attacked by two Blenheims and the violent explosion which followed suggested that a cargo of ammunition had gone up. The ship which was the Rabelais, French, 4,999 tons was damaged. On the 30th Blenheims attacked two merchant vessels outside the harbour, scoring nine near misses, and on the following day one of the ships was seen in the same position. The attack was repeated, and the ship sank. This ship was the 3,314 ton cargo vessel Florida II

May 1941 had seen the development of the first anti-shipping operations from Malta. The Blenheim force had already been increased since its arrival, and further additions were soon to be made, while the Swordfish Squadron had carried out a concentrated mining offensive against Tripoli harbour as well as taking part against shipping at sea. Supporting the activities of these two units No. 69 Squadron had developed a system of

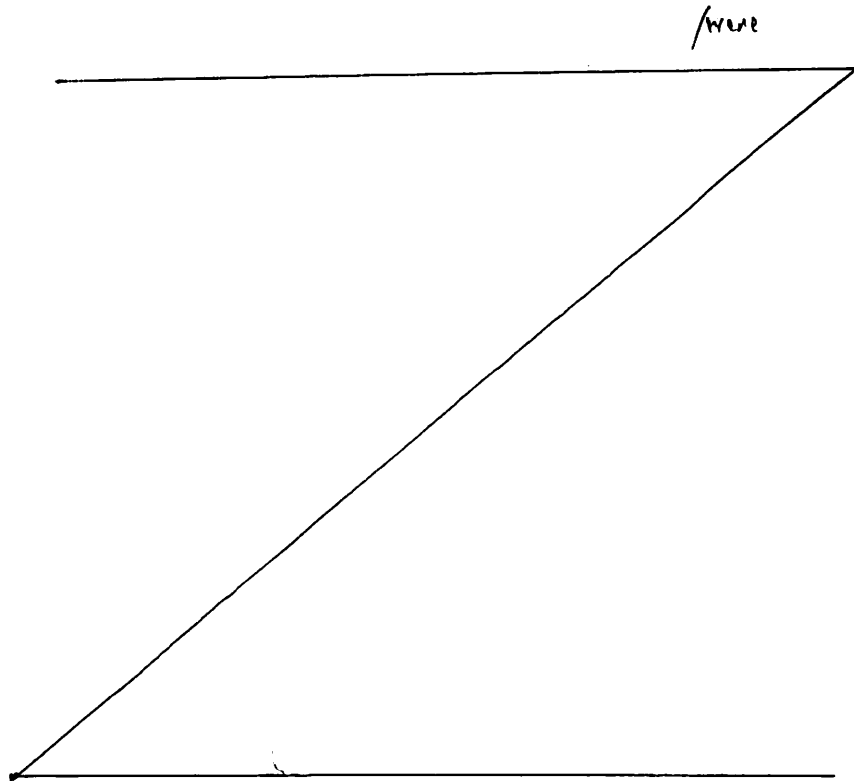
/patrol

patrol along the enemy sea supply routes which produced more information that could be acted upon, while at the same time it kept a constant watch on the vital port of Tripoli.

Operation 'Tiger' and Beaufighter Activities

During the first two weeks of May there was much activity by the Fleet in the Central Mediterranean in connection with operation 'Tiger', the sailing of an important convoy to Egypt from Gibraltar. At the same time two smaller convoys were expected at Malta. Considerable risks were taken in sending the convoy through the Mediterranean at a time when the Luftwaffe was so much in evidence, but it had been decided that these were justified in view of the urgent need for armoured reinforcements in Egypt. To provide the merchant ships and the heavy naval escorts with air protection over the most dangerous parts of the route, a detachment of Beaufighters of No. 252 Squadron was sent to Malta. These ~~were~~

D.O. Folder
A.H.B./II J5/27



SECRET

were instructed to provide air escorts to the ships over the Sicilian Narrows and as far to the east of Malta as their range permitted. While the convoy was within forty miles of the Island, the protective patrols were to be taken over by Hurricanes.

A.H.B./II J5/27
29.4.41

Besides the protection of the convoy by fighters, a further important duty was allocated to the R.A.F. at Malta during the passage of the convoy. This was the bombing of those enemy airfields in Sicily which were occupied by Ju.87 aircraft. It was suggested that heavy and continuous attacks should be made on one or more nights just before and during the critical period. For these raids it was proposed by the Air Ministry that a detachment of Wellingtons of No. 148 Squadron should return to the Island. It was also intended to send six of the Beaufighters to Malta in advance of the rest, to give protection to light naval forces operating in the vicinity.

A.H.B./II J5/27
1.5.41

Bad weather delayed the departure of the Beaufighters from England, however, and finally all fifteen left for Gibraltar on 1 May. Thirteen aircraft reached Malta on the 2nd, and another two on the 5th. These last had replaced an aircraft which had had to turn back and another which had forced-landed en route. The first task assigned to the Beaufighters was to provide escort for the steam ship Parracombe due at Malta from Gibraltar on 5 May. It was intended that the Beaufighters should cover her approach from first light until her arrival in port, but although two flights of aircraft set off to meet the vessel no contact was

S.152/7/Air
17
A.H.B./II J5/101/132

M.E. Fortnightly
Opsums

made, and it was later learned that she had been sunk by a mine on the 2nd. On the 7th Beaufighters acted as escort to Blenheims which set out to attack a convoy reported by a Maryland on reconnaissance, and on the same day, Beaufighters escorting a Maryland on patrol engaged an Italian S.81 near Linosa and shot it down.

~~A.O.C. 47~~
~~264~~
A.H.B./II J1/183/160 (A)

As the time for Operation 'Tiger' drew nearer, Air Ministry became increasingly anxious to employ all measures to ensure the safe passage of the convoy. On 4 May, the C.A.S. requested the A.O.C.-in-C. M.E. to consider whether the need to bomb and shoot

/ up

ibid.
30A and 29A

ibid.
28A

up Sicilian airfields, on the nights during which the operation was being carried out, would not justify the temporary congestion of Malta by Wellingtons. He felt that since the operation was so important, great risks should be taken to make any extra contributions to its security. Air Marshal Tedder was quite willing to agree to this suggestion if the A.O.C. Malta was able to operate the aircraft, and he proposed sending eight Wellingtons to Malta for the purpose. From Malta's point of view, however, there were grave drawbacks to such an arrangement. Although A.V.M. Maynard was quite willing to accept the risk of congestion at Luqa aerodrome for so important a purpose, the real limitation at Malta lay in the scarcity of personnel for the maintenance and handling of aircraft. He reminded A.M. Tedder that there were approximately only a hundred and twenty men for the operation and maintenance of six Blenheims, thirteen Beaufighters and five Marylands, and for the refuelling of reinforcing aircraft in transit. If Wellingtons, with their heavy maintenance, refuelling and bombing requirements, were added, some other kind of operation would have to be sacrificed. Furthermore, there were now six Sicilian airfields which might be employed as bases for attacks on 'Tiger', and with the shortage of regular reconnaissance the contents of these airfields were largely unknown.

A further drawback was the severe limitations set on night operations by enemy raids. On these grounds, A.V.M. Maynard considered that the Wellington effort possible from the Island would be quite insufficient to reduce appreciably the potential enemy attack on the 'Tiger' convoy, while the effort entailed at Malta would be out of all proportion to the possible results and would seriously affect the likelihood of success of other operations. He suggested, instead, dusk attacks on the aerodromes by Beaufighters. This would call for more Beaufighters if they could arrive in time, but they were immeasurably easier to maintain than Wellingtons. In the event of the dispatch of either type to the Island, however, more

S E C R E T

personnel would have to be supplied for the job.

161d.

32A

Unfortunately, by ~~then~~^{then} it was too late to send more Beaufighters in time for 'Tiger'. Consequently Air Ministry adhered to the policy of operating Wellingtons from the Island, with personnel sent from Middle East and with information gained from special reconnaissance of the ~~airfields~~^{airfield}, immediately prior to the operation. Owing to the acute situation at Malta, however, and to his own need for Wellingtons for operations in Cyrenaica during 'Tiger', A.M. Tedder decided against sending aircraft of No. 148 Squadron to Malta. Instead, A.V.M. Maynard promised to try and operate six Wellingtons which were due from Gibraltar, and Middle East arranged to send a hundred men for maintenance. Only four of the bombers arrived in time, however,

161d.

36A and 37A

M.E. Fortnightly
Opsums.
R.A.F. Station
Luqa.
O.R.A. A.M. File
S.50832 48A

and these did not operate until the night of 10 May, when four aircraft attacked Tripoli in company with mine-laying Swordfish. On ~~the~~^{the} 9th two flights of Beaufighters carried out patrols as escorts to the convoys, but the passage of the ships was made unusually secure by poor visibility, a rare phenomenon in the Mediterranean at that time of year. Although enemy aircraft were often in the vicinity of the main convoy, few discovered it and the major part of the defence was carried out by Fleet Air Arm Fulmars. The two Malta convoys however, were dive-bombed in harbour shortly after their arrival, and the Beaufighters and ~~aircraft~~^{aircraft} A.A. guns brought down three of the attacking ~~planes~~.

A.H.B./IIJ5/27

A.H.B./IIJ1/183/166 (A)
~~183/166~~
~~183/166~~

M.E. Fortnightly
Opsums

To contribute towards the safety of the 'Tiger' convoy on the remainder of its journey, ~~the~~^{the} A.O.C. Malta asked Air Marshal Tedder for permission to use the Beaufighters against the Sicilian ~~airfields~~^{airfields}, a suggestion which had already been made by Air Ministry. His proposal was agreed to, and on ~~the~~^{the} 10th nine aircraft were dispatched to shoot up the airfields in a low-flying attack. The first three Beaufighters achieved complete surprise in their attack on Catania, where they shot up three clusters of He.111 and one of Ju.88's. At Comiso also, complete surprise was achieved, and Me.109s and bombers were attacked,

S E C R E T

/ three

three of the latter, and two other aircraft being set on fire. A second raid was made on Comiso by the last three Beaufighters, which had been detailed to operate against Gela. Having failed to locate their target these, attracted by the smoke from Comiso, followed up the first attack. They observed one large fire and other smaller ones, and attacked a group of twin-engined aircraft, setting some on fire. During this second attack intense light A.A. fire was experienced, but although fighters and bombers were seen in the air near both airfields, at neither place did they put up any opposition to the R.A.F. fighters.

As the main convoy neared the end of its journey to Egypt it became necessary to provide for its protection while unloading. Owing to the recent events in the Desert and the many demands for aircraft made ~~on it~~ from Greece and Palestine, Middle East Command was very short of Hurricanes, and it was arranged that Malta should provide a flight for the critical period. The Island ^{by that time} had a more adequate number of fighters and in any case a large consignment was expected within a week or two through Operation 'Splice' (see Appendix No. IX). Furthermore, the dispatch of the Hurricanes would help to relieve the congestion on the airfields caused by the arrival of Blenheim and Beaufighter detachments. Thus, for the first time since the beginning of the war, Hurricanes reversed the journey across the Mediterranean from Mersa Matruh to Malta.

Further Employment of the Beaufighters

The successful employment of the Beaufighters encouraged the A.O.C. Malta to experiment with them as night fighters during the current moon period. His proposal, which was accepted by the A.O.C.-in-C., was to operate them off Sicily where they would await enemy aircraft returning from raids on Malta. Patrols were carried out by two aircraft on the nights of 12th and 13th ^{the} ^{May} but no interceptions were made.

/ The

A.H.B./DJ1/183/160(A)
~~A.O.C. 47~~
336, 37a, 40 a-d
H.Q. Malta
O.R.B.

A.H.B./DJ5/101/132
~~8-152/7/11~~
22

R.A.F. Station
Luqa O.R.B.

A.H.B./113/183/271(A)

A.O.C.-in-C.

Correspondence

with P.M.,

C.A.S. S. of S.

22A

The Beaufighters had ~~now~~ been at Malta for a fortnight, on a temporary basis, and it became necessary for a decision to be made for their future. On 8 May Air Ministry had asked Middle East for an opinion on the possibility of returning the detachment at Malta, and both A.M. Tedder and A.V.M. Maynard were very anxious to retain the aircraft. Apart from the possible use of them in night fighter defence, the Beaufighters could be of great value in the offensive against enemy convoy traffic. They could be used for the protection of destroyers and of Blenheims operating against protected convoys, and could themselves attack air traffic between Sicily and Tripoli as well as the Sicilian aerodromes. Consequently Air Ministry agreed that Malta should keep the aircraft and promised to send about twenty skilled men direct from the United Kingdom.

A.H.B./113/101/132

~~A.O.C.-in-C.~~

23 and 26

A.H.B./183/160(A)

~~A.O.C.-in-C.~~

47A

On the day this decision was communicated to Malta, however, the rapidly deteriorating situation in Crete had provided a new field of activity from Malta. On 14 May A.M. Tedder informed, ^{at} A.O.C. Malta that for the impending attack on Crete the enemy had assembled on the airfields around Athens large numbers of German aircraft of all types. The prospective scale of the attack, ~~was~~ ^{was} therefore, ^{was} such, that it was necessary to examine every possibility of breaking it up before it was launched, and he requested A.V.M. Maynard to consider the possibility of operating Beaufighters against selected ^{airfields} ~~aerodromes~~ in Greece. To this plan A.O.C. Malta readily agreed, and it was arranged that nine Beaufighters should be dispatched to Heraklion aerodrome in Crete on the following day. Their arrival was to be timed for sunset, and they were to take off again before dawn, deliver their attack at first light and return direct to Malta.

M.E. Fortnightly
Opsums

Unfortunately enemy raids prevented the departure of the Beaufighters, which, however, took place on the following day. From then on the operations went forward without a hitch. At dawn on 17th the Greek ^{airfields} ~~aerodromes~~ of Hassani, Moleoi and Argos were attacked by three flights of three aircraft. At Hassani twenty

Ju. 52

Ju.52s, twenty Me.109s and four H.S.126s were machine-gunned, and at Molaoi groups of fighters and bombers, badly dispersed on the airfield, were attacked. Two fires were started among aircraft and motor-transport at Argos where Me.109s and 110s and ^{Ju}52s were shot up. Owing to the speed of the sorties results were unassessed, but many aircraft were hit and damage was believed to be considerable. One Beaufighter failed to return from Hassani, but the remaining eight aircraft arrived safely in Malta, although four of these had been damaged.

R.A.F. Station
Luqa O.R.B.

A.H.B./II J5/101/132
~~SECRET~~
92

Following the return of the Beaufighters from these operations A.V.M. Maynard recommended the temporary transfer of the aircraft to Egypt. Before their flight to Crete the Commanding Officer of the Squadron had estimated that the aircraft could not safely do more than another twenty hours' flying without renewal with spare parts, and ~~mainten-~~ maintenance limitations threatened to ground the Beaufighters. Besides being anxious to send these valuable fighters to a safer base, the A.O.C. also needed all the available airfield space for passing through to Egypt a large consignment of Hurricanes which were due shortly (see App. No. IX). It was subsequently arranged that all available Beaufighters should be sent to Egypt to carry out further duties as escort to the Fleet, and of these four were to escort some of the reinforcement Hurricanes from Malta. It was also decided to dispatch a further fifteen Beaufighters from No. 272 Squadron in the United Kingdom, to assist in these operations in ^{the} Middle East. These reinforcements were particularly necessary ~~as~~ as, during its sojourn in the Mediterranean, No. 252 Squadron had lost six Beaufighters through enemy action at Malta, and one missing over Greece.

Although it was necessary, for the time being, to send the Beaufighter detachment to the Middle East, the aircraft had proved so effective at Malta, that the question arose whether a unit should be based there permanently. For the time being, however, the idea of operating Beaufighters from the Island was dropped, although the subject remained under consideration for the future.

A.H.B./II J5/14/4

CHAPTER 9THE END OF THE GERMAN OFFENSIVEEnemy Activity in April

H.Q. R.A.F. M.E.
Fortnightly
Opsums

In spite of the additional forces which operated from the Island during April 1941, the enemy raids seldom reached their former intensity, although the continual presence of hostile aircraft in the vicinity kept our fighters perpetually on the alert. Altogether there were only four raid-free days during April and the number of fighter and bomber sorties amounted to more than two hundred and fifty. The ineffectiveness of the enemy attacks, as compared with their frequency, was considered a tribute to the A.A. and fighter defence, although casualty figures were in favour of the enemy. On the 11th two engagements took place. In the first, two Hurricanes intercepted eight C.R.42s which were circling the Island and later in the day a large formation of Me's and Ju.88s approached the Island. One enemy aircraft was destroyed for the loss of two Hurricanes. On the 27th Me.109s destroyed a Sunderland with machine-gun fire, while on the 29th Ju.88s with an escort of Me's attacked the dockyard, only one Ju being shot down. The heaviest raids took place at night, notably on the 12th and 13th, and on the 18th aircraft were over the Island for three hours. On the night of the 29th approximately seventy Ju.88s and He.111s came over Malta in a six-hour raid which was directed mainly against the Grand Harbour, and this attack was repeated on the following night by about thirty-five aircraft.

Although the enemy raids were less effective than hitherto, there was no sign of further abatement of the effort, and the persistence of the offensive, which was now in its fourth month, was telling heavily on the defences and, more serious still, was threatening the offensive operations from Malta. By 23 April the Vice-Admiral was doubtful if he could keep the harbour open, and by 30th he reported it was becoming useless for ships at night without incurring the gravest risks.

Admiralty
Report
The War at Sea

/ Improvements

Improvements in Fighter Strength

During April however, the fighter situation at Malta was considerably improved by the arrival of two deliveries of Hurricanes by aircraft carrier. ⁽¹⁾ On 3 April twelve Mark II Hurricanes were flown in, and owing to their superior performance these proved particularly useful in dealing with the Me.109. On 27 April a further consignment of twenty-three Mark I Hurricanes arrived resulting in the over-establishment of No. 264 Squadron by thirteen pilots and by Hurricanes on the basis of sixteen I.E., eight I.R. The A.O.C. was now anxious to form a second fighter squadron, but the shortage of personnel at Malta precluded the possibility of forming it from existing resources. The proposal was, however, supported at Air Ministry and H.Q. Middle East, and it was arranged that ground personnel were to be provided in the first instance by Middle East, and replaced later by reinforcements from the United Kingdom. The new squadron, No. 185, was formed at Hal Far on 12 May. Thus was completed ^{another} ~~the first~~ step towards the improvement of the Fighter Defence.

A.M. File
S.71057

Failures in Fighter Defence

Despite the increased strength of the fighter force, the first weeks of May constituted a difficult period at Malta. The enemy continued ~~his~~ operations against the Island on much the same scale as before, but the Hurricanes were disturbingly unsuccessful. This, according to A.V.M. Maynard was largely due to the inexperience of the pilots. By 2 May the best flight leaders had been lost, and of the rest seventy-five per cent were inexperienced. In a message to Air Ministry the A.O.C. pointed out that it was particularly unfortunate that untried pilots should have been sent to Malta, because the defence of the Island, which was operated, as it were, from a pinpoint, presented peculiar difficulties, and it was no place for beginners to learn the essentials of fighter technique. Conferences were constantly held for the study of conditions and tactics, but these did little to improve the situation, and the result was the continued loss of pilots and

A.H.B./151/183/166(A)
~~100/47-25A~~

(1) Operations 'Winch' and 'Dunlop'. For details of these and similar operations see / valuable Appendix IX.

valuable aircraft. The effect of this on morale was becoming all too evident.

Convinced that these perpetual failures were due primarily to the lack of experienced leadership in the air, and, to some extent, on the ground, A.V.M. Maynard pressed Air Ministry to send out fighter personnel of proved ability and experience. In his estimation the minimum number of personnel necessary for stabilising the situation included a Squadron Commander, and five flight leaders, while a Wing Commander, with recent fighter experience, to assist and guide the fighter control was also badly needed. The A.O.C.-in-C added his support to Malta's requests, affirming that the fighter effort had been and was being gravely wasted, owing to the lack of experience of German tactics and of fighter tactics generally, and Air Ministry agreed to send out five flight leaders.

38a

A.H.B./151/182/271 (A)
A.O.C.-in-C
Corres. with
P.M. etc. 22A

Meanwhile investigations at Air Ministry into reports from Malta on German raids, showed that the enemy was employing the same high-flying tactics as had been used over Great Britain in the past, and it was suggested that Hurricanes should be employed to make fighter sweeps over Sicily to force the German fighters to take the offensive. In the past, however, the limiting factors to such operations had been the difficulty which pilots experienced in finding the island on the return journey owing to short R/T range, and the small number of pilots and aircraft available. It was understood, ~~now~~, however, that V.H.F. R/T was ⁽¹⁾ to be supplied shortly and the A.O.C. hoped that this, coupled with the increase in strength, would allow the Hurricanes to make offensive sweeps over Sicily. In the meantime it was arranged

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- (1) Hitherto the Hurricanes had been operating on H.F. R/T (T.R.G.D. equipment). This low power set had inadequate range for operations over Sicily from Malta, and homing courses from Direction Finding stations on the island were not usually obtainable. The new V.H.F. R/T equipment (T.R.1133) which had been in use in the United Kingdom for nearly a year was a big improvement, and pilots flying above 10,000 feet over Sicily could rely on obtaining a homing course from Malta. For further details of this R/T equipment see R.A.F. Narrative: Signals in World War II, Vol. IV Part 3.

/ that

A.H.R./JFS/101/132
~~E.C. Had. File~~
~~S.36003/II~~
 23, 24, 25.

that Beaufighters, then temporarily based at Malta, which were equipped with V.H.F. R/T, should carry out the attacks in place of the Hurricanes.

A.M. File
 S.36003/II
 57A

During this period the Me.109s which were frequently over the Island, out manoeuvred the Hurricanes to an alarming extent. Frequently the Hurricanes were unable to intercept them, and when an engagement did take place the heavier losses were suffered by our fighters. On ^{the} 13th two Hurricanes were shot down, and on ^{the} 14th another two, a further four being damaged on the ground, and on the night of ^{the} 14th and on ^{the} 20th a Hurricane was destroyed in the air. All these enemy successes were achieved without loss. Up to 9 May, however the enemy admitted the loss of three dive-bombers, one bomber and two long range reconnaissance aircraft.

Plans to Improve the Air Defence

A.M. File
 S.36003/II
 56A

On 12 May the A.O.C. was informed that Wg. Cdr. Halahan was being sent out to help the Fighter Defence over its difficulties. He had had very modern experience in Fighter Command and it was hoped he would be of great assistance, particularly against the Me.109s. These continued to provide the worst problem which the fighters had to tackle, for besides being fitted with cannons which made them particularly dangerous as opponents, they were well armoured and consequently very difficult to destroy. In addition they now carried bombs, and A.V.M. Maynard considered that unless this could be countered by successes against them, the local morale, which was already in a questioning mood, would be difficult to keep healthy. As the Mark I Hurricanes were quite inadequate against the Me.109s the brunt of the air fighting had fallen recently on the Mark II, of which there were only seven left out of eighteen received.

59A

On ^{the} 13th A.V.M. Maynard reported to Air Ministry that the enemy fighters, led by old hands, were getting more daring every day, and he suggested that serious consideration should be given to the dispatch of a crack Spitfire Squadron with a nucleus of ground personnel. No. 261 Squadron which badly needed a rest and

/ refit

refit after a long and arduous period of stress, could then be replaced. The A.O.C. ended by emphasising that if the present fighter situation continued, it might produce most serious consequences. His present persistence was the result of no sudden panic, but the situation had been developing despite every effort to arrest it, and the failure to do so called for drastic remedial action.

60B

Air Ministry replied with assurances that immediate steps were being taken to provide all possible assistance. Although it was impossible, as well as impracticable to supply Spitfires, twenty cannon Hurricanes were being sent as soon as possible and twenty eight-gun Hurricanes were being included in the next delivery of reinforcements. As an immediate measure it was advised that on the arrival of these Hurricanes through Operation 'Splice', all the pilots of No. 249 Squadron which was one of the best squadrons from Fighter Command, should be retained at Malta to replace those of No. 261 Squadron who should proceed to Egypt for rest.

D.O.N.C. Folder
A.H.8/IIK/36/4.6
Enc. 56

In spite of the immediate response to Malta's requests, however, opinion at Air Ministry was that the position was less grave than the signals portrayed. The Chief of Air Staff, Air Marshal Portal in particular thought it unlikely that the failures of the defence were due to inferior aircraft. The Hurricane Mark I, although outclassed at extreme heights could challenge the Me.109 at sixteen thousand feet and below and it was at these lower heights that most of the combats over Malta were fought. The failure of the pilots he considered was due to fatigue rather than to inexperience. Considerable importance was also attached to deficiencies in the higher control which had only just come to light. An example of these was the overcrowding of the Central Operations Room. In it were controlled all air activities over Malta and in the neighbourhood, as well as the control of guns and issuing of air raid warnings. Malta was advised that experience in the United Kingdom showed that the close control of fighters

D. Ops. (0)
A.H.8/IIJ5/14/3
17/5

/ must

must be by one controller, concentrating on this duty in an operations room specially provided for the purpose.

The End of the Offensive

As the month progressed, however, the situation at Malta began to improve. The Germans began to withdraw some of their forces from the Mediterranean in preparation for the attack on Russia. Units of the Fliegerkorps X began to move from Sicily early in May, and to the relief of the Malta defences enemy air attacks became less heavy and less frequent. Between ^{the} 18th and ~~the~~ 27th the majority of the German air units were sent to North Africa or to Greece where they replaced other units which were taken out of the line to take part in the Russian campaign. On 4 June the last of the operational units left Sicily, and the German offensive was over. Towards the end of May a semblance of air warfare was kept up, and large numbers of aircraft approached the Island daily, but few formations crossed the coast, and the bombing of the sea around Malta became a familiar feature of the period.

While the air battle for Malta died down, in the Middle East the invasion of Crete was increasing the tension of an already deteriorating situation. Fighters were needed there ~~now~~, rather than in Malta, and, since the success of the carrier reinforcement Operations 'Winch' and 'Dunlop' in April, it had been decided to extend the use of this method of reinforcement for the supply of fighters to Egypt. The operations were to be conducted on a much larger scale, and it was planned by this means to provide the Command with up to a hundred and forty-eight Hurricanes by the end of May. (see Appendix No. IX). A.H.Q. Malta was to be responsible for the onward transit of the aircraft. // On 21 May the first consignment arrived at Malta (Operation 'Splice') totalling forty-six Hurricanes. Seventeen were forwarded to Middle East that day, and twenty-five on the day following. Included in the reinforcements was No. 249 Squadron, one of the best Squadrons of Fighter Command. ^{As has already been noted, on} ~~the~~ the advice of Air Ministry the pilots were retained at Malta to provide the experienced

A.M. File
C.S. 9143
1A, 2A, 8A

/ personnel

personnel so badly needed for leadership of the fighter defence. The pilots of No. 261 Squadron proceeded to Egypt in their stead, to enjoy a well-earned rest.

Conclusion

The last weeks of May 1941, saw the end of the first German air offensive against Malta. For close on five months the Luftwaffe had made persistent attacks on the Island in an attempt to neutralise its effectiveness as a naval base. Throughout the period of the offensive, however, naval surface craft and submarines had used the port as a base from which to attack enemy shipping. The Island's air defence, despite the weight of the enemy attacks and the superior types of aircraft employed, had met the continuous raids with determination and had accounted for over fifty aircraft destroyed and as many damaged. By the end of the month Hurricane reinforcements had increased the fighter strength to two full squadrons, and a policy for the rapid reinforcement of Middle East and Malta had been initiated. Thus from the defensive point of view the island was well-equipped compared with its position at the beginning of the offensive.

Perhaps the most striking achievement, however, was the continuation of offensive activity by the R.A.F. throughout almost the whole of this period of attacks. During January and February this activity had been directed mainly against the enemy air bases threatening Malta, although Tripoli was never left unattended for long. In April and May, however, the attacks were switched over to enemy shipping. Blenheim and Swordfish strikes were made against the enemy sea supply lines between Italy and North Africa in the face of heavy raids by the Luftwaffe. These attacks were, however, but the prelude to a new aggressive campaign from the Island. The departure of the German Air Force from Sicily marked the beginning of a lull in enemy operations which was to last for over six months. Malta seized the opportunity thus afforded, and, in the next phase of the war the R.A.F. developed an offensive campaign.

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PART IV

MALTA ON THE OFFENSIVE - JUNE TO DECEMBER 1941

CHAPTER 10

OFFENSIVE OPERATIONS FROM MALTA - JUNE TO SEPTEMBER 1941

The Strategic Situation

At the beginning of June 1941, British fortunes in the Mediterranean were at a low ebb. Everywhere our grip on the strategic bases in the Eastern Basin seemed to be relaxing in favour of the enemy. The withdrawal of the British contingent from Greece at the end of April, and the subsequent evacuation of Crete at the end of May had provided the Axis air forces with bases from which to attack British shipping between Malta and Alexandria, while protecting their own convoys between south-east Italy and Benghazi. The transfer of these bases to enemy hands also limited the activities of the British Mediterranean Fleet. During the operations for the evacuation of Crete, naval units had suffered heavily from air attacks, and it was now recognised that without adequate fighter protection it was impracticable to operate units of the Fleet within range of enemy bombing forces. In the Desert, the enemy advance launched in April had penetrated beyond the frontier of Egypt, and a line had been established as far east as Halfaya. Except for Tobruk, which was still garrisoned by British troops, Cyrenaica was held by the enemy, and the loss of the coastal air bases had further reduced the radius of R.A.F. operations over the Central Mediterranean, and Tripolitania. In June, the British forces in Egypt, their army heavily reinforced by tanks and A.F.V's sent through the Mediterranean by special convoy, had launched a limited offensive, "Battleaxe" in an attempt to relieve Tobruk. But the project had failed, and as both sides had used up their strength, the situation in the Desert reached a stalemate.

Future Policy

On 18 June 1941 the Chiefs of Staffs met to review the situation and to determine further strategy. It was accepted that the

/renewal

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renewal of the offensive in Cyrenaica remained the chief objective of Middle East strategy, but it was recognised that no offensive could be launched without a period of respite in which to fulfil urgent requirements in reorganisation, reinforcement and training. At that time, not even an approximate date was fixed for the commencement of the offensive, but it was estimated that the interim period would cover at least two months. Under pressure from General Auchinleck, G.-in-C. Middle East, who desired a very large measure of preparation, this period eventually extended to five months and "Crusader" did not take place until November.

For the interim period, the situation postulated the policy of preventing an enemy build-up to compete with the British. This meant, first and foremost, the throttling of enemy communications between Italy and Libya, a task which fell to the Navy and the R.A.F. The limitations of such operations by either Service working from Egyptian bases have already been indicated. Egyptian based squadrons were not favourably placed for anti-shipping attacks, and although Benghazi and other Cyrenaican ports were within their range, the focal supply port of Tripoli was well beyond it. During June and July most of the few anti-shipping sorties flown were in connection with the Syrian campaign then waging, although from September onwards Blenheims based at Fuka and later, long range Swordfish from Cyprus, commenced attacks on small vessels employed from Greece.

In this situation Malta became the strategic centre of the Middle East war, and the main base for the offensive against enemy supplies. Tripoli and the enemy supply route west of Sicily were within easy range of the air striking forces in Malta, and although large stretches of the Ionian route were at the extreme range of the ^{Swordfish} ~~Broadfish~~, the eastern approaches to Tripoli were well within range of ^{Fleet Air Arm} ~~FLAA~~ aircraft as well as Blenheims. During the summer, therefore, the air striking force at Malta was further increased, and new types of aircraft introduced to improve the efficiency of offensive operations.

/Defence

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Defence Considerations

If Malta was to assume so important a role in the Middle East war, it was only reasonable to expect that the enemy would become increasingly anxious to neutralise it. Consequently, the question of defence, against attempted capture by sea and air, as well as against heavy and concentrated air attacks, assumed a new importance. There were, besides, two additional causes for anxiety in early June:-

(i) the enemy had just successfully accomplished the first large-scale air^{*}borne operation in the war (ii) his acquisition of air bases in Crete and Cyrenaica, by limiting the movements of the Fleet to the Eastern Mediterranean, had deprived the Island of one of its first-line defences. Previously, when appreciations for the defence of Malta had been made, it was considered certain that, in the event of an enemy landing, the Fleet would intervene within a few days. Now, however, it seemed likely that if an air-borne landing was attempted, the enemy would be able to support it with a seaborne^{on} attack, against which the rapid intervention of the Fleet could not be counted ~~upon~~.

A.M. File
S.36003/11
Enc. 74A

A.M. File
S.36003/11
16.d. 74A

On 6 June the Governor of Malta, in reviewing the altered situation in the Mediterranean, submitted these considerations to the War Office, and with them his proposals for improving the defence of Malta to meet the scale of attack ^{then} ~~now~~ envisaged. He recalled that until the fall of Crete and the loss of Cyrenaica the supremacy of the Fleet in the Mediterranean had been regarded as one of the Island's first-line defences. Accordingly, the loss of local air superiority had been reluctantly accepted, but now the seriousness of such a situation had become apparent. Since Malta was now more than ever important for the defence of Egypt, the likelihood of an enemy attempt to neutralise it was increased, and it was therefore essential to prepare the defences to meet an attack.

He considered the lessons for Malta ~~learned~~ from Crete were the necessity of (i) maintaining fighter aircraft in operation, (ii) dealing with parachutists instantly before they could establish centres of resistance and before others arrived, (iii) preventing

any airfield or landing ground from falling into enemy hands, (iv) repelling a seaborne attack which would probably synchronize with the airborne attack. In order to fulfil these objectives, considerable reinforcements were needed including a third fighter squadron, with sufficient reserves on the spot to replace casualties, increases in artillery and A.A. guns, with sufficient Army and Air Force personnel to man defences at both beaches and airfields.

The Commander in Chief also pointed out that defence consideration apart, it was necessary to make sure Malta did not fall through lack of supplies. With the exception of aviation spirit and fodder, he considered that existing stocks should, with the greatest care, last until January 1942 provided no serious losses were sustained through enemy action. The existing stocks of aviation spirit should last about three months. The C. in C. Mediterranean had, however, introduced a shuttle service with submarines by which these stocks would be slightly augmented. The Governor considered that if a single ship could bring in about one thousand tons of aviation spirit and two to three thousand tons of specialised stores and ammunition on two occasions during the summer months, the position would be satisfactory. If it could be found possible, however, to resume the running of convoys to Malta by September at the latest, this would prevent supplies falling to a dangerously low level from which it would be difficult to build them up.

A.H. B/IB/5/9
~~cos (41)~~
~~20th May~~

The Governor's telegrams were considered by the Chiefs of Staffs at their meeting on 7 June, when it was agreed that his requests must be met as far as possible while there was still time. If necessary a special operation for delivering men and material would be arranged. The Joint Planning Staff was instructed to prepare a plan for the reinforcement of Malta, and General Wavell, C.-in-C. Middle East, was asked to supply extra battalions from Egypt for the ground forces. (1) On 18 June it was decided to dispatch a special convoy to Malta, W.S.9(c), which should cover all the military requirements of the Island for at least six months.

16.d
~~cos (41)~~
~~20th May~~

/In

(1) In his reply General Wavell pointed out that at the moment it was practically impossible to send a convoy to Malta from Egypt.

SECRET

In view of the new situation in the Mediterranean the Air Staff agreed to provide a third fighter squadron for Malta, and personnel and eight months' spares for this were included in the convoy. Other important R.A.F. items in the convoy were personnel for servicing the Blenheim detachments and for the operations rooms, technicians, general personnel for the completion of establishments and reliefs, and essential spares for the maintenance of aircraft. The Hurricane aircraft and crew for the fighter squadron were to be flown in to Malta from a naval carrier as soon as possible. (1)

Although, strategically, recent developments in the Mediterranean had rendered Malta's position more precarious than ^{before} ~~hitherto~~, it was now reasonable to consider that the Island's immediate future was secured from further heavy German attacks, by the departure of Fliegerkorps X from Sicily. It was, consequently, of the greatest importance that this opportunity should be taken to strike at the enemy's lines of communication from the one base now available. At the same time, in view of the reversed situation in the Mediterranean, every precaution against future attacks was necessary. The recent German blitz had stimulated Air Ministry to increase the fighter strength at Malta, so that in May it had been possible to form a second Hurricane squadron. The decision in June to provide a third squadron was not carried out until the end of the month, but until then the Island was allowed temporarily to retain the crews and aircraft of No. 46 squadron, which arrived at Malta on 6 June, en route to ^{the} Middle East. Thus, on the cessation of the German attacks, Malta attained a new high level in ^a ^d ~~air~~ defence. To intensify the offensive against the enemy's supply routes it was decided to increase the Blenheim detachment by four aircraft. With these and the Swordfish, joined when practicable by Wellingtons, a sustained campaign against enemy shipping and ports was built up.

A.H.B./IJ/183/287(A).

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Enc. 58A

The Background to Operations

At the end of May 1941, Air Vice-Marshal ^{F.H.M. C.B., A.F.C.} Maynard was succeeded ^{M.C., D.F.C.} as A.O.C. Malta by Air Vice-Marshal H.P. Lloyd. Previous to his

/appointment

(1) Operation 'Railway'. See Appendix IX.

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R.A.F.
Narrative

appointment to Malta, Air Vice Marshal Lloyd had been Senior Air Staff Officer in No. 2 Group in England. Since the beginning of the war with Germany, this ^{group} ~~group~~, although a part of Bomber Command, had been primarily concerned with the war at sea. Its squadrons Bomber Command were equipped with Blenheim IV aircraft, and the tasks allotted to them were almost exclusively strikes against shipping on passage and raids on enemy ports, particularly those on the Dutch coast occupied by the enemy. It was from these squadrons that the Blenheim detachments to Malta were drawn. The new A.O.C., therefore, brought with him experience of great value to the build up of the offensive against the enemy supply routes between Italy and North Africa.

On 25 May, the date of Air Vice-Marshal Lloyd's arrival in Malta, the air forces in the Island were as follows:-

Luqa	No. 69 Squadron	Maryland
	No. 82 Squadron Det.	Blenheim IV.
	No. 139 Squadron Det.	Blenheim IV.
Hal Far	No. 185 Squadron	Hurricane
	No. 830 Squadron F.A.A.	Swordfish
	No. 46 Squadron	Hurricane
Takali	No. 249 Squadron	Hurricane

During June and July, No. 148 Squadron Detachment Wellingtons, operated from Luqa, and on 28 July No. 126 Squadron, Hurricanes, arrived at Takali, completing the recently augmented establishment of three fighter squadrons. The aircrews of No. 46 Squadron were absorbed into No. 126 Squadron on 30 June.

A.H.B./LJI/46/5
15/5

The Malta airfields were ^{then} ~~now~~ filled to their operational capacity. ⁽¹⁾ At a meeting at the Admiralty, held on 13 May, it had been agreed that five squadrons could be accommodated at Malta, although the Director of Plans at Air Ministry contended that four ⁽¹⁾ and a half was the maximum that could be operated. A more serious drawback to the operational development of the command lay, however, in the shortage of maintenance personnel. In his requests for reinforcements the Governor included over two thousand five hundred Army and Air Force personnel awaiting trans-shipment to Malta from Egypt, and it had been requested that additional personnel should

^{/be}
(1) This, however, was rapidly increasing with the continuous expansion of the airfields, until the astonishing total of 35½ squadrons (approximately 600 front-line aircraft) was reached at the time of the "Husky" invasion, in July, 1943.

A.M. File
S.71800
18A

be sent with the convoy from England. A further problem , rendered more acute by the increase in aircraft numbers, was dispersal. Following the heavy raids of the Luftwaffe, the policy of building underground hangars had been brought up in May for reconsideration.⁽¹⁾ It was decided however, that work on the hangars, which, in any case could be used for the Fleet Air Arm aircraft only, was bound to slow down both the building of the stone pens used to protect the more modern types of aircraft, and also the extension of the airfields. Consequently the plan was relinquished and work was concentrated on the construction of pens and dispersal areas. By 20 June Air Vice-Marshal Lloyd was able to report that all aircraft had been moved off the airfields, but even so, considerable development was necessary to ensure adequate dispersal. When that was completed it would still be necessary to erect pens in the new dispersal areas and to dig trenches for the men.

A.M. File
S.36003/II
76A

A.M. File
S.36003/II
79B

In spite of the steady improvement which had been maintained since the beginning of hostilities, conditions were very different from those the A.O.C. had been accustomed to. In a letter to the D.C.A.S. dated 30 June he described the chief drawbacks, which were mainly due to the shortage of personnel. Intelligence was particularly handicapped. At Luqa, which was used for the through traffic to and from the Middle East, as well as for its own operational units, there were two Intelligence Officers. ^{Th Kali} ~~Th Kali~~, which was used as a fighter station day and night, had one Intelligence Officer. Hal Far, operating a fighter squadron by day and the F.A.A. Swordfish by night, also had only one Flying Officer Intelligence. None of the three stations possessed an Operations Room Officer, so the duties had to be combined with Intelligence. The new A.O.C. brought in wives of officers to do cypher work, thus releasing five officers for other duties. These could not all be passed to

/Intelligence

(1) This question had formerly been raised in September 1940, ~~See Appendix.~~

Intelligence, however, as the administration of the stations was also in a serious condition, and officers were needed for it. Salvage was a further difficulty, many damaged and destroyed aircraft were lying on the airfields, a danger to flying, because there was no Salvage Section to remove them. The A.O.C. therefore formed a section from naval artificers from the Dockyard.

The Operations Room at Headquarters was in grave need of

A.V.M. Lloyd's reorganisation. It consisted of an underground cavern at the
 Personal end of a long winding approach. In the room was one big table
 Account on which were planned all operations against shipping at sea as well as the fighter operations. The wall at the far end of the room had been curtained off with hessian from a width of about eight feet and this strip was partitioned by more hessian into cubicles to form offices. The A.O.C's cubicle was very small, and the Senior Air Staff Officer's, although twice as big had to accommodate three clerks as well. The Fighter Controller had to concentrate his attention on the plots on the table, while members of other branches of the staff were giving operational orders over the telephone. Three days after A.V.M. Lloyd's arrival, however, Headquarters and the operations room were moved to a new site.

87 ~~On the new A.O.C. the general conditions under which the R.A.F. was maintained and operated in Malta, were almost unbelievable. Compared with conditions in England they were impossible. Yet, for a year the R.A.F. had maintained reconnaissance and offensive operations from the Island, had sent up fighters against enormously heavy odds in one of the most concentrated blitzes then experienced, and had serviced a constant stream of reinforcement aircraft en route to the Middle East from England.~~

Fighter Defence

The presence of three fighter squadrons on the Island made possible a considerable degree of reorganisation in the defence system. It was now practicable to relegate one of the squadrons entirely to night duty, while the other two stood by during the day.

A.M. File
 S.724/Air
 138

/To

SECRET

~~To begin with, No. 249 Squadron, based at Takali, and No. 46 Squadron at Hal Far, shared the daytime operations, while the other two stood by during the day.~~ To begin with, No. 249 Squadron, based at Takali, and No. 46 Squadron at Hal Far, shared the daytime operations, while No. 185 Squadron, Takali, with a strength of nine operational night pilots and five Mark II Hurricanes were responsible for all night operations. No. 249 Squadron were informed they could apply for night operations when they wished.

The new organisation introduced by the A.O.C. provided for a standby of twelve operational day fighter pilots from dawn to dusk, and four night pilots from dusk to dawn. To achieve maximum dispersal, six aircraft of No. 249 Squadron were flown to Safi air strip every day shortly before dark, and collected and flown ^{back} at dawn. Day fighter aircraft not on the line were widely dispersed during the day and night, and the line aircraft at night. The aircraft of No. 185 Squadron were maintained at Safi for dispersal by day and flown to ^{Ta Kali} ~~Takali~~ at dusk, returning to Safi at Dawn. On the arrival of No. 126 Squadron, which was accommodated at ^{Ta Kali} ~~Takali~~, No. 46 Squadron moved from Hal Far and was disbanded and absorbed into the new squadron. No. 185 Squadron moved to Hal Far at the end of June.

In his letter to Air Ministry in which he described conditions in the Island, A.V.M. Lloyd wrote:-

One bright spot, which really matters. The flying crews are magnificent The fighter pilots at ^{Ta Kali} ~~Takali~~ stand by at immediate readiness each day in the boiling sun, in a single fly tent They then take off at immediate notice - go to twenty thousand feet. I asked the contractor to build a suitable place at once, and he said it would take three months to build.

Enemy Activity

During June enemy activity remained on a small scale, and no heavy raids were experienced. Daylight activity consisted mainly of reconnaissance sorties by single bombers with fighter escorts but several attacks by small formations of fighters and bombers ^{took place.} ~~were experienced.~~ On 7th twelve Me.109s came over, four

A.H.B./116/111
M.E.W.I.S.
M.E.
Daily Opums
and H.Q. Mod
File
S-217/16/3/111
A.H.B./101/134

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of which made a machine-gun attack on Hal Far, while the remainder formed a defensive circle above. Although Hurricanes were unable to intercept the enemy, no damage or casualties were suffered. On 9 June four Hurricanes intercepted four S.79s passing west of Malta. They destroyed two of the enemy and severely damaged the remaining two for the loss of one Hurricane, the pilot of which was saved. On the 11th, when Hurricanes of No. 46 Squadron intercepted ^a ~~an~~ S.79 with an escort of five Me.109s, the S.79 was shot down while the fighters made off without engaging. One Hurricane was lost. On ^{the} 12th several combats took place when ^a ~~an~~ S.79 came over on reconnaissance escorted by six Me.109s and 6 Macchi 200s. Eighteen Hurricanes of Nos. 46 and 249 Squadrons went up to intercept, and A.A. engaged heavily and accurately. Combats took place at 16 to 17,000 feet. No. 249 Squadron engaged first and claimed one Me.109 confirmed and one unconfirmed. No. 46 Squadron claimed two Macchi 200s confirmed. R.A.F. losses were two Hurricanes of No. 249 Squadron, one pilot being saved. Later in the morning an Italian rescue flying boat (red cross) three C.R.42s and one Macchi 200 were shot down by Hurricanes, ^{one} ~~one~~ of which was lost but the pilot saved. On 18 June nine aircraft which approached the Island were intercepted by Hurricanes of No. 249 Squadron. Six of the enemy turned back when five miles from Gozo, but the remaining three were attacked by Hurricanes. One Macchi 200 was destroyed and another probably. The loss of one Hurricane and pilot was ^{not} ~~not~~ due to enemy action. On 25 June nine Hurricanes each of Nos. 249 and 46 Squadrons went up to intercept ^a ~~an~~ S.79 escorted by fifteen Macchi 200s. No. 46 Squadron attacked and damaged the S.79 whose undercarriage was later seen to be down. Two Macchis were shot down. On 27 June ^a ~~an~~ S.79 crossed the Island escorted by eighteen Macchis in three formations and a further formation above. Eighteen Hurricanes went up, nine of which engaged the enemy over the Island, while further combats took place over the sea. No. 249 Squadron did not engage, but No. 46 Squadron claimed six Macchis destroyed, two probably destroyed and one S.79 damaged. On 30 June eleven Macchi 200s approached Malta and were engaged by Hurricanes of

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/No. 46

No. 46 Squadron Squadron, two of the enemy being shot down.

No. 249 Squadron was up but did not engage. On several other occasions during ^{June} ~~this~~ and the following month fighters/were unable to engage the enemy through lack of height. (1)

During June No. 185 Squadron carried out all night-fighting operations except for four days during which No. 249 Squadron took over. Enemy attacks were not heavy, although aircraft were over or near the Island on most nights. On 6 June No. 185 Squadron became a night fighter Squadron and ceased to exist as a day unit. On the night of ¹⁴ 7th, a pilot of No. 249 Squadron intercepted a B.R.20 before the searchlights illuminated and shot it down. Two other aircraft of the same squadron attacked an illuminated aircraft which was believed to have forced landed in the sea on the way back to Sicily. On several occasions, when enemy aircraft came over, interception by fighters was impossible as the searchlights did not illuminate the aircraft. On other occasions poor visibility, which was frequently due to ground haze, prevented illumination.

The first day interception in July was made on the morning of 4th when a formation of twenty-five Macchi 200s, escorting a reconnaissance aircraft, approached ^{to} within ten miles of the island. Four Hurricanes Mark II of No. 185 Squadron, which had returned to day fighting at the beginning of the month, intercepted the enemy. One Macchi was destroyed. Ten more Hurricanes, Marks I and II were scrambled but were unable to gain height quickly enough to attack. During the raid a cannon Hurricane was used for the first time by No. 185 Squadron. On 11 July twelve Hurricanes of No. 185 Squadron engaged over thirty Macchi 200s which came over in three formations, and shot down three aircraft. The enemy nevertheless succeeded in machine-gunning Luqa airfield, and one Wellington was burnt out and four others and two Marylands damaged. The

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(1) This was due to inefficient ground control. ~~(See page)~~

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following extract from an Italian account of the raid was given, without comment, in the Malta Daily Intelligence Summary.

The great offensive activity of the enemy has met effective reply in the daring action carried out by our light forces against the principal airport in Malta. Five twin engined bombers of the Vicker Wellington type were set on fire, one of which loaded with ammunition blew up into the air our escorting aircraft were engaged by Hurricanes from above. In the course of the most violent combats four enemy machines were shot down, two at Hal Far and the other two crashed into the water ten kilometres east of Marsaxlokh this encounter in which more than a hundred machines were engaged is one of the greatest battles among air forces composed of fighters that has ever been fought in the Central Mediterranean None of our planes were lost The total enemy losses amount to nine enemy machines besides an unascertained number of others.

On 17 July eight Hurricanes of 249 Squadron and eleven of 185 Squadron went up to intercept a reconnaissance aircraft with an escort of fifteen Macchis. No. 185 Squadron was too low to attack, but No. 249 Squadron pursued the raiders to the Sicilian coast and shot down two Macchis and damaged a third for the loss of one Hurricane. On the morning of 25 July a further attempt was made by the enemy to reconnoitre the Island. This time the aircraft consisted of one S.79 and one B.R.20 escorted by about twenty Macchis. On the previous day, ^{Operation 'Substance'} a long awaited convoy of supplies for Malta had arrived from the United Kingdom, ⁽¹⁾ and having had little success against the transports while on passage the enemy now displayed great curiosity concerning their dispositions in the harbour. The Hurricanes, however, were equally determined to deny the enemy the information they desired. Twenty-two aircraft of Nos. 185 and 249 Squadrons intercepted the formation. The B.R.20 was attacked by several pilots of No. 249 Squadron who last saw it making for the sea with smoke pouring from it. This aircraft was then attacked by No. 185 Squadron which set the port engine on fire. It was then seen to break up and dive towards the sea, north-east of Malta. The S.79 was attacked by four pilots of No. 185 Squadron and crashed into the sea. Three Macchis were also shot down.

~~(1) See Operation 'Substance', page~~ /After

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After this rough treatment the enemy steered clear of the Island during daylight, and for the last few days of the month confined their activities to the hours of darkness. Night raids were usually slight throughout the month, although enemy aircraft were over on most nights. On several occasions, although the searchlights illuminated, Hurricanes were unable to engage because they were too far from the enemy aircraft to overtake them before they were lost. On other occasions confusion was caused by Wellingtons which failed to ^{switch on} ~~indicate~~ their I.F.F. (1) when returning from night operations during a raid.

Operation "Substance"

The period 23-26 July was an eventful one for Malta. It covered the arrival of an important convoy from the west, and, after the ships had reached the Island, an Italian seaborne attack on the Malta harbours. It has already been seen that in June, in response to representations from the Governor, the Chiefs of Staffs Committee decided to take the risk of sending a convoy to Malta through the Western Mediterranean, with supplies for six months. The cargoes were carefully prepared with a view to the primary requirements of all three services and civilians, and the convoy consisting of five transports and a troopship, entered the Mediterranean on the night of 20 July. Unfortunately, the troopship carrying urgently needed personnel for Malta, went aground at Gibraltar and the convoy had to proceed without it. Preparations by the R.A.F. at Malta for the reception of the convoy included the reinforcement of No. 69 Squadron with three aircraft from the Middle East to bring the unit up to its established strength, the temporary retention at the Island of reinforcement Hurricanes en route for the Middle East, the arrival of eleven Beaufighters of Nos. 143, 252 and 272 Squadrons from the United Kingdom and Middle East for long range fighter protection of the ships, and an increase

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(1) I.F.F. was part of the radar equipment of an aircraft, which when switched on, indicated to the radar stations that the approaching aircraft was friendly.

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in the strength of the Wellington detachment by six reinforcement aircraft from the United Kingdom. It was intended to divert the attention of the enemy convoy by an increased effort by the Blenheims and Wellingtons against shipping, ports and bases.

On 22nd and 23rd July, as the convoy and its escort of a fleet carrier, cruisers and destroyers approached the Central Mediterranean, the Marylands kept close watch on the Italian Fleet bases, Naples, Taranto, Messina, Palermo and Trapani. On the afternoon of 23 July, at 1715 hours, as the ships passed south of Sardinia, they were met and escorted by eleven Beaufighters. Unfortunately, the aircraft failed to identify themselves and were engaged by gunfire from the Fleet, so they took up formation at a safe distance ahead of the ships. The convoy had already been attacked several times by torpedo and bomber aircraft, and at 2004 hours, five S.79s dropped bombs in the middle of the transports. The Beaufighters were prevented from following them on their run in by the intense barrage put up by the convoy, but afterwards a straggling S.79 was pursued and damaged by a Beaufighter. During the escort patrol an Italian E. boat was attacked and left sinking east of Pantelleria. One Beaufighter failed to return. // Throughout the hours of daylight, Marylands patrolled between the tip of Sicily to southern Sardinia, and Fulmars patrolled between Malta, Pantelleria and Cape Bon from 0930 to 1130 hours. In the evening three Blenheims attacked shipping in Trapani Harbour. On the following day Beaufighters were on continuous escort patrol over the convoy, the Marylands continued their patrols and Swordfish made anti-submarine patrols from 0430 to 1430 hours, while Fulmars made two dawn patrols. The Beaufighters intercepted an attack on the convoy by six Ju.87s, two of which were chased half way to Melbourne Star, City of Palermo, Port Chalmers, Durham, Sea Lion Sicily and shot down. The main body of the convoy ^{now the} reached Malta at ~~noon~~ ¹⁴ on 24th, and were followed in the early afternoon by the stragglers - a transport, the Sydney Star, which had been torpedoed during the night, and two destroyers. Most of the naval units refuelled and left Malta for Gibraltar the same evening. On the following day, 25 July, the enemy made his desperate attempt to

/reconnoitre

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reconnoitre the harbour and was completely defeated by the Hurricanes. Nevertheless, the enemy decided to make an attack on the ships in spite of his lack of information.

The Attack on Malta Harbour - 25 July

A.H.B./JJS/101/128
H.Q. R.A.F.
Med. File
S.247/16/5/Air
V.A. Malta's
Report.

During the night of 25 July enemy light naval forces operated off the coast and three enemy aircraft came over. At 2055 hours a surface plot was detected south of Sicily approaching Malta, and from 2220 hours onwards the noise of motor boat engines could be heard from the coast. By 2300 hours the plot had approached to within fourteen miles of Malta and all the guns were manned and the air-raid warning sounded. At this time the plot turned to a reciprocal course and approached more slowly. A Swordfish striking force was prepared and started out at 2355 hours but unfortunately the aircraft became split up and returned without sighting. At 0130 hours a motor boat was heard closing in on Grand Harbour, and the batteries of searchlights of the harbour defences were exposed. Nothing was illuminated but the boat withdrew. At 0446 the All Clear was sounded, but one minute later a track was seen approaching St. Elmo, and a wake was observed by the lookout at Tigne. A few seconds later an explosion blew up the breakwater viaduct, one span of which collapsed, and at the same time the searchlights were exposed and fire was opened. For the next few minutes the illuminated area off the entrance was criss-crossed by a devastating fire of tracer bullets from every close range weapon that would bear. Many boats were hit and blew up, and after a few minutes' fire ceased as there seemed to be nothing left to fire at. At 0530 when the dawn had broken two objects which had been thought to be wrecks were seen to move and fire was reopened. In a few minutes both had sunk and exploded under water. At 0540 hours nine aircraft of ^{No.} 185 Squadron were scrambled and attacked fleeing enemy E. Boats and escorting Macchi fighters. Four E. boats were destroyed by our pilots, and one Macchi. One Hurricane was shot down but the pilot, P/O Winton, baled out and managed to swim to an E.boat, the crew of which were dead, and

/climbed

climbed on board. He was picked up later. Six Hurricanes of No. 126 Squadron were also airborne. One aircraft was surprised by fifteen Macchis on their way back to Sicily, and shot down two, while other aircraft attacked the E. boats with No. 185 Squadron.

It was difficult to tell which boats fell to the shore defences and which to the air, but it was believed that no single boat escaped back to Sicily. From an examination of the Operation Orders captured in one of the boats, and from the interrogation of prisoners it appeared that the naval force was composed of one ~~cruiser~~ ^{fast torpedo boat}, the Diana about 6,000 tons, which was plotted by the R.D.F., two M.A.S. (torpedo boats), one M.T.S. and one M.T. (small torpedo craft), two S.L.Cs (small assault craft) and nine M.Ts with a crew of one each (human torpedo craft).

At the end of his report on the attack the Vice Admiral added the following remarks:-

- (1) Among the operations orders captured in M.A.S.452, no sign has been found of any "enemy information".
- (2) The most remarkable thing about these very intricate and detailed orders is the almost complete absence of any reference to counter action on our part.
- (3) In this respect it is very noticeable that prior to the moment at which our counter action developed - namely when the viaduct was blown up and the fortress opened fire - the whole plan had been carried out with great determination and the time-table had been kept to with admirable exactitude. Within two minutes however of our opening fire the attack had been completely defeated and there was never any further risk that the defences of the harbour would be penetrated.
- (4) The Harbour defence of Malta, largely manned by Maltese, scored an outstanding success in this, their first action, and to them must go the entire credit for maintaining the security of the Harbour.
- (5) The very accurate R.D.F. plot which allowed us to follow exactly the movements of Diana has given us the utmost confidence that we shall be very advantageously placed should a sea-borne invasion come. On the other hand it is definitely established that neither of the types (of radar) on the Island will pick up M.T.B.

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(6) The photographic reconnaissance on which the attack was to be based must have been at least four days' old In a desperate attempt to get photographs two bombers escorted by fighters were sent over on Day One, but thanks to a magnificent effort by our fighters both the bombers together with three fighters were shot down.

(7) The determined search for, and destruction of every retiring M.T.B. by our Hurricanes turned a failure into a disaster.

This was the last attack the enemy attempted against the convoy, and the ships were all safely unloaded, except for coal cargoes, by 12 August. The non-arrival of the troopships, however, was a matter of grave concern as the shortage of personnel impeded the development of Malta's air effort.

The Anti-Shipping Offensive - Policy

The departure of the Luftwaffe from Sicily in May and the consequent cessation of heavy raids, enabled the air force at Malta to continue almost unhindered the development of offensive activity against the enemy life-line between North Africa and Italy.

Generally speaking, the policy of the offensive was to employ the Blenheims to attack enemy convoys by day, and the Swordfish by night.

In addition, the Swordfish were used for mine-laying, particularly at Tripoli, and both types of aircraft, aided by Wellingtons on

A.H.Q. Malta
O.R.B.

detachment maintained a bombing offensive against Tripoli. The Wellingtons also attacked Italian and Sicilian ports. Towards the end of June the Marylands joined the battle and commenced bombing attacks on enemy shipping, each aircraft carrying two 500 lb bombs. Offensive fighter operations were also mounted. During June only one attack was made by fighters, when Hurricanes machine-gunned the seaplane base at Syracuse, but in July the effort was increased and F.A.A. Fulmars and Beaufighters on detachment were also employed on offensive missions. The sine qua non of all these operations, however, was the work of No. 69 Squadron. This squadron still consisting of only a flight of Marylands and two Mark I Hurricanes⁽¹⁾ maintained constant vigil over the arrival and departure ports in

/Italy

(1) A Hurricane Mk.II reinforced the squadron on 18 June.

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Italy, Sicily and North Africa, in addition to long searches over the enemy shipping routes across the Mediterranean.

Reconnaissance from Malta

The fall of Crete in May 1941 had repercussions in every aspect of air warfare in the Mediterranean, and Reconnaissance was not the least affected by the new situation. On 2 June, the Naval C.-in-C. Mediterranean, communicated to the A.O.C.-in-C. Middle East his views on reconnaissance under the new conditions, ending inevitably with a request for the expansion of operations. He pointed out that the occupation of the entire Greek Archipelago by the enemy, enabled him to base and fuel his ships within easy striking distance of the Libyan and Egyptian coasts. It had therefore become of the highest importance that air reconnaissance of the Italian bases in the Central Mediterranean and the Greek ports should be as extensive and accurate as possible. This would postulate improved reconnaissance from Egypt, and, from Malta, daily location of units of the Italian Fleet by the examination of bases in Italy and Sicily, and effective reconnaissance of the Ionian Sea. At the same time it was most necessary to maintain reconnaissance to the east and west of Malta to enable the continued interception of convoys by aircraft and submarines. || In commenting on the C-in-C's proposals, the A.O.C. Malta told the A.O.C.-in-C. that to fulfil them fourteen Maryland sorties per day would be necessary. He pointed out that the Ionian reconnaissance was singularly negative, and that Naval Intelligence affirmed that almost all shipping to Tripoli passed either through Messina or West of Sicily and down the African coast. To cover the sea passage alone four Maryland sorties daily would be required to obtain fifty per cent reliability for the Blenheim sorties. He considered that interference with the Tripoli convoys was of prior importance, since it could have far reaching results on future operations. To fulfil the C.-in-Cs requirements and the needs

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A.M. File
M.P. File
S.29916

A.M. File
M.P. File
S.45581
160A

A.M. File
M.P. File
S.49916
25A

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of the striking force at Malta, sixteen Marylands would be needed, but with limited reconnaissance for the Navy, twelve would be sufficient. It was eventually decided that because of its importance to the land operations in Egypt reconnaissance from Malta of the Tripoli supply routes should have priority over the general reconnaissance of the Central Mediterranean to cover enemy shipping movements. There was no proposal, at this juncture, to augment the Maryland unit to cover all requirements, although the A.O.C. asked for the squadron to be established at twelve Marylands.

Towards the end of June the A.O.C. introduced a regular system for reconnaissance operations. Until then information concerning enemy shipping movements had been gathered almost entirely from patrols over the main shipping routes. The new system was arranged in such a way that the main enemy ports were visited at regular intervals. By this method movements of particular convoys could be watched from the time of their assembly to the time of arrival at their destination. The information concerning the departure of the convoys acted as a guide to the oversea patrols, as rough estimates could be made of the probable position of the convoys. || The new system was drawn up as follows:-

A. Convoy routes. Daily patrols, a.m. and p.m.

B. Ports

Every four days: Tripoli, Misurata, Zuara, Homs.

Every eight days: Naples, Palermo, all other Sicilian ports, Pantelleria and Lampedusa.

Every sixteen days: Taranto and Brindisi.

Every twenty-four days: Cagliari, Madalena.

C. Aerodromes

Every eight days: All Sicilian aerodromes, Castel Benito, Mellaha, Homs, Misurata, Sormann, Zuara.

Every sixteen days: Vibo Valencia, Reggio Calabria.

Every twenty-four days: Cagliari, Alghero.

D. Land Communications

Every eight days: Road Homs to thirty miles east of Sirte

During June Maryland patrols to the west of Malta, down

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~~Br. G. G. Palmer~~
~~Br. G. G. Palmer~~
AB/II JI/69. 8/6

A.H. 8./II JS/113/5/107
~~Br. G. G. Palmer~~
~~Br. G. G. Palmer~~
BA

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No. 69 Sqdn.
O.R.B.

^{the}
~~The~~ Tunisian Coast were made at least twice, and sometimes three or four times daily, while those to the Greek coast were made once or twice daily. On ~~the~~ three days only during the month were the westward patrols omitted, when the reconnaissance unit was fully occupied in ^sshadowing convoys elsewhere. In July, particularly towards the end of the month, the system was less strictly adhered to, but good results were obtained by concentrating the effort on watching the progress of particular convoys, from day to day.

In addition to the Maryland sorties, the Hurricanes of No.69 Squadron kept close watch on the Sicilian ports and airfields, which were well within their range. Ports in Sicily were visited every two or three days and since convoys frequently put in to these ports on their way to Tripoli these Hurricane patrols were of great value. The use of the Hurricanes for these short patrols were invaluable in releasing the Marylands for the long overseas patrols and for shadowing duties.

ibid.
No. 69 Sqdn.
O.R.B.

Although, in the absence of the Luftwaffe, the Marylands met with far less opposition than in the previous months, they were occasionally attacked by hostile aircraft, and when practicable, took the initiative themselves. On 5 June, while on patrol to Corfu a [↑]Maryland attacked a Cant.506 flying boat with several bursts from its guns, damaging the aircraft and causing the rear-gunner to bale out. The Cant. returned fire unsuccessfully. On the 22nd a Maryland returning from the Tunisian coast patrol attacked a gun position on Linosa. It was then attacked by three C.R.42s, but evaded combat and replied with the rear gun. On several occasions Marylands were chased homewards by aircraft from Pantelleria, and on the 11th an aircraft sent to reconnoitre Palermo was prevented by an Me.110 patrolling between Cape Bon and Sicily. This enemy patrol was probably ordered to prevent the sighting of a northbound convoy in the vicinity

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of Pantelleria, which had been located previously by Marylands. On 3 July, while shadowing a convoy at night, a Maryland was attacked by an illuminated aircraft, and took avoiding action in the cloud. On emerging, from the cloud it was again attacked, this time by three aircraft, one of which had a powerful headlight, and was chased to within twenty miles of Cape Passero, where the Maryland made for base and shook off the enemy. || On the 9th, while on reconnaissance over Tripoli harbour, a Maryland was persistently attacked by a Macchi 200. The rear gunner returned fire, damaging the enemy which broke off combat and dived steeply emitting smoke. The Maryland received very slight damage. A similar action took place over Taranto on the 14th, the Macchi 200 again diving steeply after being hit by the rear guns. On the 22nd another Cant seaplane was attacked. The enemy aircraft returned fire but landed on the water shortly afterwards. A second attack set it on fire and a message was then intercepted reporting both pilots killed. || Only two aircraft were lost during June and July, one on 25 June during the squadron's first bombing attack on a convoy, the other on 15 July on patrol to Tripolitania.

Offensive Operations June and July 1941

R.H.B./II 6/1/1

M.E.W.I.S. ~~and~~
 No. 69 Sqn.O.R.B.
 A.H.B. List of
 Enemy shipping
 Losses.

The first convoy sighting in June was made on the morning of the 3rd by a Maryland on the Tunisian coast patrol. The ships which were first sighted south of Pantelleria and making towards Sfax, numbered three cruisers, ten destroyers and six merchant vessels. Five Blenheims of Nos. 139 and 82 squadrons were sent to attack, and obtained four direct hits on two of the merchant vessels. The first, a vessel estimated at 8,000 tons carrying ammunition blew up with a tremendous explosion, and flying debris was thought to have hit other ships. This vessel, which enemy records confirmed as sunk was the Montello, Italian, 6117 tons. The second vessel the Beatrice C., Italian 6132 tons, was left on fire, and was subsequently sunk by an Italian destroyer. One of the Blenheims was hit by debris from the first ship, and crashed into the sea. This was the last attack by No. 139 Squadron, which

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left Malta on 5 June. Later in the day a Maryland was sent to locate the convoy again, but visibility was bad, and although the Maryland sighted the ships, six Swordfish which were subsequently sent to make a night attack with torpedoes, failed to find their target. (1) During the following week the Maryland sighted several convoys and ships on the Tunisian routes but no further attacks were made until 11 June, when a convoy of six merchant vessels was sighted near Pant^aalleria. At the time there were only two serviceable Blenheims in Malta, (1) but these were sent to attack. Five hits were scored on one merchant vessel of 7000 tons, causing a large fire and volumes of smoke. No sinking has been recorded for this date, however. One of the Blenheims crashed into the sea after hitting the mast of a ship.

The Marylands continued to make frequent sightings, but although a single ship was attacked by Swordfish on the night of ^{the} 13th, and a single ship and a convoy by Blenheims on 19th 22nd, no sinkings were achieved. During the attack on the convoy one of the six Blenheims was forced to break off the attack and jettison its bombs owing to intense A.A. After dropping its bombs a second aircraft was attacked by a G.R.42, but managed to evade it. On 25 June Marylands took the offensive when four aircraft attacked a convoy off Catania, but no hits were observed. That night seven Swordfish resumed the attack, but although they claimed hits with torpedoes, no sinking was reported in enemy records. Intense A.A. was experienced and one aircraft failed to return from both attacks. On the following day Marylands searched for the convoy without result, but nine merchant vessels and seven torpedo boats were seen in Tripoli harbour. Four Marylands were dispatched to make a high level attack on the harbour, but no hits were observed on shipping. Intense A.A. was experienced but all the aircraft returned safely.

/On

(1) When their detachment period had expired the Blenheims proceeded to Middle East for inspection. When the relieving detachment from the United Kingdom was delayed there was sometimes a shortage of Blenheims in Malta.

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On 27 June after a long series of blank patrols to the Ionian Sea, a convoy of four merchant vessels was sighted in the Gulf of Taranto escorted by six destroyers. Close watch was kept on the ships and the following day the escort was seen to have increased by two cruisers and three destroyers. By the morning of the 29th the convoy escorted only by destroyers was sixty-five miles east of Tripoli, and nine Blenheims with three Marylands were sent to make a dive bombing attack. The Blenheims failed to find the target and no hits were observed by the Marylands. A second bombing force of Blenheims and Marylands was dispatched in the evening by which time the convoy had entered Tripoli harbour, but the Blenheims again failed to locate the target, and the two Marylands bombed alone. The failure of the Blenheims was unfortunate as they constituted the main attacking force, the Marylands being employed mainly for the purpose of drawing the attention of the gunners away from the low-flying Blenheims. These tactics were justified by a heavy barrage of accurate A.A. After dark Swordfish and Wellingtons were dispatched to continue the attack, but owing to bad visibility three of the seven Wellington, and all six Swordfish failed to find the target. The four Wellingtons which attacked scored hits on shipping and on the moles. On the following day the Blenheims made up for their previous failures, when six aircraft evaded a hostile fighter patrol to bomb the ships in harbour. It was confirmed by Lloyds, that in this raid the 11,398 ton vessel Esperia (Italian) was damaged, the Blenheims claiming to have hit it with six bombs. Intense medium A.A. was supported by fire from destroyers in the harbour.

The A.O.C.-in-C., M.E. questioned the wisdom of using the Marylands for bombing attacks, although he appreciated the offensive initiative displayed. He pointed out that they were

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A.H.B./H.J./183/160

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Ibid
72A

the only effective aircraft available for the vital task of reconnaissance, and that supplies were very limited. The A.O.C. Malta, assured him, however, that these aircraft had only been used to create a diversion at height for the Blenheims. This had been very necessary in view of the strong escort and defences which were used. In each case, through various causes the Blenheims had failed to rendezvous, and the plan had miscarried. He considered that in view of the importance of the targets and of affording a diversion the employment of the Marylands had been justified, but he agreed that the practice could only be warranted in exceptional circumstances. He mentioned, in addition, that Marylands on reconnaissance of Tripoli and the Libyan coast now carried bombs to frighten the Tripoli stevedores. This did not effect the reconnaissance in any way. The A.O.C.-in-C. was apparently satisfied.

Ibid 73A

M.E.W.I.S.
Malta Daily
Intsums
H.Q. Med. File
S.247/37/1/Air

A.H.B. / 11557/101/134

In addition to those already mentioned four more attacks were made on Tripoli harbour during June. Night bombing raids were mounted by the Swordfish and by Wellingtons of No. 148 Squadron which returned to Malta on detachment on 25th and 26th. On the night of the 26th four Wellingtons, in company with five Swordfish, visited Tripoli and obtained hits on the quays, and a 10,000 ton merchant vessel outside the harbour, and on the following night six Wellingtons obtained further hits on the Spanish Mole. (1) The Swordfish made twenty-four night bombing sorties in all during June besides laying mines on two occasions, once on the sea route Tripoli-Benghazi, and once in the Tripoli harbour approaches. A total of eight mines were laid. On the night of the 8th, following a report that the S.S. Birmania had sunk in Tripoli harbour, seven Swordfish were dispatched to attempt to set fire to the harbour surface, which was believed to be covered with oil. (1) The project failed, although small fires were started in the quays. During the month fighters took the offensive on one occasion when four Hurricanes of No. 46 Squadron machine-gunned the seaplane base at Syracuse on 23 June.

(1) According to enemy reports the S.S. Birmania blew up and sank in Tripoli harbour on 3 May, 1941. They

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They found the seaplanes exactly as they were shown on the photos taken on reconnaissance the previous day, and, quite undisturbed by any opposition they were able to spray them and other targets very thoroughly. Tamet and Sormann landing ground in Tripolitania were also attacked during the month by Blenheims which had failed to find their primary targets.

The anti-shipping operations continued steadily during July. Although fewer attacks were made on convoys at sea, the offensive against enemy ports increased considerably, Naples, Palermo and Messina ~~now~~ being included among the targets for the Wellingtons. In spite of the fact that their numbers were considerably increased during the month (1) the Blenheims did not noticeably increase their effort. The Marylands continued to be used for bombing operations.

Wellingtons made the first attack of the month when five aircraft were dispatched to bomb Tripoli on the night of the 1st July. An effective smoke-screen covered the harbour, but the aircraft scored hits on the Spanish and Karamanli moles, and on two ships, one of which, the Italian vessel Eritrea (2517 tons) caught fire and sank. (2) The second ship, thought to be the Sabbia, was claimed as damaged but this was not confirmed. An effective smoke screen was laid over the harbour. On the following night ³ six swordfish laid mines outside the harbour while two more, with seven Wellingtons, made extensive bombing attacks on harbour facilities and shipping starting many fires. An Italian ship, estimated at 8,000 tons which was set on fire was still burning fiercely twelve hours later. ^{Enemy records} ~~It was reported~~ two ships sunk during this raid: the Sparta 1724 tons, German, and the Annunzia [†] tina, 20 tons, Italian. // The next attack was made on the night of the 6th when six Swordfish laid mines in the approaches to the harbour and dropped bombs on a 5000

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- (1) There were from fourteen to twenty Blenheims at Malta throughout July.
 (2) Subsequently salvaged and sunk again.

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ton merchant vessel while seven Wellingtons bombed the engine sheds causing several fires and one large explosion. The attack was repeated on the following night, with apparently equal success, although no further sinkings were achieved. On the nights of 9th and 10th the Wellingtons turned their attention to Naples, a total of thirteen sorties being made against the Central Railway Station, and factories, and on the night of ^{the} 20th a further nine sorties were made. Many hits were obtained on the station, good yards, sidings at the harbour, fuel tanks and factories. || On 12 July, the A.O.C.-in-C. M.E. reminded the A.O.C. Malta that the Wellington detachment was intended primarily for attacks on enemy ports and shipping in harbour. The A.O.C. explained however that shipping at Naples, Palermo, Taranto and Messina was not sufficient to provide a worthwhile target and that the Naples marshalling yards were full of material for shipment, and surrounded by aircraft and torpedo factories, and oil storage depots.

On the night of the 14th, eight Wellingtons made an outstandingly successful raid on Messina with seven and a half tons of H.E. bombs and many incendiaries. Hits were scored on the railway terminus and workshops, and on warehouses in the dockside area. Huge fires, visible from sixty miles away, were caused at the ferry railhead, in engine sheds, and among buildings of transformer power plant. Photos later confirmed that heavy damage had been done, including the gutting of an area of railway sidings full of goods trucks, and the destruction of two large buildings adjacent to the transformer plant. // Further night raids against Tripoli were made by five Wellingtons on 15th and three Swordfish on the 16th. The Swordfish torpedoed a tanker amidships causing clouds of black smoke, and bombs on the Spanish Mole caused a huge explosion. No results of an attack by three Swordfish on the night of 18th were observed owing to poor visibility. Cruisers and destroyers in Palermo harbour were attacked by five Wellingtons on the night of 17th. No

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results were observed, although bombs were dropped on or near the ships. Apart from the raid on Naples on 20th this was the last raid by the Wellingtons for the month as the detachment left Malta on 22nd. They had made a total of seventy sorties during their four weeks detachment.

The Blenheims made several attacks on shipping during the month, both at sea and in harbour. On 3 July, fourteen aircraft of No. 82 Squadron bombed shipping outside Tripoli harbour claiming two 500-ton merchant vessels set on fire, and on the 6th, six aircraft of No. 110 Squadron (1) bombed shipping in Palermo harbour and claimed hits on five merchant vessels, one of which, estimated at 10,000 tons appeared to have its back broken. A further attack on Tripoli was made on the night of the 9th, when hits on four merchant vessels and on the moles and warehouses were reported. None of the shipping sinkings claimed were confirmed by ~~Lloyds~~ ^{enemy records}. On the 13th four Blenheims which failed to find a convoy located by a Maryland, attacked shipping outside Tripoli harbour, and claimed to have set fire to a large tanker and a small merchant vessel. The tanker and a three masted schooner, which appeared to blow up, were reported as sunk. Neither sinking was confirmed by enemy records.

|| Early on 15 July a Maryland sighted a convoy of five merchant vessels and four destroyers north-west of the Kerkennah bank and a second Maryland led a striking force of three Blenheims to the convoy later in the morning. Direct hits were scored on an 8,000-ton vessel which caused volumes of grey and white smoke, and a single hit was scored on a second ship of the same tonnage. Opposition was fierce. There was very intense heavy and light A.A. fire and all the aircraft were hit. One ship, the Barbarigo 5293 tons, Italian was confirmed as sunk by Lloyds. (2)
On 18th one aircraft was lost when two Blenheims which had bombed transformer plant at Tripoli, were attacked by a Macchi

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(1) No. 110 Squadron Detachment replaced No. 82 Squadron detachment on 4 July.

(2) The Admiralty claim that the Barbarigo was ^usunk by _ksubmarine.

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200. A.A. opposition over Tripoli was intense and accurate and it was considered that a landfall made west of Tripoli by the Blenheims had warned the enemy of the Blenheims' approach. // On 22 July Blenheims made a very successful attack on a convoy when two aircraft of No. 110 Squadron attacked at mast height four merchant vessels, escorted by five destroyers and three C.R.42s, seventeen miles south of Pantelleria. A hit on a 7000-ton vessel produced a sheet of flame, and black smoke which turned white making a column six hundred feet high. Two more aircraft of the same squadron withdrew, to attack later, but found a 4-5000 ton merchant vessel with a destroyer ten miles south-west of the convoy which they attacked. One aircraft obtained a near miss on the merchantman, and the other two hits which caused a fire. The vessel blew up, dark grey smoke rising to two hundred feet. All the aircraft returned with damage. After dark five Swordfish were sent to attack the convoy. Two torpedo aircraft hit what was thought to be a tanker, causing an explosion and the ship was claimed as sunk. A third aircraft attacked a destroyer from six hundred yards and obtained a hit astern causing a red flash and clouds of smoke. Accurate light A.A. was experienced from a destroyer. Enemy records shew that two enemy ships were sunk on the 22nd from these attacks, the Preussen 8230 tons, German, and the Brarena, 6996 tons, Italian registered Norwegian.

It was becoming evident from the increased naval escorts to enemy convoys, and from the presence of protective fighter patrols that the success of the offensive had had its affect on the enemy. On 31st, when six Blenheims of 105 Squadron ⁽¹⁾ were dispatched to bomb a convoy near Pantelleria, the attack was called off as it was found that the escort included not only destroyers, of which there were five, but six C.R.42s/as well. It was ^{now} ~~not~~ becoming a difficult problem to decide whether the valuable Blenheims should be allowed to take the risk of attacking escorted convoys in daylight.

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(1) This Squadron arrived at Malta to replace No. 110 Squadron on 28.7.41.

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During July Ellenheims and Marylands made twenty sorties against land targets, including the airfields of Zuara and Misurata in Tripolitania, and the coastal road from Tripoli to Benghazi. In addition there was a marked increase in offensive activities by Malta based fighters. On 9 July Hurricanes of Nos. 46 and 185 Squadrons attacked seaplanes in Syracuse harbour setting fire to three aircraft which were burnt out, and severely damaging five others. The attack was made from only a few feet above the water but the defences were late in opening fire and all the aircraft returned safely. Towards the end of the month, the Beaufighters of Nos. 143, 252 and 272 Squadrons which ^{had been} ~~were~~ sent to Malta to cover Operation "Substance", ~~for~~ carried out very successful sorties against seaplane bases at Syracuse and Marsala and landing grounds at Catania and Baglio Rizzo (Marsala).

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// A feature of the month was the employment of F.A.A. Fulmars for night 'intruder' patrols over Catania. These patrols were designed to intercept enemy aircraft departing for or returning from raids on Malta. The Fulmars also dropped bombs on airfields and towns. The activities of the Fulmars did much to harass the night air operations of the Italians and on many nights enemy bombers were prevented from operating. During the month Swordfish laid seventeen mines in the approaches to Tripoli harbour.

Report on Malta by the Inspector General

During July the island was visited by the Inspector General of the Royal Air Force, Air Chief Marshal Sir Ludlow-Hewitt, who drew up an extensive report on the R.A.F. Command Malta. His general comment was that in spite of many drawbacks, excellent progress was being made in every department. The main difficulties were the shortage of spares, maintenance personnel and labour. He considered that the organisation of labour under central control, so that it could be parcelled out according to authorised priorities, would considerably improve the situation.

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In spite of these difficulties, however, Air Force operations and works services were going ahead admirably. The runways at the satellite aerodromes of Safi were complete, and those at Krendi were developing rapidly. He considered the most remarkable of recent developments was the amount of work done in the provision of dispersal standings and taxi-tracks for aircraft at the three main airfields. Aircraft were well dispersed at a considerable distance from the airfields, and where pens had not yet been constructed, a considerable amount of protection was afforded by the stone walls bordering the fields. The construction of pens was going ahead well, and when these were completed, the Inspector General considered the three main airfields, with the help of the two satellites, should be able to accommodate up to three squadrons each. This new estimate of aircraft accommodation in Malta was nearly double that decided upon at a meeting at Admiralty on 13 May.

Maintenance

The Inspector General was particularly impressed by the work of the Maintenance Personnel. ^{he reported} The aircraft in the Island were being maintained by a strength of personnel equivalent to a fraction only of the normal establishment in Home Commands, and the men were working under a climate and conditions far more arduous than those in England. They had worked day after day for very long hours under a hot sun with an available strength of Technical personnel far below the minimum required for the work in hand. At Luqa, for example, a Bilenheim squadron, a Wellington and a flight of Fulmars at Hal Far had all been operating at an intensive rate without any establishment of maintenance personnel. In addition, a hundred and ninety-six aircraft had passed through the island in the last month,

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(1) Reinforcements of maintenance personnel were included in the "Substance" convoy, on the troopship which went aground at Gibraltar.

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and the only servicing party available to deal with these numbered seventeen men. The three fighter squadrons, which were actively engaged almost continuously, were being maintained on fifty per cent of normal establishment. In order to find men to deal with the Blenheim and Wellington squadrons the greater part of the R.A.F. strength of the base at Kalafrana had been transferred to Luqa. This had only been done at the cost of practically closing down the repair works at Kalafrana, ^{on} ~~which~~ which the R.A.F. relied for all workshop repair.

Aircraft

The Inspector General was ~~particularly~~ anxious that Malta should be supplied with airfuze torpedo aircraft, in addition to the Swordfish. He considered that a squadron, or at least a flight of Beaufort aircraft would probably contribute more than any other one thing to the weakening of the enemy in North Africa. He suggested also, that the Island should be provided with P.R.U. aircraft. Mosquitoes based on Malta could cover the whole of the Italian, Adriatic, Libyan and Grecian coasts, Sardinia and practically the whole of the interior of Italy. There was a serious lack of up-to-date intelligence, particularly naval intelligence, in the Mediterranean.

The Inspector General considered that both operational and intelligence staffs required strengthening, not in numbers but in quality, particularly in the Fighter Operations ^RRoom. Malta's situation, right in the enemy lines, astride his communications and exposed to the full weight of his air forces, was unique. To exploit its advantages to the utmost, while ensuring at the same time a highly organised defence, required the most up-to-date and alert operational and intelligence staffs. For the fighter defence the successful interception of approaching enemy raids required very nice judgement, and in the island the margin of time available to achieve the necessary altitude was small though sufficient. The Controllers were not being very successful, and were not up to the standard required. A further drawback was

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the inaccuracy of Intelligence sent by the Intelligence department of the Air Ministry. What was sent arrived too late to be of use. More and quicker information from Air Ministry, combined with an efficient P.R.U. organisation should revolutionise the work of the bombing and reconnaissance units in Malta.

The Inspector General ended his report with a word on reinforcing Malta. He emphasised the importance of sending on the personnel waiting at Gibraltar (1) and suggested that further convoys should be sent with supplies to maintain a garrison for at least another twelve months. The impression he had received at Malta was that the Italians had little enterprise or offensive spirit, and that the present time, if ever, was the time to send convoys through. (2)

Reinforcements

A.M. File
C.S.9747

Ibid 6A

During June discussions were held at Air Ministry on the Reinforcement Programme for the Middle East and Malta with the result that the decision of 13 May to limit aircraft at Malta to four and a half squadron had been revised. The establishment of a third fighter squadron, and the increase of the Blenheim detachment to full squadron strength brought the number of squadrons up to five and a half, a figure agreed to at Air Ministry on 13 June. At this meeting the Fleet Air Arm Squadron at Malta was discussed in detail. It was felt that at that time the value of the work done by the squadron hardly justified the amount of accommodation it took up, although it was useful for sea-mining. It was, however, practically impossible to remove the squadron, owing to the physical difficulties of doing so. Also the unit received reinforcements from a variety of types of Fleet Air Arm aircraft flown in during operations. It was decided, that the Admiralty should be told that there was no

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(1) Seven hundred maintenance personnel had arrived by the end of August.

(2) This recommendation was followed, and a second convoy was sent to Malta in September.

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intention of asking for the squadron to be moved, but that since space was so valuable at Malta it was essential that the squadron be properly maintained to play a useful role in operations. The Director of the Naval Air Department later affirmed that the Navy had every intention of keeping the squadron up to strength and maintaining it in an efficient state.

The Question of Supply

In spite of the Chiefs of Staffs' decision in June to run a convoy through the Western Mediterranean, the Governor was still dissatisfied with the supply position at Malta, and even before the arrival of "Substance" at the end of July, he had suggested to the authorities at home that a second convoy should be sent to Malta during the summer. His view was, that although it had been the intention that the "Substance" convoy should provide the island with essentials for six months, the situation in the Mediterranean gave no guarantee that a convoy could be sent at the end of that time. The C.-in-C., Mediterranean could not send a convoy from Egypt until Cyrenaica had been recaptured, an event which could not take place for some months, and meanwhile there was always the possibility of the Luftwaffe returning to the Mediterranean, and thus rendering the passage of a convoy from the west far ^{more} hazardous than it then was. In addition, in spite of the efforts made to ensure even distribution of space for essential stocks in the "Substance" convoy, stocks of aviation spirit, bombs and fodder were lower than those of other essentials. // The Admiralty saw no possibility of sending a second convoy through until October, at the earliest, but when, at the end of August, the Governor renewed his request, this decision was revised. General Dobbie, whose cause was supported by both the Vice-Admiral Malta, and the A.O.C., pointed out that since the arrival of "Substance" the supply situation had radically changed owing to the steadily increasing scale of offensive operations being conducted from the island. This

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~~C. S. Signals~~

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Malta War
History
(Cabinet Offices)

A.M. File
C.S.10677
1A

had greatly complicated the co-ordination of supply at a time when the intervals between convoys were inevitably long. The Governor estimated that if no convoy was sent before October, the total amount then required to bring stocks up to their proper strength, would be about eighty thousand tons. As it was, the loss of a single ship in the next convoy would have a direct effect on offensive operations, and on the length of time the island could hold out. // At the Chiefs of Staffs meeting on 28 August, at the instigation of the First Sea Lord, it was agreed that a convoy should be sent through the Western Mediterranean in the near future, and that loading should begin at once. The convoy was to aim at supplying Malta with essential stocks to last six months. After the arrival of the "Halberd" convoy at the end of September most stocks were expected to last until the early summer of 1942, and the policy was that no convoys should be sent for some months. This however, proved impracticable and further attempts had to be made to send supplies before the end of the year.

A.H.B./J.B./4/6
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Malta War
 History
 (Cabinet Office)

Policy Developments Concerning the Offensive from Malta

During August, plans for the intensification of the offensive from Malta developed rapidly. The Inspector General's Report had indicated the practicability of enlarging the scale of operations from Malta, and his estimate that the airfields could accommodate nine squadrons had stimulated renewed discussions at Air Ministry. In the first instance however, the initiative came from the Middle East. The A.O.C.-in-C. visited Malta early in August, and was particularly impressed by the excellent dispersal that had been arranged and by the extension of the runways and the provision of satellite airfields. At the time of his visit seven hundred maintenance personnel had just arrived and he was able to inform the Chief of Air Staff that the only limit, now, to the offensive, was the number of aircraft that could be serviced at Malta.

A.H.B./J.J./83/271 (A)
 A.O.C. Corres.
 with P.M. C.A.S.
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 153A & 154A

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The A.O.C.-in-Cs plan was to send immediately to the island two Wellington squadrons. These would use Malta as an operational base, and maintain a minimum of ten aircraft each. As soon as he could withdraw the Blenheim squadrons from Egypt he hoped to send half a squadron to Malta to learn the anti-shipping technique. A future possibility he envisaged was the operation of South African Marylands from Malta for bombing operations.

On 23 August, Air Ministry took the matter up with the A.O.C. Malta. By this time the Wellingtons were already at the island, and Air Ministry wanted to know how many further squadrons could be operated from Malta (a) with existing resources and (b) with a hundred and fifty additional ground personnel. The A.O.C. estimated that with his existing resources he could operate only an additional half squadron, and, with the extra personnel, one and a half squadrons. He suggested the extra squadrons should consist of Wellingtons, Marylands, or Beaufighters,⁽¹⁾ rather than Blenheims. Enemy convoys were now so strongly protected that day attacks were likely to involve heavy casualties, and although the Blenheims were still invaluable for attacking lightly escorted ships, and their presence at least forced the enemy to provide larger escorts and delayed the shipping turn round, the present force was sufficient for these tasks. The Wellingtons, however, were invaluable for attacks on Tripoli, and the Marylands for bombing and machine-gunning road communications in Tripolitania. The A.O.C.-in-C. who was in complete agreement with the A.O.C. Malta, had already offered to lend him half a squadron of Marylands.

At Air Ministry, however, the policy of attacking ships at sea was still preferred to port bombing and it was decided

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(1) Beaufighters were needed for Night Fighter Defence.

A. A. B. / J 31 / 43 / 160 (A)
ACB / 47
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to increase temporarily the Elenheim detachment at Malta to three squadrons on the understanding that the detachment would operate exclusively against the enemy lines of communication. This increase would alter the status of the detachment as it would be no longer practicable to send out relief crews. It was proposed, therefore, to maintain the detachments from the monthly consignment of reinforcements to the Middle East. // On learning of this proposal both the A.O.C.-in-C. Middle East and the A.O.C. Malta protested that what was most needed at Malta was more and heavier bombs, especially for Tripoli. The A.O.C.-in-C. was of the opinion that if bombing operations were mounted against Naples and Brindisi on the same scale as those against Tripoli, the results might be decisive. The A.O.C. was convinced that with heavier bombs the Wellingtons could make Tripoli useless for large ships, and thus jeopardise the whole of the enemy's supply system. He asked that the hundred and fifty airmen being sent out should be employed to operate an additional Wellington squadron. In the meantime he agreed to accept an additional half squadron of Blenheims and eight Marylands and to maintain them with existing resources pending the arrival of personnel reinforcements. At this juncture, however, the G.O.C. Malta agreed to provide a hundred and fifty men to assist in the maintenance of aircraft, and this generous action enabled the A.O.C. to accept a complete Blenheim squadron.

ibid 96A

ibid 100A

ibid 98A

Arrangements were then put in hand at Air Ministry to send this one extra Blenheim squadron immediately, and a second squadron as soon as Malta could maintain it. Opposition to the port bombing policy, based on experience in the United Kingdom, remained firm. It was considered that a very heavy scale of attack on Tripoli was necessary to gain results, and that even if sufficient Wellingtons could be operated from Malta the supply situation would not permit them to operate over a long period. It was estimated that submarines and aircraft

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ibid 104A

were inflicting twenty-five per cent losses on shipping to North Africa and the C.A.S. thought this might be increased to fifty per cent by operating the additional Blenheims and meanwhile maintaining the Wellington offensive against Tripoli and the embarkation ports. (1) The A.O.C. Malta, however, held firmly to his opinion in favour of port bombing. He considered that, as a bombing target, Tripoli could not be compared with ports in the United Kingdom. The main difference was the comparatively small area in which the port facilities were contained. There was only one quay, four hundred and thirty yards long by a hundred and fifty wide, and on it were the only ~~store~~ ^{store} houses, warehouses and unloading gear in the port. There were only two other jetties, one two hundred yards long, and the other, the petrol jetty one hundred yards. The A.O.C. argued that a few 1,000 lb bombs on the quay and jetties would not only sink ships alongside but would destroy the buildings and machinery. Unloading from ships not alongside was frequently done but this depended entirely on a small fleet of lighters. In the evenings these were usually concentrated in a very small area against the town. A 1,000-lb bomb in the middle of them could sink the lot. Anchorages in stream were also in a very limited area, and whereas a 500-lb bomb did little damage with a near miss, a 1,000-lb bomb might easily disable a ship.

A.M. File
C.S. 10581
15A & B.

Despite this strong plea for port bombing, Air Ministry held to the decision to send the Blenheims, until a proposal by the C.-in-C. Mediterranean caused a modification in this policy. In a message to the Admiralty, dated 2 September the C.-in-C. pointed out factors which might hinder the efficiency of the anti-shipping policy in the near future: (a) The enemy might have recourse to routeing the convoys via the

/Ionian

(1) These considerations were based on a personal survey by the C.A.S. of the results achieved by Bomber Command and the German Air Force.

ibid 17A

Ionian Sea and thus out of range of the night attacks by the Swordfish, (b) the Blenheim daylight attacks might become still more hazardous owing to the improvements in the enemy anti-aircraft defences, and (c) the disadvantages of both methods of attack would shortly be aggravated by bad weather and longer nights during the approaching winter season. For night attacks the C.-in-C. considered the only solution was a longer range torpedo bombing squadron of either Beauforts or Albacores and for day attacks he suggested a squadron of high speed dive-bombers. // Although he recognised the validity of the C.-in-Cs arguments, the C.A.S. considered there were various qualifying factors to be taken into account. If the enemy convoys were routed via the Ionian Sea and thus out of range of the Swordfish, delay would be imposed on the movements of shipping and this would reduce the rate of flow of the supplies to North Africa. Also the ships would be vulnerable to attack from Egyptian bases on entering the Benghazi^z area and would be within range of the Blenheims at Malta during their journey through the Ionian Sea. He admitted, however, that the availability of shore-based fighter protection from Greece would increase the hazard of the latter attacks. As regards the Blenheim losses, the C.A.S. pointed out that although several aircraft had been lost from various causes, only two had so far been shot down by A.A. fire from convoys. It was agreed however, that consideration should be given to the possibility of sending an Albacore^a squadron to Malta in place of the third Blenheim squadron.

ibid 20A

The A.O.C.-in-C. Middle East, and the A.O.C. Malta were now asked for their views. The question was, if Malta was now able to operate an additional squadron, and the Albacore range was sufficient,⁽¹⁾ whether two squadron of Blenheims and

(1) This was at first queried by Air Ministry but later confirmed by the C.-in-C. Mediterranean.

two of torpedo aircraft would form a more effective force for attacks on shipping than three squadrons of Blenheims and one of torpedo aircraft. The A.O.C.-in-C. and the A.O.C. Malta were unanimous in their preference for two squadrons of each type, but although Malta could accept an additional squadron, maintenance crews and torpedoes were in short supply. The A.O.C.-in-C. was already helping to relieve the torpedo shortage, however, by flying in emergency stocks by Sunderlands, and further supplies from other sources were detailed to arrive in the near future. A further drawback was that Albacores were not fitted with A.S.V. but as there were four Swordfish at Malta with A.S.V. apparatus which could be used with Albacores, it was thought this difficulty could be overcome. It was found that the Albacore had a range fifty miles greater than that of the Swordfish, an advantage which the A.O.C.-in-C. considered well worth having, and on 12 September¹⁹⁴² the Air Ministry decided to cancel the move of the third Blenheim squadron and to send an Albacore squadron No. 828 F.A.A. to Malta in its place.

ibid 23A

P.H.B./TJ/183/160(A)

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Renewed Demands for Reconnaissance Aircraft

The increase in offensive operations from Malta inevitably aggravated the already difficult problem of reconnaissance. From the first, in accepting the Air Ministry offer at the end of August of additional offensive aircraft, the A.O.C. had made it clear that to employ the Blenheims and Swordfish to the full a proportionate increase in reconnaissance aircraft would be necessary. The R.A.F. was already providing a considerable amount of reconnaissance for the Navy to watch the movements of the Italian fleet and merchant shipping, and it was a major problem to balance these requirements, which were invariably represented as essential, against those of the air striking force. To supplement reconnaissance during a bad spell of Maryland unserviceability the A.O.C. had already been obliged to retain at Malta two Beauforts en route to the Middle East.

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It was now almost impossible, however, to supply further Marylands for Malta from the United Kingdom. The last two aircraft available for overseas service had been dispatched soon after 4 August, and Air Ministry had decided that No. 69 Squadron must be maintained from aircraft already in the Middle East, until it could be rearmed with another type. Medium bombers, however, were in short supply in the Middle East and the situation became more acute when the Baltimore aircraft which were to replace the Marylands were delayed in production. It was therefore decided to send out the few remaining Maryland aircraft in the United Kingdom, some of which were then in use as training aircraft, the remainder being on the strength of No. 1. Photographic Reconnaissance Unit. || These measures were not sufficient, however, to solve the problem and in any case it was likely to be some time before the aircraft arrived at Malta. To meet the acute situation at the end of August, the A.O.C.-in-C. advised the A.O.C. Malta, to give priority to the reconnaissance for the Blenheim and Swordfish strikes, but owing to ^h ^o Naval ~~Q~~ operations early in September this was not practicable and the C.A.S. instructed him to supplement the Maryland effort with the Blenheims. This course was first taken on 12 September, and for some time, owing to a shortage of Blenheim crews for shipping strikes, (1) Maryland pilots carried out patrols in Blenheim aircraft.

A.H.B./II 51/183/287(B).
ACC/47
101A

ibid 98A

H.Q. Med. File
S.176/1/Air 28A
A. M. File
S.47924 30A

A.M. File
C.S.10581
25A & B.

It was still necessary however to take long-term measures to ensure adequate reconnaissance. The Commanders-in-Chief, Middle East, were of the opinion that the obvious and most practical solution was to cease the employment of Marylands at Malta for bombing operations, and to concentrate their effort entirely on reconnaissance. Air Ministry agreed that in view of the more profitable nature of shipping targets and the shortage of reconnaissance aircraft, the diversion of the

/Marylands

(1) This was due to sickness. ~~(See page)~~

A.M. File
C.S.10732
8A

Marylands to attack land communications in Tripolitania was not normally justified. A more constructive proposal, however, put forward by the Admiralty was that Long Range A.S.V. should be supplied for Malta. This would give much greater scope to search patrols than the short range A.S.V. in the Swordfish. The proposal was considered at Air Ministry and on 14 September it was agreed that three Wellingtons (1) fitted with Long Range A.S.V. should be dispatched to Malta as soon as possible. These Wellingtons which were to be manned by specially selected crews would be able to search a track sixty miles wide for enemy surface vessels. They would be equipped, in addition, with a special I.F.F. set to enable the Swordfish with short range A.S.V. to home on to them.

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The method of employment proposed was that the Wellingtons should carry out searches on suitable nights along the shipping routes known to be used by the Italians. When contact was made with an enemy convoy they would summon the Swordfish which would then home on to them from approximately sixty miles and deliver their attack. In addition, although the Blenheims at Malta were not equipped with A.S.V. apparatus, an expert from the staff of the Scientific Advisor on Telecommunications was to be sent out to give assistance in devising methods of co-operation between the Wellingtons and Blenheims, and other types. As A.S.V. and similar developments were thought to be unknown to the enemy strict instructions were given that the Wellingtons were not to be flown near the enemy or Vichy coast where it might be possible to salvage equipment and aerial systems if an aircraft were forced down.

It was arranged that the A.S.V. Wellingtons should be sent out as part of the strength of twenty Wellingtons which were operating from the island. When they arrived, the

/Albacores

(1) Naval aircraft could not be fitted with L.R.A.S.V. owing to the shape of the fuselage. Of the R.A.F. types, Wellingtons, Sunderlands and Catalinas were suitable.

SECRET

A.M. File
C.S.10581
25B

Albacores would bring the number of aircraft on the island up to the equivalent of nine squadrons, and this was considered the maximum that could be operated from Malta. Without changing the types of squadrons, no increased striking power could be expected, and ~~and~~ no such changes could be made without full consideration being given to the supply position and to other vital air requirements, such as defence. The extent of the offensive from Malta was thus fixed for the time being.

The Anti-Shipping Offensive

During August and September, as has already been mentioned, owing to the increased A.A. and fighter defences of enemy convoys, the Blenheim effort against shipping at sea was considerably modified. In the words of the A.O.C. Malta "to launch the Blenheims against convoys in the face of the A.A. and fighter opposition now frequently provided was murder", and he considered that attacks should not be made unless a certain degree of success for the operation and a reasonable chance of survival for the aircraft could be expected.

AOC/47
83A

A. H. B. / 115 / 183 / 160 (A)

Air Marshal
Lloyd's
personal account

The Blenheims were an easy target for experienced gunners, provided there was a reasonable volume of fire. The method of attack was to fly directly at the target ship at fifty or a hundred feet above the sea and just before collision appeared imminent to bank up over the target, the bombs being released just before banking. The Blenheims each carried four 250-lb bombs, which were armed with an eleven-second fuse. The bombs were dropped in a closely-spaced stick to ensure that one or two would hit the target. In this way the sides or deck of the ship would be penetrated and the bomb would lodge inside and then explode. As a general rule the ship would then catch fire. The method of attack was therefore simple and if the convoys were lightly defended it was also very effective. As the defences increased, however, it became very hazardous, and crews were being shot down on the run in to attack. Surprise was almost impossible except in conditions of dust haze as

/there

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there was usually not a cloud in the sky. Fire would be opened on the aircraft long before they were within gun range, and huge sheets of water would rise up from the falling shells. An attack under such conditions required considerable courage, determination and leadership.

Fighter opposition was also particularly dangerous for the Blenheims. The fighters could easily attack the low-flying bombers from above, and moreover the fighter pilot could see the strike of his bullets on the sea and could quickly adjust his aim on to the target. The Blenheims rarely had fighter escort as the Hurricane range was too short, although on a few occasions Beaufighters on temporary detachment to Malta, accompanied them. A further danger for the Blenheims was that of colliding with the masts of the ships, if the bank away after the attack was not accurately timed and once or twice Blenheims were lost by being caught in the explosion of a ship. This danger occurred if several aircraft were attacking the same ship. The Blenheims then had to fly close together to ensure that they were all clear of the ship within the eleven seconds allowed by the fuses of the bombs. If these were inaccurately timed the Blenheims were usually too low over the ship to escape the blast.

As a consequence of these difficulties, although several operations against convoys were mounted, there was an increasing tendency during the month to confine operations to attacks on small or unescorted vessels, or vessels which were already damaged and straggling behind their convoys. An alternative policy employed was to increase the number of Blenheim attacks on ports and land targets. This divergence from the original policy laid down for the operation of the detachment from No. 2 Group resulted in the discussions at Air Ministry and the revision of the plans for the operation of aircraft from Malta, as related above.

R.A.F. Malta
D.I.S.

Although the Blenheim anti-shipping operations were limited, however, the Swordfish offensive continued steadily, and on a few occasions night attacks on shipping at sea were made by Wellingtons, while both types of aircraft were employed in attacking shipping in harbour. On ^{se} several occasions visibility for Swordfish strikes was extremely bad, and the convoys could only be located with A.S.V. These weather conditions made torpedo dropping very difficult, but nevertheless the aircraft accounted for three enemy ships sunk at sea during the month. Close watch was kept on the Ionian Sea and the Tunisian coastal route by the Marylands, and Tripoli and ports in Sicily and southern Italy were frequently visited. As the result of Malta-based operations in August, six ships were sunk at sea and at least four in harbours.

Anti-shipping Strikes - August 1941

The first convoy strike took place on 5 August, when a northbound convoy of five merchant vessels and five destroyers, sighted by a Maryland, was attacked near Lampedusa by Blenheims. This attack was unsuccessful, and, on the following day, when Blenheims were dispatched to attack a similar convoy southbound near Pantelleria, it was decided not to attack as the ships were escorted by Italian fighter aircraft. After dark, however, Swordfish located the convoy with A.S.V. and attacked it with torpedoes, and the Blenheims repeated their operation at dawn. As a result of these sorties the Nita, Italian, 6813 tons, was sunk. On 10 August Blenheims were sent to attack a single merchant vessel off Kerkennah. Hits were reported, and the ship, which was the French collier S.N.A.9, 2719 tons was reported damaged by Lloyds. On the night of 17 August, following a report by a Maryland, Swordfish were sent to attack a southbound convoy south of Pantelleria. One ship, the Maddalena Odero, Italian, 5479 tons, was sunk and on 30th, Swordfish attacking a convoy northwest of Lampedusa sank the Italian ship Egadi 861 tons. The Blenheims achieved

/two

two more sinkings during August. On ^{the} 23rd the Italian vessel Costanza 582 tons was sunk in convoy, and on 28th when two merchant vessels were attacked one of them the Cilicia, Italian, 2747 tons was lost. (1)

Three attacks on shipping in Tripoli, Catania and Lampedusa were made by the Blenheims, but no ships were reported sunk or damaged. As the result of a Swordfish attack on ships in Catania on ^{the} 10th, however, the large Italian vessel California 13060 tons was sunk. It was learned later that this was a hospital ship. (2) Other attacks were made by the Swordfish on Augusta and Syracuse, fires and explosions being reported. Land targets visited by the Blenheims included the airfield and barracks at Misurata, and chemical works at Crotone and Licata. Five Blenheims were lost during the month.

Beaufort Experiments

To make up for the limitations imposed on the Blenheim operations during August, the A.O.C.-in-C. Middle East, suggested that ^{the} two Beauforts at Malta, which were en route to Egypt, should be retained at the Island for experimental operations against shipping. This plan was agreed to, but the experiments bore little fruit. It was found that, in daylight attacks, the Beauforts were subject to the same dangers as the Blenheims. Owing to the short distance from the target at which the torpedoes had to be launched, the aircraft had to pass right over the ship, thus themselves offering an easy target for the A.A. As the Beaufort crews at Malta were not trained in night torpedo dropping, the possibility of employing the aircraft for night attacks was also ruled out. The A.O.C. suggested, however, that the aircraft might be used for laying mines in Tripoli harbour, since they had been used extensively and successfully, in similar operations from the United Kingdom. This idea was not followed up at ^{the} ~~this~~ time.

/Tripoli

- (1) She was claimed by the submarine RORQUAL
 (2) The California was not, however, included in the Italian Naval Order of Battle which was issued with hospital ships.

S E C R E T

RORQUAL /

SECRET

Tripoli Raids - August 1941

R.A.F. Malta
D.I.S.

A.H.B. JIJ/113/5/15.

Wellingtons of No. 38 Squadron which arrived at Luqa from Egypt on 6 August maintained a steady offensive against Tripoli during the month. Of nineteen operations carried out between 7 and 31 August sixteen were directed against the port. The first, which took place on the night of ^{the} 6th was carried out by six aircraft and lasted from 0155 hours to 0350 hours. This raid was the first of many, designed to break down morale. The Wellingtons arrived over the target separately, and since each aircraft dropped its load in sticks at intervals, there was no appreciable gap throughout the two hours when bombs were not exploding. Most of the bombs fell in a concentrated area near the Spanish Mole, and at least two fires were started. On the night of 21/22 and 29/30 as many as fifteen Wellingtons took part in the attacks, both raids lasting just under two hours. During the former raid twenty-four tons of H.E. were dropped, and over twenty-five tons during the latter, when many hits were observed among ships in the harbour, resulting in fires and explosions. || During the August raids Malta Wellingtons dropped a total weight of 206½ tons of bombs on Tripoli, more than half the total weight of 409½ tons dropped on Tripoli by Wellingtons from Malta since their raids began. During the raid on the night of ^{the} 30th, when nine Wellingtons took part, four ships were sunk in Tripoli harbour. They were the Neptune, Italian, 395 tons, the Riv, Italian, 6630 tons, the Giuseppina V 367 tons and the Fiammetta, Italian 393 tons. A further raid on Tripoli was made on the night of the 31st. The Wellingtons also made two attacks on Catania and one on Augusta. Only one aircraft was lost on operations during August.

Further Blenheim Difficulties

During the first two weeks of September, Blenheim operations remained on so small a scale that on the 11th Air Ministry commented on the disappointing results of their effort. Up to and including the 12th only two attacks were made against

A.H.B. List of Enemy
Shipping Sunk in the
Mediterranean.

/shipping

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shipping and two against land targets. On several occasions the aircraft failed to find the ships they had set out to attack. During an anti-shipping strike in the Ionian^{Sea} ^{the} on 11th, however, in which five Blenheims took part, one ship was sunk, the Alfredo Oriani (Italian) 3059 tons. This was the first success of the month. A second ship the Caffaro, Italian, 6476 tons was sunk on 12th^{the}, but on this occasion three Blenheims were lost. Wellingtons and F.A.A. Swordfish also co-operated in their sinking.

A. M.E. File
S.47924
28A & 30A

As the A.O.C. explained, however, the Blenheims were working under considerable disadvantages. The main drawback was the lack of determined and experienced leadership. The Squadron Commander was not allowed to fly, and although other leaders had been sent from No. 2 Group, unacclimatised crews were very susceptible to sickness, in spite of preventive measures. Consequently, for some weeks, the squadron's crew strength, nominally sixteen had been down to three or four, and even this number had only been achieved by mixing crews, a practice which did not produce good results. Another difficulty was the low standard of navigation. Compared with those in northwest Europe the Mediterranean winds were difficult, and landfalls far fewer, so that the navigators had difficulty in assessing the drift of the aircraft, in spite of assistance and lectures from Maryland observers. The experiment had been tried of sending a Maryland to lead the Blenheims to the target. This had been successful, although unpopular, but it had soon had to be dropped owing to the shortage of Marylands. As there were insufficient Blenheim crews to man the aircraft, the Blenheims had been used by Maryland crews to make good the shortage of Maryland aircraft which was threatening reconnaissance.

The A.O.C. considered that the best solution to the Blenheim problem was to allow each squadron to remain in Malta for four or six months, so that they could become acclimatised and gain experience of local conditions. Under the existing

/system

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ibid 41A &
42A

system of short detachments, the squadrons were being withdrawn from the island just as they were beginning to pull their weight. On 22 September the Officer Commanding No. 105 Squadron was killed in a flying accident and the A.O.C. felt there was no longer any chance of pulling the squadron together. It was consequently decided that it should be replaced by No. 18 Squadron from the United Kingdom, which would then remain at the island indefinitely. Meanwhile the second Blenheim squadron, No. 107, had arrived from the United Kingdom and commenced operations on 15 September. No. 105 Squadron continued operating until 27 September and returned to England on 11 October. They had been in Malta since 28 July.

Shortly after the arrival of No. 107 Squadron several successful operations against shipping were mounted. On 17 September Blenheims attacked a merchant vessel, a tug and two laden schooners off the Tunisian coast and destroyed a schooner, the Filuccio, Italian 248 tons, and on 19th two attacks were made on a 24000 ton liner in Tripoli harbour. On a few occasions when Blenheims scored hits on ships the bombs bounced harmlessly off the deck. On 20 September four aircraft of No. 107 Squadron ^{CK} attacked two merchant vessels off Kerkennah. One of the ships which was carrying phosphate from Sfax to Marseilles was sunk. She was the Monselet, French, 3372 tons. On 26 September, Blenheims on a shipping sweep claimed one 1000 ton merchant vessel sunk thirty miles north-west of Tripoli but this was not confirmed. ~~By Lloyd~~ Frequently, during the month, Blenheims made anti-shipping sweeps along the Tripolitanian coast, and when no targets were found, attacked motor transport on the coastal road, destroying and damaging many vehicles and causing great congestion of the traffic. Other targets were supply dumps and barracks at Misurata and Homs, and factories at Licata.

/Swordfish

SECRET

A.H.Q. Malta
Daily Int. News
Sent by list of
Enemy Shipping
(A.H.Q.)

SECRETSwordfish Operations

The Swordfish were very successful during September, sinking at least four ships. On the night of 3 September nine aircraft on a sweep off Sicily and the toe of Italy sighted a convoy of seven destroyers and five merchant vessels and sank two Italian ships. They were the Adrea Gritti, 6338 tons, and the Pietro Barbaro 6330 tons.⁽¹⁾ On the night of the 11th seven Swordfish made the first attack on a southbound convoy off Kuriat Island, claiming two merchant vessels damaged. They attacked it again on the following night, the Blenheims having first bombed the ships during the day. Three hours later Wellingtons of No. 38 Squadron made low level and gliding attacks on the convoy, dropping ten tons of bombs. During one of these operations the Italian ship Nicolo Odero, 6003 tons was hit. She blew up on 14 September. || On ^{the} night 17/18 September five Swordfish attacked a convoy near Trapani, and in spite of poor visibility damaged the Italian ship Col de Lana, 5891 tons. Further attacks against shipping on the nights of 18/19 and 21/22 failed to produce results, but on 22/23 three Swordfish attacked two merchant vessels off Kuriat Island and severely damaged one, the Marigola, Italian, 5996 tons. She was stranded on the coast and sunk on 1 November by gunfire from a submarine. The Swordfish also laid mines in Tripoli and Palermo harbours during the month, while other Swordfish on Wellingtons created a diversion with bombs.

Wellington Operations

During September Wellingtons of No. 38 Squadron maintained a steady bombing offensive from Malta. On ^{the} nights of 1/2, 4/5 and 5/6 they mounted raids on Tripoli lasting well over three hours, causing fires and explosions. The next targets to receive attention were Palermo and Messina, the former being attacked three times and the latter twice during the next five nights. Both ports were so effectively covered by smoke-screens that no results could be observed except one

/very

The Pietro Barbaro is not included in the official Italian list "Nave Perduti". SECRET

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very large fire at Messina. Palermo was attacked twice more towards the end of the month, but results of the former were not good and cloud over the target prevented accurate bombing during the latter. On the night of the 13th operations⁽¹⁾ against Tripoli were resumed and on the nights of 15th, 16th and 17th two of the Wellingtons laid mines while the remainder successfully created a diversion with bombs. Six more raids were mounted against Tripoli before the end of the month, the last two being directed against Motor Transport parks, where large fires and explosions were ~~caused~~^{caused}. On two occasions Wellingtons were employed to create a diversion for Swordfish laying mines in Sicilian harbours. On the night of the 22nd Wellingtons were dispatched to attack shipping following a Swordfish strike, but no hits were obtained. One aircraft was lost on operations during the month.

The weight of bombs dropped by the Wellingtons during September was as follows:-

A. H. B. Malta D.R. B

<u>Target</u>	<u>Weight of Bombs</u> (to nearest ton)
Tripoli	158.2
Palermo	77.3
Messina	22.9
Shipping	<u>14.2</u>
Total ..	<u>272.6</u>

Fighter Defence

Enemy raids during August and September remained on a small scale, and consequently there were few spectacular interceptions by the Hurricanes. The enemy was particularly cautious in his day attacks and seldom sent over any aircraft besides Macchis, and these frequently flew so high that the Hurricanes were unable to gain height to intercept before the intruders had made off. On a few occasions, however, air battles took place between Italian and British fighters. On 19 August the Hurricanes were given particularly good warning of an enemy fighter sweep of twelve Macchis to Malta and twelve aircraft of No. 126

Squadron were able to intercept and pursue the enemy back to

(1) The Hurricane ~~which~~ (No. 126) was shot down by the Hurricanes. The blow-up

SECRET

/Sicily.

16.10.15
A.H.B./HJS/113/5/15

Sicily. Two Macchis were shot down over Sicily, and a third crashed into the sea off the coast. One of the Hurricanes was ^adamaged. On 26 August ten Hurricanes of No. 126 Squadron and eight of No. 185 Squadron were directed to intercept a plot circling some forty or fifty miles north of the island. No. 126 Squadron found the enemy and an engagement took place off Cape Scaramia. Three aircraft were claimed destroyed, and two were probably destroyed. One Hurricane was lost. On 4 September two interceptions were made. During the morning twelve Hurricanes of No. 126 Squadron intercepted a plot of plus sixteen ten miles north of the island, and claimed six Macchis destroyed. No. 185 Squadron which was also scrambled claimed one aircraft destroyed. In the afternoon eight Hurricanes of No. 249 Squadron engaged twelve Macchis escorting a hospital plane at sea level off Cape Passero. The Hurricanes which were originally at 20,000 feet came down to 8,000 before diving on the Macchis. One of the pilots described the engagement as one of the toughest he had experienced - "The Macchis just stayed and fought". Three aircraft were claimed destroyed. When the engagement ended the aircraft were well over Sicily, so the Hurricanes decided to return to base. The Macchis followed them however for some distance. Two Hurricanes failed to return. From ^{the} 4th to ^{the} 20th no enemy aircraft crossed the coast in daylight and there were only three alerts. Before the end of September, enemy aircraft probably crossed the coast twice in daylight.

Night Defence

While enemy day activity was infrequent and consisted chiefly of fighter patrols, night raids were comparatively persistent. They consisted, as a rule, of a few bombers which came over at intervals and dropped their bombs either in the sea or at random over the island. There were few sustained attacks on single targets by large numbers of aircraft. Except on the occasions when the enemy aircraft were over at a great height, such raids were comparatively easy to combat,

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but up to this time the fighter defence had had very little success in night interceptions. During August, however, the night defence system was overhauled and a special night fighter unit was formed with the result that successful night interceptions began to increase.

Developments in Night Fighting

In order to understand the developments that took place in August it is necessary to know something of the anti-aircraft defences of Malta, and the night defence tactics formerly employed.

Note on Malta
Night Fighting
Tactics
A.48/II J5/104

(a) Searchlight and Radar Organisation

From the beginning of the war Malta was very heavily defended by a first-class barrage of guns (1)^{and} by searchlights of which twelve were of the 150 cm type and the remainder the 90 cm type. The Searchlight Defences were organised into six areas in each of which there were six to eight searchlights. Every searchlight was connected by telephone to its Area Headquarters, which in turn, had a direct line to the Fighter Operations Room. The searchlights were directed purely by sound location until the target was illuminated, and then by eye. The weather conditions were, generally speaking, first class for the operation of searchlights. Air conditions were good and the enemy rarely raided the island when there was more than three tenths cloud. Consequently the searchlights were able to obtain a high percentage of illuminations, about twenty-five per cent of all raiders that crossed the coast. These illuminations lasted from thirty seconds to three and a half minutes, and once a target was caught it was very seldom lost until it had passed out of range well beyond the coast.

The R.D.F. facilities, which were assisted by G.L. sets were only moderate. Their range was usually sufficient for the Fighter Controller to scramble the night fighters in good time

/for

(1) At night gun-fire was confined to geographical areas agreed between the Army and Air Force, as it was for day operations.

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for them to obtain the height of the enemy raid by the time it crossed the coast. Direction plotting of the raiders was good but heights were only moderate to bad and could not be relied upon to any great extent. There were no modern devices such as G.C.I. or A.I. available and all the tactics were based on the principle gained from experience, that it is practically useless for a Fighter Controller to vector fighters at night on to ~~raiders~~ ^{raiders} without the assistance of modern G.C.I. and A.I. organisation.

(b) Tactics Prior to August 1941

By August 1941 the Night Fighter Defence of Malta had passed through a number of stages of development. Pre-war experience in the British Isles had tended towards the conclusion that an operational searchlight zone of belt at least thirty miles deep was necessary for successful night fighter defence. Although Malta provided an operational zone only eight miles deep, with a maximum time of target illumination of three and a half minutes, successful fighter defence was however soon found to be possible.

At first a single fighter was stationed in the least active part of the searchlight layout, and about ten per cent of the illuminations resulted in fighter engagements. At this time no heights were obtainable and the next stage was the employment of two fighters at difference heights. This was followed by the introduction of two and then four areas for stationary fighters, the areas used depending on the enemy line of approach. The most successful result at this stage was achieved when two fighters were stationed at different heights in areas on either side of the target as it crossed the coast. Each of these improvements led to greater efficiency until about thirty per cent of illuminations resulted in fighter engagements.

The fighters however were still confined to special areas until an illumination occurred and, unless the enemy aircraft happened to be flying towards them, a terrific chase ensued. Consequently the enemy aircraft on being illuminated

/often

17A

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often crossed the coast well ahead of the fighter and was ~~out~~ out of range of the searchlights before the fighter could overtake. Another difficulty was that over a blacked-out and small land mark like Malta, it was almost impossible for the fighter to maintain position on the patrol line on dark nights even with the help of a flashing beacon, and on occasions wandered as far twenty miles from the island. Consequently, in order to obtain better results, it was necessary to devise improved tactics.

(c) Formation of the Malta Night Fighter Unit

The first steps towards the development of night fighting in August 1941, was the formation of a special Night Fighter Unit. This consisted of twelve pilots and twelve Mark II Hurricanes, eight of which were armed with four cannons and the remainder with twelve guns, with the usual complement of ground crews. In the first instance men and aircraft were provided equally from the three fighter squadrons, but although the A.O.C. did not ask for additional pilots or aircraft for the unit, he requested that Air Ministry should allot a squadron number to establish the unit's identity and to help morale. The unit became No. 1435 Flight.⁽¹⁾ He proposed the establishment of the unit should be eleven pilots and fourteen Hurricanes with a few airmen for maintenance, the remainder being on the station servicing basis, as was the system for the other fighter units. The pilots and aircraft were to come out of Malta's establishment of thirty-four pilots and sixteen aircraft plus a hundred per cent reserve of aircraft for each of the three fighter squadrons. In this way the A.O.C. demanded no increases in establishment to provide for the new unit.

A.H.B./II J1/183/160 (A)
ACC/47
85B

ibid 127A

A.H.B./II J5/104

In order to obtain greater efficiency the pilots of the new unit operated solely at night. A night state of six aircraft two of which were at readiness, and four at thirty minutes was maintained. The Hurricanes were equipped with

No.

/V.H.F.

(1) Became 1435 Squadron on 23 July 1942 when Beaufighters took over night-fighter duties and a Spitfire squadron then forming in Malta adopted the squadron number 1435.

S E C R E T

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V.H.F. and were controlled from the usual Fighter Operations Room. A very close liaison was maintained between the searchlight personnel and the night fighters, and lectures were arranged for the benefit of both parties, as well as regular searchlight co-operation training.

(d) New Tactics

It was found that as long as the fighters did not bear a lesser angle than twenty degrees to the searchlights' sound locator on either side of the line of approach of the enemy aircraft, it would not greatly upset the efficiency of the sound locator. It was also found later by experience that once the enemy aircraft was over the island the fighter could be only a thousand yards away on either side of a concentration of searchlights without greatly interfering with the searchlight efficiency. By following the concentration of searchlight beams it was therefore possible for the fighter to take up a position close to the raider as it approached the island and thus to be ready to close in to attack in the event of an illumination.

With this knowledge as a basis the following new tactics were designed. In place of the four station patrol areas two fluid patrol lines were used for the initial positioning of the fighters, the first over the centre and the second over the south south-east of the island. As the enemy aircraft approached Malta, the Fighter Controller gave the fighter:-

- (a) the distance of the raid from the Island,
- (b) the height, if known,
- (c) the line of approach towards the Island.

In no circumstances did the Controller attempt to vector the fighter. On hearing that a raid was approaching, both fighters left their patrol lines and took up a position on each side of and approximately four to six miles distant from the incoming raider. They then flew on converging courses so that they closed in on and were in the immediate vicinity of the raider by the time it was over the Island. The latter was then

/engaged

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engaged by any number from eight to eighteen searchlights, with a resultant concentration of beams. The fighters then took up positions flying parallel to and in the same direction as the concentration was moving so that they were near if an illumination took place.

In order to reduce the risk of collision between the two fighters as they attacked the illuminated enemy aircraft, the camera gun switch in each aircraft was altered to operate the tail light independently. This light was switched on by the pilot when he engaged, and switched off again when he broke off the engagement. This employment of the tail light was also useful in indicating to the other fighter the position of the enemy aircraft when the illumination had ceased. When two or more illuminations occurred at the same time the Controller informed the pilots of the location of each in the six searchlight areas. If several aircraft were plotted approaching at the same time a third fighter was scrambled and remained on patrol six thousand feet higher than the incoming raids and was given strict orders to engage only a second illumination. In the event of a major raid, when a continuous stream of aircraft was approaching the Island, there was a possibility that if there were numerous illuminations the airborne fighters might expend all their ammunition before they could be relieved. In order to avoid this it would be necessary to scramble the next three aircraft about thirty-five ^{minutes} ~~minutes~~ after the first three had taken off. The second sorties of fighters would then orbit Gozo at different heights until told by the Fighter Controller to relieve one or ^{more} ~~one~~ of the first three fighters. On moonlight nights it was sometimes possible to see a silhouette of the enemy aircraft against the concentration of beams without an illumination. This could only be done when the Controller gave the height of the raider accurately.

To keep the fighter aircraft on their patrol lines while awaiting a raid, three searchlights shining nearly vertically

/were

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were employed during periods of no moon or little moon. These were absolutely essential and invaluable to the fighter and far better than any system of ground flares. Their positions were changed nightly and they were also used for homing friendly aircraft. Since, in any case a flashing beacon was employed every night for homing the Malta bombers it was considered there was little extra risk in exposing the searchlights as well.

R.A.F. Malta
D.I.S.
A.H.B./HJS/113/5/15

Night Raids - August and September 1941

The Malta Night Fighter unit achieved its first success on the night of 5 August. Ten raiders came over, and two Hurricanes were up to intercept. Searchlights made several illuminations and one of the Hurricanes had a very successful night shooting down one BR.20 and one unidentified aircraft in flames. The second Hurricane pilot was fired at by an enemy aircraft, while he was closing in to attack, but he returned fire and succeeded in shooting down his opponent. On the following night three aircraft approached the island, but about ten miles north of St. Paul's Bay the leader caught fire in mid-air and crashed into the sea where it burned for some time. The other two aircraft then turned back. It was found, later that the Italians were dropping a new type of incendiary bomb, the technical arrangements of which were apparently faulty, as no sooner were the bombs released than the aircraft burst into flames. In order to keep secret from the Italians the shortcomings of the new bomb, the Hurricane pilots had to take credit for the losses thus sustained by the enemy. The Malta Night Fighter Unit had to be credited with five such victories.

Air Marshal
Lloyd's Personal
Account

H.Q. Malta
D.I.S.
A.H.B./HJS/113/5/15

On the night of the 11th nine raiders came over two of which were illuminated and shot down by Hurricanes. On the night of the 20th, ground stations reported the sound of engines just before dawn, and eventually a plot appeared twenty-eight miles to the north-east. Night flying Hurricanes were ordered to make dawn patrol, several enemy aircraft then appeared coming in and No. 185 Squadron was scrambled. A number of these raiders eventually made low flying attacks on Hal Far and Luqa but

/caused

caused no damage. Another plot of plus nine, appeared to the north and No. 126 Squadron was scrambled. These raiders did not come in to attack and were not intercepted by the Hurricanes. One of the latter, however found a sloop and escort vessel near Pozzallo and attacked the former with cannon, causing much consternation among the crews of both. The Italian broadcast description of the raid on Hal Far and Luqa was as follows:-

A particularly audacious action was carried out over Malta. In the early hours of yesterday an Italian Fighter formation escorted by another formation of fighters flew over Malta and from a very low level machine-gunned the highly equipped base of Hal Far, while another formation crossed the sky for indirect reasons over Malta. The daring attack of our fighters, although met with a most intense anti-aircraft fire was crowned with success. Two large twin-engined bombers were set on fire and destroyed, while another two bombers and two single-engine planes were hit and rendered unserviceable. Furthermore several other aircraft to the south-east of the Aerodrome were hit, and, judging by the flames, they sustained extensive damage. Enemy's A.A. batteries were also attacked with armament available on board our aircraft. British fighters flying over Malta did not engage our planes, all of which returned regularly to their respective bases.

On the night of 4/5 September two Hurricanes engaged and shot down an enemy aircraft which was illuminated. It was later learned that the aircraft was a Cant. Z.1007m the first of its kind to be identified over Malta at night. A second Cant. was shot down by a Hurricane on the night of the 8th. No further enemy aircraft were engaged at night up to the end of September, and there were several nights when no Alert was sounded.

Fulmar Activity

An important factor in night defence was the operation of Fulmars over southern Sicily on anti-intruder raids. These naval aircraft, operating, on an average, every alternate night, carried out long patrols over the enemy airfields, particularly Gerbini, Comiso, Augusta and Gela. They carried small bombs and machine-guns, with which they attacked parked aircraft and other suitable targets, frequently damaging or destroying several aircraft, and causing fires on the airfields. Their

H.Q. Malta
D.I.S. & O.R.B.

A.H.B./1155/113/5/15

long patrols enabled them to watch the operational routine of the enemy, to observe which airfields were mainly used at night and the procedure employed on the runways for aircraft taking off and landing, and to reconnoitre for Wellington and Swordfish raids against Sicily. (1) The Fulmars attacked enemy aircraft taking off for or returning from raids on Malta and their constant presence over the enemy airfields often prevented enemy raiders returning to their base, and disorganised projected night operations. While the Fulmars were over, most of Sicily was kept in a state of air alarm, and to the Fulmar pilots who carried out keenly a sometimes dull and tiring job of work, Malta probably owed many a peaceful night.

The Fulmar patrols were not always dull however. The following is an account of the activities of a Fulmar over Sicily on 2/3 September taken from the Malta Daily Intelligence Summary:-

2100 hours. The Fulmar proceeded to Gerbini and immediately saw an enemy aircraft with navigation lights on at the same height (6,000 feet). This aircraft disappeared but, fifteen minutes later the navigation lights of a second aircraft were seen. The flare path was switched on and as the aircraft approached to land the Fulmar dived to intercept. The enemy switched off lights and the Fulmar lost the target until the aircraft was landing. He gave it a short burst from eighty yards, but the aircraft landed safely. The Fulmar climbed to two thousand feet and patrolled. The Fulmar climbed to four thousand feet east of Gerbini after seeing another enemy aircraft which made out to sea. Pilot soon after saw the silhouette of an aircraft above him. He climbed quickly and caught the aircraft just south of Etna. He got in a long burst and the enemy went down in flames about four miles north-east of Gerbini. Three fighters were seen so the Fulmar proceeded to Comiso where he dropped 4 x 20 lb bombs on North dispersal. Another fighter appeared and petrol was low so the Fulmar returned to base landing 2330 hours. A.A. rather heavy.

Fighter Offensive

During August the Hurricanes carried out a few offensive operations in Sicily, and sometimes made offensive sweeps to the Sicilian coast, although the latter were seldom fruitful. The seaplane base at Syracuse was attacked by three aircraft on 17 August when one seaplane was set on fire and others riddled with bullets. A.A. fire commenced as the fighters

(1) For example the Fulmars kept a close watch on a dummy flare path which the Italians moved about in the proximity of the airfields. /flew

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flew over the town to attack. On ^{the} 20th six Hurricanes of No. 126 Squadron attacked barrage balloons, sea planes and ⁶ patrol tank installations at Augusta. Three balloons were set on fire and seaplanes damaged. A barrage was put up at Syracuse although the Hurricanes did not fly within ten miles of it. At the beginning of the month Beaufighters were still based at Malta, following Operation Substance which took place at the end of July. At dawn on 2 August two aircraft attacked Rizzo airfield, destroying one S.79 and badly damaging four more, and on the evening of the following day two Beaufighters attacked fighters on Reggio Calabria airfield. Many aircraft were claimed destroyed and badly damaged.

A development in September was the fitting of bomb racks to twenty-four of the Hurricanes and the introduction of fighter-bomber raids on Sicily. Throughout August and September between thirty and sixty fighters had been observed on Comiso airfield and many more on other airfields in Sicily. The airfield of Comiso was the first target chosen for the Hurricane bombers, which, with Hurricane fighter escorts made four attacks during September. Dive-bombing tactics were employed and many enemy aircraft were reported destroyed or damaged. The bombers carried approximately six 40-lb G.P. bombs and two 25-lb incendiaries. A train shooting offensive was also commenced in Sicily during the month. On 1 September cannon Hurricanes attacked a train, hitting the engine and the driver's cabin and causing clouds of steam. This single operation was assumed to have been highly successful, as for some time to come no further train movements were observed during daylight.

Towards the end of September Beaufighters of No. 272 Squadron and fighter Blenheims of No. 113 Squadron arrived on detachment for operations in connection with Operation "Halberd".

/During

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During their stay these attacked seaplane bases at Marsala, Cagliari and Elmas and the airfield of Bo Rizzo, besides other targets.

Operation "Halberd" - 25-28 September 1941

A.M. File
C.S.10677
9A

An important event in September was the arrival of the "Halberd" convoy. It had been decided that the convoy should consist of six merchant vessels, and that the voyage through the Mediterranean from Gibraltar to Malta, a naval escort would be provided by Force H, including three battleships, one aircraft carrier, five cruisers and eighteen destroyers. It was assumed that the Italian Fleet with up to four battleships might be sent to dispute the passage of the convoy. In view of the heavy naval protection being provided the Admiralty was very anxious that the fullest possible air support should be given from Malta, particularly in the form of reconnaissance and fighter protection. The A.O.C. calculated that at least eight additional Marylands would be necessary to fulfil reconnaissance requirements, and thirty⁺-six Beaufighters for shipping protection and offensive operations against enemy airfields. The Air Ministry arranged that the September consignment of eight reinforcing Beaufighters for the Middle East should arrive at Malta in time for the operation, and agreed to the temporary loan to Malta of six additional Beaufighters from Coastal Command. The A.O.C. in C. undertook to supply four or five long range Marylands, eight, possibly ten Beaufighters, and eight Blenheim fighters to help make up the deficiency of twelve Beaufighters.

A.M. File
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Preliminary air proposals for the operation were as follows:-

- (a) Reconnaissance as for operation "Substance"
- (b) Escort. Beaufighter escort in Skerki area
and as required in approaches to Malta.
- (c) Offensive.

/(i)

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- (i) Maximum effort for bombing of Messina, Palermo, Trapani with repetition on the most fruitful target on the four nights preceding the arrival of the convoy.
- (ii) Beaufighter attacks on airfields and sea-plane bases at Cagliari, Palermo, Borizzo, Marsala and Pantelleria during the approach of the convoy to Malta.
- (iii) Beaufighter anti-reconnaissance patrol between Trapani and Pantelleria prior to the passage of the convoy through the Narrows.
- (iv) Intruder patrols by Fulmars to keep down enemy night movements or attacks
- (v) Swordfish striking force at readiness.

Malta D.I.S.

A.H.B./EJS/113/5/15

For several days prior to the arrival of the convoy at Malta preliminary air operations were carried out in the form of special reconnaissance and offensive sorties against enemy naval and air bases. Between 22 and 26 September P.R. Hurricanes, and a P.R. Spitfire sent out for the operation, made frequent reconnaissance patrols over Sicilian and south Sardinian ports, airfields and seaplane bases, and bases in Pantelleria and at Tunis and Bizerta in North Africa. Wellingtons and Swordfish made night attacks on ^{the} 24th and 25th against Palermo, where many units of the Italian Fleet had been sighted. During the latter attack Swordfish laid mines outside the harbour to block the entrance.

Admiralty Battle
Summary
CB.3081(ii)

The convoy entered the Mediterranean on 25 September, and by mid-day on ^{the} 27th the ships had reached Galita Island, south of Sardinia. From 1255 hours until 1405 several attacks from torpedo aircraft were sustained, during which the battle ship Nelson was severely damaged. At 1404 hours a report was received from a R.A.F. Mary ^{and} that two enemy battleships and eight destroyers were in 38.20N, 10.40 ^{E.} and steering

/towards

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towards the convoy. The ships were shadowed by the Maryland until 1500 hours by which time their course had been altered to the northward, ending all hope of an engagement. Further air attacks during daylight were driven off by the Ark Royal's Fulmars, but during the night several attacks were made during which one transport the Imperial Star was torpedoed and so badly damaged that attempts to tow her proved futile, and she had to be sunk. At 0630 hours on the 28th a Fulmar and Beaufighters arrived from Malta, and, according to Admiral Burrough^Sts, gave "excellent protection for the remainder of the passage".

Malta D.I.S.

A.H.B./AJJ/112/5/15

During 27 September, Beaufighters had contributed to the safety of the convoy and naval ships by attacking enemy airfields and seaplane bases in western Sicily and southern Sardinia. Attacks on Marsala seaplane base and Bo Rizzo airfield were made at 0820 and 0930 hours respectively, and Cagliari seaplane base was attacked at 1500^{hours}. An attack on Bo Rizzo by Blenheims of No. 105 squadron had to be abandoned owing to bad weather, but aircraft of the squadron attacked targets at Porto Empedocle on the south coast of Sicily. From 0555 to 1330 Marylands patrolled between Marittimo and Cape Carbonara, from 1545 to 1830 a Maryland patrolled Tunis - Pantelleria - Cape Bon, Marittimo, and from 1600 to 1840 patrols were made off the east Sicilian coast. During the day Beaufighters and Blenheim fighters made anti-submarine and anti-E-beat patrols, and with Fulmars provided escort for two ships leaving Malta for Gibraltar.

M.E.F.O.S.
No.24.

During 28 September several offensive air operations were mounted from Malta with the object of pinning down and destroying enemy aircraft during the approach and unloading of the ships. An important feature of these operations was the use of Hurricanes as bombers for the first time, a successful experiment which led to the frequent use of Hurri-bombers in the future. Two attacks by six Hurricane bombers and six fighters were made at 0715 and 0930 hours against Comiso airfield and a similar attack was made at 1400 hours. The total weight of

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/bombs

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bombs dropped in these attacks was 5,140 lb of which it was estimated ninety per cent fell in the target area. Other air activity for the convoy included anti E-boat and submarine patrols by Beaufighters and fighter Blenheims, and Maryland patrols between Marittimo and Cape Carbonara^d during which the enemy fleet was sighted three times on a southerly course. In the evening of the 28th, having unloaded passengers, the naval escort left Malta on its journey back through the Western Mediterranean.

The part played by the R.A.F. in ^{Operation} "Halberd" was highly successful. The Senior Office, Force H, attributed the absence of bombing during the operation, to the air attacks on enemy aerodromes. Vice Admiral Burroughs^s also paid tribute to the R.A.F. fighters from Malta, which provided "excellent protection" and gave the Fleet a great sense of security. This success in naval co-operation was particularly gratifying in that it showed a rapid improvement in efficiency since the "Substance" operation

The arrival of this convoy solved Malta's supply problem for some time. Stocks of most requirements were now expected to last until the early summer of 1942, although the dispatch of disparate amounts of stores led to some supplies running out before others.

A.M. File
C.S.10677
and ACC/47
A.H.B. / II J. / 123 / 287 (A)
Cabinet Office's
Malta War History

/ Chapter 11
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S E C R E TChapter 11

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MALTA AND THE 'CRUSADER' OFFENSIVE - OCTOBER TO DECEMBER 1941The Importance of Malta in the Plan for Operation 'Crusader'

By the autumn of 1941, the familiar pattern repeated throughout the Mediterranean campaigns of time in relation to reinforcement had become fully apparent. Both sides were endeavouring to build up their forces in North Africa, in order to resume the offensive, and reinforcement and supply became a race against time, in which sea transport was the deciding factor. After successive postponements, in September and October 1941, General Rommel with his Panzergruppe Afrika, aimed at launching an offensive for the reduction of Tobruk, (1) about the third week in November. On the other hand, General Auchinleck planned to commence the 'Crusader' offensive to relieve Tobruk and expel the enemy from Cyrenaica, on 18 November.

In September 1941, the Chiefs of Staff signalled to the Commanders-in-Chief, Middle East and Mediterranean that the interception of supplies to Libya, in the next few weeks, was a matter of such importance that they were anxious to be in possession of all the information on the subject. This led to an assurance from the Commanders-in-Chief that they were fully alive to the great importance of interrupting supplies to North Africa, and that their resources were being used to the utmost. They considered that increased interceptions and sinkings of enemy ships could only be achieved by adding to Middle East resources in reconnaissance aircraft and torpedo bombers. The fitting of A.S.V. to aircraft searching for ships gave greater chance of interception, especially as weather conditions during the winter months were likely to make the locating of convoys more difficult. Furthermore, an increased scale of bombing attack on ports should achieve good results, although Middle East resources were being used to the limit.

By 17 October, the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief, Middle

(1) The siege of Tobruk began on 12 April 1941.

/ East

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East, Air Marshal A.W. Tedder issued an important directive to the Air Officer Commanding, Royal Air Force, Malta, Air Vice-Marshal Hugh Pughe Lloyd, on the future conduct of operations from Malta:

A.O.C.-in-C.
file Malta
A.H.8/IJW1/183/160(A)

'Major operations,' he wrote, 'are impending in Libya with the object of driving the enemy out of Libya and Tripolitania. Instructions have been received that every available force is to be concentrated to achieve this aim.... Your forces in Malta can contribute powerfully towards this common cause. Interruption of enemy sea supplies to Africa remains your primary objective, in particular, every effort should be made to deal with tankers or ships carrying petrol.'

A second Wellington Squadron, No. 104, would be sent from England for temporary attachment at Malta, thus enabling No. 38 Squadron to be returned to Egypt.⁽¹⁾ When the 'Crusader' operation began, the Egypt-based Wellingtons would concentrate their attack on targets in the forward area and the Wellingtons from Malta could assist by bombing Benghazi. Air attacks from Malta on Italian ports would assist the operations in Libya, both by interrupting supplies and by leading to the retention of Italian fighters in Italy.

At the end of October, the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief followed up with a further instruction to the Air Officer Commanding, Malta. For the next two weeks ('Crusader' was to be launched on 18 November) the operations to assist 'Crusader' should be :

Wellingtons (a) Sustained light nuisance raids against Naples.

(b) Heavy attacks on Tripoli, with the maximum effort when convoys arrived.

Blenheims The first priority was to be south-bound shipping and the second Tripoli, Benghazi and land lines of communication in North Africa.⁽²⁾

'It is of the utmost importance,' he concluded, 'from now onwards to discover and intercept enemy shipping en route to Benghazi. This should take priority over all other commitments.'

(1) The move of No. 104 Squadron from the U.K. to Malta began on 17 October and of No. 38 Squadron from Malta to Egypt on 25 October.

(2) This instruction was subsequently modified, because of the heavy Blenheim losses.

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/Comparative

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Comparative Air Strengths October and November, 1941

The force of Cat. A aircraft (Serviceable or serviceable within 14 days) at the disposal of the Air Officer Commanding, Malta, on 5 October, 1941 amounted to 148 aircraft, made up as follows:

Fighters

Hurricanes	97
Beaufighters	5 (1)
	<u>102</u>

Bombers

Wellingtons	15
Blenheims	17
	<u>32 (2)</u>

Reconnaissance

Marylands	13
Spitfires	1
	<u>14</u>

Middle East
Strength Returns
A.H.B./VB/9/1

The Malta Order of Battle, on 7 October, 1941, was:

<u>Squadron</u>	<u>Type</u>	<u>I.E. Establishment</u>	<u>Location</u>	<u>Remarks</u>
105/107	Blenheims	16	Luqa	For special shipping ops.
38	Wellingtons	16	Luqa	
126	Hurricanes	16	Takali	
185	Hurricanes	16	Hal Far	
249	Hurricanes	16	Takali	
69	Marylands	7	Luqa	Reconnaissance
830 (F.A.A.)	Swordfish	12	Hal Far	Under A.O.C. for certain ops.

Middle East
Orders of Battle
Aug. '39 to Dec. '42.
A.H.B./103/679 A.

At this time, there were no German Air Force units on Sicily.

In April and May, 1941, units of Fliegerkorps X had been switched

- (1) These Beaufighters which had arrived in Malta en route to the Middle East had been retained in order to carry out low-level attacks against military traffic on the Tripoli-Benghazi road. Early in December, they were recalled to Egypt.
- (2) Does not include Fleet Air Arm Swordfish of No. 830 (F.A.A.) Squadron.

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to Crete and the Aegean and, since that time, responsibility for continuing the air offensive against Malta had been left to the Italians. It was not until December, 1941, with the appointment of Kesselring as C.-in-C. South and the transfer of Luftflotte 2 to the Mediterranean, that Luftwaffe units ^{again} began to operate from Sicily against Malta. ~~again~~.

The strength of the Italian Air Force units on Sicily, for October, 1941, is not available, but there is no evidence that their strength fluctuated considerably during this period and the Order of Battle is given for November, 1941.

Italian Air Force Strength on Sicily, November, 1941

<u>Type</u>	<u>Strength</u>	<u>Serviceable</u>
Fighters	180	126
Bombers	122	83
Army Co-op and Navy	72	33
	<u>374</u>	<u>242</u>

A.H.B.6.

From their strategically central position, the R.A.F. bombers based on Malta had a choice of important targets which included the enemy sea convoys, their ports of departure in Europe and arrival in North Africa, together with land targets such as road convoys, dumps, bases and landing grounds. The available force was too small and ill-equipped - the bombers were proving themselves most unsuitable for attacks against well-escorted merchant vessels - one would have thought to make any significant contribution to the land battle. Furthermore, the sea area over which they operated from such a tiny island base was vast. It involved something like two thousand square miles of open sea, in land planes, from which there was but small chance of survival and rescue if one were forced down. Both targets and base required accurate, pin-point navigation and a raid on Benghazi, for instance, necessitated a round trip of some eight hundred miles. Nevertheless, the continuance of the British air and

/naval

S E C R E T

naval base of Malta lying athwart the enemy's lines of communication, was providing one of the chief obstacles to Axis control over the Mediterranean and hegemony over the Middle East.

Arrival of Force K at Malta 21 October.

"The War at Sea"
Vol. II.

Two cruisers and two destroyers, H.M.S. Aurora, Penelope, Lance and Lively arrived at Malta on October 21 to operate under the Vice-Admiral Malta, Vice-Admiral Sir Wilbraham Ford. Force K, as it was termed, was strengthened by two more cruisers and two destroyers, Ajax and Neptune, Kingston and Kimberly on November 29. The important successes scored by Force K against enemy convoys will be referred to later in the narrative.

The C.A.S. Worried by the Heavy Blenheim Losses

The vulnerability of the Blenheims, which constituted one half of Malta's small bomber force and was the only R.A.F. aircraft suitable for daylight attacks on enemy convoys, was causing considerable concern at this time. The C.A.S. wrote to the A.O.C.-in-C., Middle East, on 1 October:

I am becoming rather anxious about the strain that is being imposed on the Blenheims at Malta by their constant use in low attacks on heavily-escorted merchant ships. The trouble is that one sends out a squadron composed of a few real leaders and the rest good followers, but not leaders. Soon the leaders get killed and then there is no-one with the necessary heart to take on what is, after all, an extremely tough job, and so the efficiency of the attack wanes and morale wanes with it. It is no good imagining that all our men are heroes who can stand, indefinitely, the tremendous risks which these attacks involve. I see that in the last three months we have lost eighteen crews out of the comparatively small number that have been operating and frankly I do not think that we can ask one or two units to bear the brunt indefinitely. As you know, we sent the 2 Group Blenheims out because they had learned the trick of getting these ships by low bombing and I think the time has come when the burden must be spread evenly over the whole of your Command

Another point. The feeling among the Blenheim crews in Malta is that, while it is fair to ask them to 'bump-off' a merchant ship which is unescorted or weakly escorted, it is up to the Navy to deal with the very strong A.A. escorts that are now being provided. Is it really impossible under present conditions to put at Malta surface vessels which could occasionally go out and 'beat up' the escorts? Could you not persuade Cunningham to take a hand in this?

S E C R E T

Over the question of the Blenheims, the A.O.C.-in-C. replied that he had a scheme in mind for relieving the Malta squadrons. His own feeling was that the Blenheim attacks against heavily escorted convoys by day were becoming too expensive and these views were shared by the A.O.C. Malta. To his mind, night attacks on the convoys were the answer and the Blenheims should be used for the ships that were rash enough to go without suitable escort.

Correspondence
with the Prime
Minister etc.
A.H.B./IIJ1/183/271(C)

At this time, there was a controversy between the Commanders-in-Chief as to whether the enemy battleships or merchant ships should take precedence as air targets. It was the Commander-in-Chief Mediterranean's view that the battleships should take precedence, whereas Air Marshal Tedder, supported by General Auchinleck, was of the opinion that the immediate objectives should be the cargo vessels and that should the enemy succeed in discharging these ships in Benghazi, the Eighth Army's advance in Libya might be seriously delayed. The view that cargo vessels and not ships of war should remain the primary objective for shipping strikes by aircraft was maintained in the face of opposition from the C.-in-C. Mediterranean, Admiral Cunningham. The controversy was again raised in the disagreement over the R.A.F. handling of air operations at the time of the Breconshire convoy.

Shipping Strikes by Malta-based Aircraft in Support of Operation "Crusader" - October and November, 1941

During the month of October, 1941, Malta-based aircraft, including the Fleet Air Arm, sank eleven enemy ships totalling 24,691 tons. The figures for the month were:-

A.H.B.
~~Enemy~~ List of
enemy merchant
shipping sunk in
the Mediterranean

<u>Navy *</u>	<u>Mine</u>	<u>Aircraft</u>	<u>Shared</u>
29,719	1,527	24,691	4,786 (F.A.A. and Sub.)
<u>Total: 60,723 tons G.R.T.</u>			

/All

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^f
 * All the ^fFigures for the Navy exclude the Fleet Air Arm.

Out of this total, the R.A.F. sank 4,174 tons, the Fleet Air Arm 20,517 tons, with a further 4,786 shared between the Navy (submarine) and the Fleet Air Arm. There was a further 7,744 tons seriously damaged by the Royal Air Force.

Details of the ships sunk, seriously damaged by aircraft or shared during October, 1941 are:-

<u>Date</u>	<u>Name</u>	<u>Flag</u>	<u>Position</u>	<u>Tonnage</u>	<u>Remarks</u>
Oct. 5	<u>Rialto</u>	Italian	33.30 N. 15.50 E.	6,099	F.A.A.
7-8	<u>Reichenfels</u>	German	Tripoli	7,744	Seriously damaged in R.A.F. raids.
8	<u>Paola 2</u> <u>Podesta</u>	Italian	15 miles S.W. of Favignana Sicily.	863	Bombed R.A.F.
11	<u>Casaregis</u>	"	34.00 N. 12.56 E.	6,485	F.A.A.
14	<u>Bainsizza</u>	"	34.18 N. 12.16 E.	7,933	F.A.A.
18	<u>Caterina</u>	"	85 miles from Tripoli.	4,786	F.A.A. and Sub.
23	<u>Avohille</u>	"	W.N.W. of Marittimo	2,415	R.A.F.

There were also six small craft, totalling 896 tons, mostly sunk by the Royal Air Force in air raids on Tripoli on 13 October.

The first successful shipping strike in October was made on the night 4/5 by seven Malta-based ^{Swordfish} ~~Swallowfish~~ of No. 830 Squadron Fleet Air Arm which attacked a convoy of six merchant vessels, escorted by five destroyers, in the Central Mediterranean. As a result of this attack, the 6099-ton Italian merchant ship, Rialto, was sunk. Two nights later, the 7744-ton German ship ^{on Tripoli} Reichenfels was seriously damaged in the course of a raid by

/seven

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S E C R E T

seven Wellingtons of No. 38 Squadron^u ~~on Tripoli~~. This ship was subsequently sunk in June, 1942.

During the night of 10/11 October, a remarkably successful shipping strike was made by a Swordfish of No. 830 Squadron F.A.A. and Wellingtons of No. 38 Squadron on a convoy of four merchant ships, escorted by five destroyers, which had been located some 50 miles to the east of Kuriat Island. Three attacks were made, two by the Swordfish and one by the Wellingtons and the Casaregis of 6,485 tons was sunk outright. A third ship, the Bainsizza of 7,933 tons carrying 3,273 tons of ammunition and M.T. was so badly damaged that she sank three days later.

The 4,786-ton Italian ship Caterina loaded with 2,162 tons of ammunition and M.T. was sunk on the night of 17/18 October when five Swordfish of No. 830 Squadron F.A.A. attacked a convoy of four merchant ships, escorted by five destroyers, to the south of Pantellaria^e. The convoy was attacked simultaneously by submarines and the Caterina was finally assessed as shared between aircraft and submarine.

hist.
A.H.B. ~~Est.~~
of Enemy Shipping
losses in the
Mediterranean
M.E. Tables of *A.H.B.*
Operations IIJ1/31/3
and Squadron O.R.Bs.

The last successful shipping strike of October, 1941 was scored on the 23rd by four Blenheims of No. 107 Squadron which bombed the 2,415-ton S.S. Achille which had been located by a reconnaissance aircraft some fifty miles to the north-west of Marittimo Island. After a Blenheim captained by Sgt. Hopkinson had scored a direct hit on the ship, near the funnel, a large cloud of steam and smoke was seen and the crew abandoned the ship which sank the next day.

As a direct result of these successful air attacks against their convoys, the enemy strengthened their defences and employed stronger and heavier escorts, thus increasing the hazards run by attacking aircraft, particularly the Blenheims.

/This

This coincided with a deterioration in weather conditions which, as will be seen later, seriously hampered air operations from Malta. Thus, from the end of October to 18 November, when "Crusader" was launched, aircraft accounted for only two sinkings. On 5 November, the ^{Zippitelli}~~Anna Speranza~~ of 1,019 tons was sunk by a force of six Blenheims and another small ship of 246 tons, the Maria Brune, was sunk out of the same convoy, in the Gulf of Sirte.

Towards the end of November, there was an improvement as the enemy reverted to their earlier policy of sending small, weakly-escorted convoys across to North Africa which were suitable for attack by the Blenheims.

<u>Date</u>	<u>Name</u>	<u>Flag</u>	<u>Tonnage</u>	<u>Position</u>	<u>Remarks</u>
Nov. 28	<u>Speranza</u>	Italian	445	Benghazi	R.A.F.
28	<u>Berbera</u>	"	2,093	Navarino Bay.	R.A.F.
28	<u>Priaruggia</u>	"	1,196	Benghazi	R.A.F.
30	<u>Capo Faro</u>	"	3,476	96 miles W.S.W. of Strophadia Island.	R.A.F.

Two other small craft, the Nuove Cicillo of 43 tons and the Generale Gerbi of 143 tons were both sunk by the R.A.F. in a raid on Benghazi on 30 November.

On 28 November, a most important success was scored at Navarino when the Italian tanker Berbera of 2,093 tons and accounted a very valuable ship was sunk by a combined shipping strike of four Blenheims of No. 18 and two of No. 107 Squadrons. In spite of intense A.A. gunfire, the Blenheims carried out their attack from mast height, scoring five direct hits on the Berbera which burst into flames. The 3,476-ton Capo Faro was sunk on 30 November by six Blenheims of No. 18 Squadron 96 miles to the west-south-west of Strophadia Island, in the Ionian Sea, when, in the company of another ship, she was being escorted

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by a destroyer. The aircraft scored three hits on the Cape Fare which was left in a sinking condition, the crew having taken to their boats.

The Priaruggia of 1,196 tons was sunk in the course of heavy raids on Benghazi on the night 28/29 November by a combined force of 34 Wellingtons, eight of them based on Malta and 26 from Egypt. Very extensive fires were caused in the port and considerable damage, which included the sinking of the ship.

The final figures for the month of November were:-

<u>Navy</u>	<u>Aircraft</u>
57,064 tons.	8,910 tons.

Total 65,974 tons

The very heavy losses inflicted on the enemy convoys by the Royal Navy during the month was largely due to the presence at Malta of Force "K". Their most outstanding success, when 40,000 tons of enemy merchant shipping was sunk, on 9 November, is referred to in a later Section.

According to enemy figures, 77% of the shipping employed on the North African convey route in November 1941 was sunk. Out of 79,000 tons of cargo despatched, 50,000 tons was lost, while only some 5,000 tons out of 13,500 tons arrived for the German forces. Of the fuel supplies despatched for the Germans, only 1,154 tons arrived or less than 20%. The only way the enemy could make up for these serious losses of freights - the Afrika Korps ~~African Corps~~ were at this time heavily engaged by the Eighth Army in Operation "Crusader" - was to replace cargo vessels with warships. Thus, the Italian Navy was forced to use cruisers, destroyers, auxiliary cruisers and submarines to carry troops, ammunition and fuel to Benghazi and Derna. The total quantity of stores transported by Italian warships to North Africa in the three weeks between 12 November and 3 December amounted to only some 1,200 tons, mostly fuel. Nevertheless, according to this same enemy source, it was largely because of the work of these Italian naval units and the single Italian and German supply

/ships

La Marina
Italiana Nella
Seconda Guerra
Mondiale.

Axis Naval
Policy and
Operations in
the Mediterranean
R.242.

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ships which managed to break the blockade, that Rommel's retreat was successfully accomplished and the Eighth Army's plan to encircle the temporarily immobilised German and Italian tanks was unsuccessful.

What the enemy described as "a major success for British aircraft" occurred in November when Malta-based bombers and torpedo-carrying aircraft forced an important enemy convoy to return to base. Ciano made the following interesting reference in his diary to this abortive attempt:

Count Ciano's
Diary

The convoy which was to cross last night (21/22 November) direct to Tripoli by following the route east of Malta has not succeeded in passing. The boats under the attack of torpedo planes turned back towards Taranto, and at the same time two cruisers, the Trieste

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and the Duke of Abruzzi were struck by torpedoes. Fortunately, they were not sunk. There is no doubt that the task of moving convoy supplies is most difficult and it is that which keeps our hearts in our throats.

The convoy consisted of four large supply ships, escorted by four cruisers and nine destroyers which left Naples bound for North Africa, via Messina, on 20 November. The first sighting was made on 21 November by a Maryland of No.69 Squadron (Sgt. MacDonald), in the vicinity of Messina. As a result, a special Wellington began shadowing the convoy from 21.15 hours and with its help a striking force of four Swordfish and four other naval aircraft carried out an attack from 0049 to 0105 hours on 22 November when the convoy was some 12 miles from Cape Spartivento. In spite of intense and accurate A.A. gunfire from all ships, the aircraft attacked with torpedoes and one of the cruisers was hit. A force of thirteen Malta-based Wellingtons next attacked and dropped approximately twenty tons of bombs, at low and medium altitudes. No direct hits were claimed, but many sticks straddled the ships which scattered in all directions, until the convoy covered an area some ten miles in length.

Another of the cruisers, having been hit by a torpedo from a submarine, the Italian Naval Staff "considered that the convoy no longer possessed the necessary strength to meet the threat of attack by British naval forces from Malta, and so ordered it to turn back." Another force of four Wellingtons despatched to attack the convoy reported "no target" and returned to base.

Destruction of Enemy Convoy by Naval Force "K" Based on Malta, Night 8/9 November.

The temporary check to successful shipping strikes by aircraft which occurred during the first half of November 1941 was more than compensated for by the complete destruction, on 9 November, of an enemy convoy by naval surface ships based on

/Malta

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No.69 Squadron
O.R.B.

Daily Int.
Sum.

A.H.B/IIJ5/113/5/15.

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'The War at Sea'
Vol. II

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Malta. On 12 October, two cruisers, the Aurora and Penelope and two destroyers, the Lance and Lively, under the command of Captain W.G. Agnew, and later known as Force 'K', left Scapa for the Mediterranean and reached Valetta on 21 October to operate under the Vice-Admiral Malta, Vice-Admiral Sir Wilbraham Ford. This movement was well-timed, as early in November the Italian Navy made an attempt to resume the Tripoli convoys which had been completely suspended since 19 October, owing to the severe losses sustained during that month which amounted to 6% destroyed or damaged of all shipping employed on the African convoy route.

On 8 November, a group of seven cargo ships totalling about forty thousand tons gross sailed from Naples, via Messina, for North Africa. That afternoon, a Maryland of No.69 Squadron (Wing Commander Dowland, Pilot Officer Potter and Pilot Officer Gridley), while on a routine reconnaissance of the Cephalonia - Corfu area, sighted at 13.50 hours a convoy some forty miles to the east of Cape Spartivento and travelling in an easterly direction. Force 'K' sailed immediately from Grand Harbour to intercept the convoy. They made contact at 00.40 hours, on 9 November. Seventeen minutes later, the Aurora opened fire and the action soon became general. In bright moonlight and good visibility, they succeeded in sinking all seven cargo ships and two of the escorting destroyers, the Fulmine and Libeccio.

The ships were:

A.H.B. list of
Enemy shipping
losses in the
Mediterranean
~~1939-1943~~

<u>Conte di Misurata</u>	5,014 tons	(tanker)
<u>Maria</u>	6,339	(motor)
<u>Minatitlan</u> (ex Mex.)	7,800	(tanker)
<u>Rina Corrado</u>	5,180	
<u>Duisburg</u> (motor)	7,389	
<u>Sagitta</u>	5,153	
<u>San Marco</u> (ex <u>Muinam</u> - Danish)	3,113	
	<u>39,988</u>	

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Although the engagement lasted for over an hour, on practically the same spot, and was visible from a long distance, the Italian cruisers did not intervene. Hurricanes of No.185

No.185 Squadron
O.R.B.

Squadron escorted Force "K" back to Malta. Formations of aircraft comprising Caproni 135s, escorted by Macchi 200s made four attacks on the British ships, but the attacking aircraft were driven off by the escorting Hurricanes and gunfire from H.M. ships.

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The success of Force "K" had a profound effect on the enemy supply programme for Libya and cruiser escort had to be provided for the convoys until the virtual elimination of Force "K" by mines on the morning of 19 December.

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Operations in
the Mediterranean
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The failure of the Italians to protect the convoy gave rise to widespread criticism of the morale in Italian warships and of the political reliability of the Italian armed forces. The German Admiral in Rome, however, reported that the disaster was rather the result of the inadequate tactical training of the Italian naval forces and the shortcomings of their command. An important result of this success was that the Italians regarded the sea route to Tripoli as blockaded and, for a period, sent supply ships only to Cyrenaica, where the facilities for the unloading were very limited.

Count Ciano's entry in his diary for 9 November is revealing:

7

Ciano's Diary

"Since September 19 we had given up trying to get convoys through to Libya; every attempt had been paid for at a high price, and the losses suffered by our merchant marine had reached such proportions as to discourage any further experiments. To-night we tried it again; Libya needs materials, arms, fuel, more and more every day. And a convoy of seven ships left accompanied by two ten-thousand ton cruisers and ten destroyers, because it was known that at Malta the British had two battleships destined to act as wolves among the sheep. An engagement occurred, the results of which are inexplicable. All, I mean all our ships were sunk, and one or maybe two or three destroyers. The British returned to their ports after having slaughtered us... This morning Mussolini was depressed and indignant. This will undoubtedly have profound repercussions in Italy, Germany and above all in Libya. Under the circumstances, we have no right to complain if Hitler sends Kesselring as Commander in the south."

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It will be recalled how a heavily-escorted convoy was forced to turn back on 21 November, after having been attacked by Fleet Air Arm Swordfish and R.A.F. Wellingtons. This was followed, on the night 24/25 November, by the sinking of two German cargo vessels, the Maritza of 2,910 tons and the Procida of 1,842 tons, by Force "K".

According to an enemy report, the ships were taking "valuable supplies, including petrol, to Benghazi, for the Luftwaffe."

7 The British considered these two supply ships to be so important that two naval forces, Force "B" of the Mediterranean Fleet, consisting of the 7th and 15th Cruiser Squadrons, based on Gibraltar, and Force "K" (Aurora, Penelope, Lance and Lively) based on Malta, both put to sea to intercept the convoy.

The two ships, escorted by two destroyers, were sighted ^{S. W. of Goite} by a Maryland of No.69 Squadron at 07.40 hours on 24 November. After a Blenheim striking force from Malta had failed to locate the convoy, Force "K" made contact and attacked. When the range had closed to 8,000 yards, the enemy destroyers retired, leaving the Maritza and Procida at the mercy of the Penelope, who destroyed both ships within a few minutes. The German Staff reported that the sinking of these two ships made the fuel supply of the Luftwaffe in Africa critical.

Wellington Reinforcements: Transfer of No.104 Squadron to Malta October 1941.

In accordance with Air Ministry's declared policy to step up the bombing of enemy ports, in preparation for Operation "Crusader", the transfer of No.104 Squadron from the United Kingdom to Malta began on 17 October 1941, when six Wellingtons left Stanton Harcourt and arrived early next morning. Two more aircraft arrived at Malta via Gibraltar on the same day and a final detachment of seven arrived on 20 October.

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H.Q.M.E. Table
of Operations.
A.H.B./IIJ/31/3

"The War at Sea"
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Nos. 38 and 104
Squadron O.R.Bs.
and Tables of
Operations.

The six Wellingtons which arrived on 18 October were operational the next day when, together with eleven aircraft of No. 38 Squadron, they carried out an attack on Tripoli. Another heavy attack was made on Naples on the night 21/22 October by a combined force of 24 Wellingtons drawn from Nos. 104 and 38 Squadrons.

After this period of overlap, with the two squadrons operating together, No. 38 Squadron began to move back to Egypt on 25 October. Five Wellingtons arrived at Shallufa on 25 October and a further nine on the following day. (1)

Port Bombing: Use of 4,000-lb Bombs in Attack Against Naples
Night 21/22 October.

H.Q.
Mediterranean
O.R.B.

In October 1941, the Wellingtons of Nos. 38, 40 and 104 Squadrons carried out a total of twenty-eight operations, employing an average of seven aircraft on each operation. The port of Tripoli was attacked thirteen times, Naples six times and raids were carried out against airfields at Mellaha, Elmas, on Sardinia where there was also a seaplane base, and Trapani, Sicily. Altogether nearly 250 tons of bombs were dropped on these targets.

Personal
Signals
D/A.O.C.-in-C.
A.H.B./IIJ1/94/5A.

On 8 October, the Chief of the Air Staff suggested in a signal to the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief, Middle East, that from all reports morale in Italy was so low that a diversion of a proportion of the Wellington effort to Naples might achieve a greater dislocation in German supplies to North Africa than if the weight of attacks on Tripoli were to be increased. He asked Air Marshal Tedder to consider dropping two or three 4,000-lb bombs in the congested dock area of Naples, accompanied by leaflets addressed to the dock workers to the effect that "if they continued to load ships for Africa, they must expect to be bombed

(1) No. 38 Squadron had been detached to Malta from the Middle East since 5 August 1941. No. 104 Squadron were, in turn, transferred to Egypt early in January, 1942 when enemy attacks on Luqa airfield became too intense.

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more and more often with larger and larger bombs."

Air Marshal Tedder agreed with this suggestion. There was, however, some delay and confusion in the execution of this project caused by the fact that the tails for the bombs, which had been classified as "ironmongery" in the U.K. had been loaded on one ship and the bombs, classified as "explosive^s", on another. Although the bombs had arrived at Malta there was no sign of the tails which apparently were on their way via the Cape. However, by improvisation, the tails for the 4,000 lb. bombs were manufactured in Malta.

The attack already mentioned was accordingly made on the Naples dock area on the night of 21/22 October, when 24 Wellingtons (13 of No.103 Squadron and 11 of No.38 Squadron) dropped 34 tons of bombs, including four four-thousand pounders. Pilots reported excellent results. Numerous fires were started which merged into one large conflagration spreading over an area of 400 ^{yards square} ~~square yards~~, with flames rising to one thousand feet. In the course of the raid, twelve thousand leaflets calling on the Neapolitans to refuse to load and sail the ships for the German were also dropped.

H.Q.
Mediterranean
O.R.B.

In November, the Wellington operations were intensified. Aircraft of Nos. 40 and 104 Squadrons between them carried out forty-one operations and dropped 330 tons of bombs. Naples was bombed eight times, Brindisi four, Benghazi three times and Catania, Castel Benito, Palermo, Tripoli and Berka satellite airfield twice. In the course of the month, there were approximately 550 bomber sorties carried out from Malta, mainly against enemy ports and bases, although bad weather intervened about the middle of the month and hampered operations.

The port of Naples was again the primary objective. The torpedo factory received a direct hit from a 4,000-lb. bomb on the /night

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night 31 October/1 November. In the course of raids which took place between 6 and 8 November, 24 tons of bombs were dropped on the dock area, marshalling yards and Capodichino airfield. In spite of bad weather, twenty Wellingtons dropped 23 tons of bombs on Naples on the night of 11/12 November, causing large fires and explosions in the marshalling yards, airframe factory and power station. There was a nuisance raid on the next night by six Wellingtons, but results were obscured by cloud. Attacks were also made by a total of thirty Wellingtons during the nights 18, 19 and 20 November and the 4,000-lb. bombs dropped on the marshalling yards on the night 19/20 November started extensive fires visible for 35 miles.

H.Q. Middle
East Tables
of Operations.
A.H.G./I.L.J.1/31/3.

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Operations in the
Mediterranean.
R.242

Practically the only defence Naples had at this time was the German A.A. guns temporarily awaiting shipment to Libya. Naples, of course, was the chief loading port for the African convoys and, according to enemy sources, the heavy raids caused serious dislocation.

Operations by Blenheims and Hurricanes Against Enemy Road Convoys in North Africa and Airfields in Sicily and Southern Italy, October and November.

H.Q. 1941
Mediterranean
O.R.B.

Including the shipping strikes, Blenheims of Nos. 18 and 107 Squadrons carried out a total of 62 operations during October and November, 1941. They attacked enemy motor transport and barracks in North Africa, between Homs and Buerat, and also industrial targets in Sicily and Southern Italy. The hazards attending these low-level attacks on enemy road and sea convoys by the Blenheims is revealed by the losses sustained by No.107 Squadron during these two months. In the course of a bombing attack against shipping in the Gulf of Sirte, on 11 October, two out of six Blenheims were shot down. On 17 November, whilst carrying out a low-level attack against a road convoy between

No.107 Squadron
O.R.B.

/Zuara

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Zuara and Sirte, a Blenheim hit a tree, seriously damaging the port wing and ailerons so that it had the greatest difficulty in traversing the intervening 350 miles of sea. Two other Blenheims were also damaged in this raid.

On 8 November, a Blenheim was shot down in an attack on a merchant ship, escorted by a destroyer. After an attack on another supply ship on 17 November, one Blenheim returned to base with twenty holes and another with twelve holes. On 24 November, in the course of a most successful attack on an enemy road convoy to the west of Sirte, a petrol lorry was machine-gunned. It exploded with such violence, that the attacking aircraft had the perspex blown in, the fuselage buckled and the wings bent. In spite of this extensive damage which rendered the aircraft useless for further operations, the pilot nevertheless managed to return to base, at Malta, over 300 miles away. No.18 Squadron sustained equally heavy losses and in a single fortnight of November, they lost six crews.

H.Q.
Mediterranean
O.R.B.

During this period, the Hurricane bombers of Nos. 126, 185 and 249 Squadrons made frequent bombing attacks on Comiso airfield, where hits were scored on hangars, living quarters and dispersal areas. Ragusa Vittoria and other railway sidings and stations in Southern Italy were also bombed.

Reconnaissance by No.69 Squadron

The Marylands and P.R.U. Hurricanes of No.69 Squadron covered the Italian convoy routes regularly throughout October and November, 1941. The Sicilian airfields and ports, Tripoli and the airfields in Tripolitania were frequently photographed. Naples, Taranto and Cagliari were also covered.

H.Q.
Mediterranean
O.R.B.

These daily reconnaissances of the enemy convoy routes constituted an essential part of the successes scored by both air and naval forces in their attacks against the enemy sea convoys to North Africa. For instance, it was a Maryland of No.69

/Squadron

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Squadron which first detected the enemy convoy on the afternoon of 8 November and which was annihilated by Force 'K' that night, with the result that forty thousand tons of enemy shipping and war stores were lost to the enemy.

No.69 Squadron
O.R.B.

During October, No.69 Squadron carried out 141 reconnaissances totalling 465 hours of flying time. In November, the number of flying hours by the squadron numbered 524, comprising 137 sorties. Due to the congestion at Luqa, the squadron moved to Takali on 31 October. However, at the end of November, the squadron was forced to return to Luqa owing to the heavy rains which made it difficult to get the reconnaissance aircraft off the ground, as the Takali dispersals were so boggy.

Low Scale of Enemy Air Attacks Against Malta, October and November.

In spite of the enemy's grave losses on the sea convoy route during October and November which was seriously endangering current military operations by the Afrika Korps, enemy air attacks on the island were light, due to the fact that the initiative for maintaining the pressure against the island had been left to the Italian Air Force. In October, day alerts numbered 28 and night alerts 24. In one daylight raid, a fuel dump near the Grand Harbour was set on fire. Apart from this, there was only minor damage to government and civilian property, with but slight casualties.

H.Q.
Mediterranean
O.R.B.

During November, the tempo of enemy air activity increased slightly and there were thirty-five day and forty night alerts, mostly due to fighter and reconnaissance aircraft. None of the bombing raids was heavy and only slight damage was done. The heaviest raid was carried out on the night of 9/10 November,

H.Q. M.E. Table of when 25 enemy aircraft approached the island, but only seven
Operations
A.H.Q./IIJ/31/3. /attacked

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attacked, killing three civilians and causing slight damage to civilian property.

Throughout this period, no German aircraft raided the island. Although the Italians began to intensify their attacks in December, it was not until the return of the Luftwaffe to their Sicilian bases in the third week of the month that the air offensive against Malta began again to assume really serious proportions. The enemy date the beginning of the great 'blitz' on Malta from 21 December and it was to last for four gruelling months.

Malta Publicity

A subject much under discussion in the autumn of 1941 which, in some of its aspects, may be related to the enemy offensive against Malta, was the amount of publicity the island was beginning to receive at home and in the United States. Towards the end of September, the Governor and C.-in-C. Malta sent a message to the War Office asking for guidance on the policy which should be followed on the release of information about the island. Until April, he stated, the policy had been accepted which implied that no publicity should be given to offensive operations carried out from Malta in order to avoid attracting attention from the enemy and so enable the authorities there to improve the island's defences. Then statements were made disclosing the actual types of aircraft operating from the island and there appeared to be a definite policy to publicise offensive operations from Malta. Air Ministry had sent an official press representative to increase R.A.F. publicity. The Admiralty were sending an official photographer and an American press representative had already arrived without prior warning to any one of ^{these} ~~these~~ Services.

The Governor went on to say that the decision to release or restrict information about Malta was obviously one which could

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Malta Part 2.
R.H.B./ID3/673(B)

S E C R E T

C.A.S. Malta
Part 2
A.H.R./ID3/673 (B)

was not be made locally, but it was clear that the policy of emphasising Malta's offensive operations must make these activities well-known to the enemy and would lead, sooner or later, to heavy retaliation. The Service Commanders at Malta were prepared to recognise the need for some publicity, because of its effect on the civil population throughout the Empire and, in particular, on the island. However, from their point of view they would like to carry out the maximum amount of offensive activity from Malta with the minimum of publicity.

On 30 September, the A.O.C.-in-C. signalled Air Ministry that he heartily endorsed the Governor of Malta's views.

07 "Can really see nothing to be gained and much to be lost by publicising base from which these operations taking place or giving any details regarding types of aircraft."

This evoked the comment by the Assistant Chief of Air Staff (General) to the C.A.S., "It is always an astonishment to me that our Commanders should continue under the belief that our newspapers are an important source of military information to the enemy. Nothing has been published in regard to air operations in Malta of which the enemy is not, by other means, perfectly well aware."

The Governor of Malta's telegram was discussed at a Chiefs of Staff Meeting held on 1 October 1941. The C.A.S. expressed the view that, although there might be no harm in publicity concerning offensive operations from Malta, provided that certain safeguards were observed, due regard should be paid to the psychological effect of the challenge to the Germans which this publicity would throw out. The Germans, he said, had shown a tendency to respond to challenges of this nature and there was a danger that the Maltese would in future attribute any heavy attacks on the fortress to the provocation afforded by unnecessary publicity.

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At another meeting of the War Cabinet, Chiefs of Staff Committee held on 3rd October, a report was prepared, in accordance with instructions received from the Prime Minister and, as a result, the following signal was despatched to the Governor, on 5 October.

87 We consider, provided certain safeguards are applied, that there is much to be gained by giving publicity to the spirited offensive being directed from Malta.

Information should not be published which reveals the strength of our forces and reference should not be made to the numbers of aircraft or naval craft employed in operations or to the operational effort sustained over any given period. The arrival of reinforcements, opening up of new aerodromes and the employment of new types of aircraft should also be treated with the greatest secrecy until it is established that such information is known to the enemy.

We are satisfied that if these safeguards are applied the enemy will learn nothing from our propaganda that he cannot easily obtain from sources which are outside our control.

87 We realise that this policy may give rise to the feeling that if Malta is attacked it is because of the publicity given to your operations, but we do not consider that this is so and are agreed that the propaganda value outweighs the security aspect, provided the above safeguards are applied.

The attempt to subdue Malta by means of a concentrated air assault began in December. There is no evidence to suggest, however, that an increase in the publicity given to the British naval and air operations carried out from the fortress had anything to do with this German decision to launch an air offensive against the island, which would appear to have been governed entirely by military considerations.

Factors Leading to Hitler's Decision to Transfer Luftflotte 2 to the Mediterranean.

Enemy losses of shipping and supplies, on the Africa convoy route, from British naval and air attack, had reached a prohibitive figure by the autumn of 1941, as the following figures for the months of September and October reveal.

/Italian

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Italian Shipping Losses on the Libyan Convoy Route

La Marina Italiana Nella Seconda Guerra Mondiale.	<u>Month</u>	<u>Damaged</u>	<u>Sunk</u>
	September	332,000 tons	80,000 tons
	October	237,000	33,000
	Total	569,000	113,000

The total of 113,000 tons sunk was all southbound shipping and was presumably lost with full cargo.

Axis Cargo Losses on the Libyan Convoy Route

<u>For Germans, Italians and Civilians</u>			<u>For the German Forces in Libya</u>	
<u>Month</u>	<u>Despatched</u>	<u>Lost</u>	<u>Despatched</u>	<u>Lost</u>

<u>Month</u>	<u>Despatched</u>	<u>Lost</u>	<u>Despatched</u>	<u>Lost</u>
Sept.	94,115 tons	26,602 tons	34,552 tons	6,829 tons
Oct.	92,449	18,835	24,358	8,635

Although Rommel was trying to build up his forces for the capture of Tobruk, the actual tonnage shipped in October for the German forces in Africa fell to about one half of the September figure. Moreover, the tonnage unloaded for them at Libyan ports in these two months, 43,446 tons, was only approximately one half of the monthly requirements of 40-50,000 tons. As a direct result, twice - the first time in September and again in October, the planned attack on Tobruk had to be postponed because of the shortage of supplies.

In a Memorandum dated 20 October on the Progress of the War, the German Naval Staff described the Mediterranean situation as having "deteriorated to an alarming extent." A few days later, on 24 October, Hitler summoned General von Rintelen, the German General at Italian Armed Forces H.Q., to his Headquarters in East Prussia to report on the air and transport situation in the

/Mediterranean

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The War in the
Mediterranean.
An Appreciation
Prepared by the
Cabinet Office.
R. 258.

Mediterranean. Hitler also wanted to know if the Duce and the Comando Supremo would agree to the employment of a new Fliegerkorps in Sicily, Sardinia and Southern Italy. Von Rintelen was able to assure Hitler that Rome recognised the necessity for strong air cover for the Mediterranean convoys and was prepared to accept German help.

On 29 October, Hitler gave orders for the transfer of Luftflotte 2 H.Q. together with Fliegerkorps II from the Russian front to the Mediterranean. The Luftflotte was put under the command of Field Marshal Kesselring who was given the title of Oberbefehlshaber Sud (Commander-in-Chief South). In his Memoirs, Kesselring tells how:

Memoirs of
F/M Kesselring

"I was given a final briefing by Hitler in the presence of Goering and Jeschonnek. The unfavourable situation of our supply line to North Africa, I was told, must be remedied by the neutralisation of the British sea and air key-point, the island of Malta. When I objected that we ought to make a thorough job of it and occupy Malta, my interruption was brushed aside with the flat statement that there were no forces available for this."

At the same time, Hitler ordered the transfer of nine submarines for operations in the eastern Mediterranean and twelve for the western Mediterranean, together with additional MTBs and minesweepers. At the end of the month, ten E boats and ten motor minesweepers were sent to the Mediterranean via the Rhine and Rhone and eighteen landing craft with a landing capacity of eighty tons, for coastal work, were dismantled and taken by rail to Palermo, where they were reassembled.

dated 2 December, 1941

The Fuehrer Directive No. 38, which appointed Kesselring as C.-in-C. South and ~~took~~ ^{took} down his responsibilities, is so important that it is quoted in full.

Fuehrer Directive No. 38

1. As a foundation for securing and extending our own position in the Mediterranean, and for the creation of a focus of Axis power in the Central Mediterranean, I have come to an agreement with the Duce, and now command that sections of the Luftwaffe now released from the East, to the strength of about one Fliegerkorps and the necessary air defence forces, be transferred to the South Italian and North African area.

/Apart

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Apart from its immediate effect on the conduct of the war in the Mediterranean and North Africa this measure is designed to exert a considerable influence on all further development in the Mediterranean area.

2. I put Field Marshal Kesselring in command of all the forces to be used in this task, at the same time appointing him as C.-in-C., Southern Area.

His tasks are:

To achieve air and sea mastery in the area between Southern Italy and North Africa and thus ensure safe lines of communication with Libya and Cyrenaica; the suppression of Malta is particularly important in this connection.

To co-operate with the German forces operating in North Africa and with the forces of her Allies.

Fuehrer
Conferences on
Naval Affairs
1941.

To paralyse enemy traffic through the Mediterranean and to stop British supplies reaching Tobruk and Malta; this is to be effected by close co-operation with German and Italian naval forces which may be available.

3. The C.-in-C., Southern Area is subordinate to the Duce from whom he will receive instructions for the task as a whole via the Italian Supreme Command. In all matters concerning the Luftwaffe, the C.-in-C. of the Luftwaffe will deal directly with the C.-in-C. Southern Area; if the matter is particularly important the Armed Forces Supreme Command must be informed at the same time.

4. The following are subordinate to the C.-in-C.:

All German Luftwaffe forces operating in the Mediterranean area and North Africa; the air force and anti-aircraft units which have been placed at the C.-in-C.'s disposal for this task by the Italian Wehrmacht.

5. The German naval forces employed in the Central Mediterranean area remain under the command of the C.-in-C. of the Navy.

The C.-in-C. Southern Area is empowered, for the purpose of carrying out tasks assigned to him, to issue orders to the German Admiral with the Italian Naval High Command and if necessary also to Naval Group South (for the Eastern Mediterranean). Operational orders will be given by the Naval authorities in agreement with the C.-in-C., Southern Area.

The wishes of the C.-in-C. Southern Area regarding the manner in which the combined naval forces shall be employed are to be communicated exclusively to the German Admiral with the Italian High Command.

6. The tasks of the Wehrmacht Commander for the South-eastern Area and of the German General at Italian Armed Forces Headquarters remain unaltered.

(signed) ADOLF HITLER

/The

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Weichold:
Axis Naval
Policy in the
Mediterranean.

Rise and Fall
of the German
Air Force.
A.M. Pamphlet
No. 248.

The decision to denude the incomparably important Central Russian front of a whole Luftflotte was one of the major decisions of the war. It reflected the German High Command's resolve to transfer the centre of operations to the Mediterranean, "the decisive area for the future conduct of the war". Having failed in its first attempt to achieve victory in Russia, the German High Command had now decided to devote its utmost strength during 1942 to secure a final victory in the Mediterranean, thus giving access to the Middle East, combined with an all-out offensive in Southern Russia, with the Caucasus as its objective.

When Luftflotte 2 under Field Marshal Kesselring took Fliegerkorps II under General Loerzer with it, from the Russian front, for transfer to the Mediterranean, considerable readjustments were called for. In Russia, Fliegerkorps VIII had to take over the whole of the Central Sector which it had previously shared with Fliegerkorps II. This Central Russian Sector was a very wide one to be covered by a single Fliegerkorps extending, as it did, for some 400 miles to the north and south of Moscow.

In the Mediterranean, Luftflotte 2, with Field Marshal Kesselring as C.-in-C. South, took over responsibility for the whole theatre of operations. Fliegerkorps X was given the more easterly part of the Mediterranean, while Fliegerkorps II had the more westerly area. Fliegerfuehrer Afrika, who had previously been under Fliegerkorps X, now came directly under the command of Luftflotte 2. Fliegerkorps X, which had previously enjoyed the status of a Luftflotte, now reverted to a Fliegerkorps, subordinate to Luftflotte 2.

The G.A.F. in
Maps and
Diagrams
A.P. 3038

The move of Luftflotte 2 to the Mediterranean began in December, 1941. By the third week in January, 1942, an appreciable air fleet of some 250 operational aircraft of

/ Fliegerkorps II

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Fliegerkorps II had arrived in Sicily. Fliegerkorps II's peak strength was attained in the following April when 400 aircraft were based in Sicily .

Axis Naval
Policy and
Operations in
the Mediter-
ranean. R.242.

Field Marshal Kesselring arrived in Rome to take over his new appointment, in advance of his staff, on 28 November 1941. As Oberbefehlshaber Sud (C.-in-C. South), he was to be subordinate to the Duce and to receive his general orders from Commando † 7 Supremo. He was to have under his command a mixed German and Italian Staff, all German Luftwaffe units in the Mediterranean and North Africa and all air force and flak units made available by the Italians. He was empowered to issue directives to the German and Italian naval forces assigned to him.

According to Von Rintelen, although both Mussolini and Cavallero welcome German support, they refused to agree that Kesselring should become responsible for the organisation and protection of the Africa convoys. They regarded the suggestion as an insult to their military honour and would concede only that Kesselring should be allowed to work in close co-operation with the Italian naval and air staffs. Owing to this whittling down of Field Marshal Kesselring's Command, his status was no more than that of an Air Marshal in command of the Luftwaffe forces stationed in the Mediterranean and in North Africa. He had no direct authority over the Africa campaign and he was not responsible for the Africa convoys. Thus, this new Command set up in the Mediterranean by the Axis powers was to prove unrealistic for it ignored the paramount need for a centralised direction of all military operations in that theatre. Not until February 1943, when the enemy position in North Africa was already past redemption, was Italian national pride subordinated to military necessity and a Supreme Commander appointed, in the person of Field Marshal Kesselring. This division of command and responsibility was to bedevil enemy operations in the Mediterranean

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throughout 1942 and was to prove an important factor in the enemy failure at El Alamein, in the summer and autumn of that year.

Field Marshal Kesselring's own comments on the situation in the Mediterranean, although written after the event, are of interest as they do point the importance that Malta had already assumed, by the latter part of 1941, in a theatre of operations in which a combined German and Italian expeditionary force were wholly dependent on sea and airborne supplies and reinforcements.

o/ The salient feature of the military operations at the end of November 1941 he wrote in his Memoirs, "was the inadequacy of our communications system across the Mediterranean. Every day showed more plainly the naval and air supremacy of the British in these waters. The battle of Africa had in fact taken a critical turn for Rommel.....

Meanwhile, Malta had assumed decisive importance as a strategic keypoint, and my primary objective at the beginning was to safeguard our supply lines by smoking out that hornet's nest. Time was required to build up the ground organisation in Sicily, to bring forward our ~~air~~ o/ air formations and the supplies needed to smash Malta's naval and air bases, as well as to secure the co-operation of the Italian air force in our offensive. For the moment, it was impossible to do more than reinforce the air umbrella over the most indispensable convoys.

F/M. Kesselring's
Memoirs.

Needless to say, I lost no time in familiarising myself with my new command.... The result of these informative flights was to confirm my view that the menace to our communications from Malta must be removed and to bring home to me the decisive importance of the Mediterranean to the war. Had I known then that Admiral Raeder, after the abandonment of "Sea Lion", had also seen that the centre of gravity of the war against England lay in the Mediterranean, our joint endeavour might have succeeded in shifting our main effort to this theatre....

We were unable as yet to launch a decisive air attack on Malta, as our air base, Sicily, was not yet ready to take the forces destined for the operation, which in any case had not been assigned. Things had first to be improved by a series of intruder raids on the British island and by strengthening the protection given our convoys..

Over and over again, sometimes with the support of the Comando Supremo, I urged Goering and Hitler to stabilise our position in the Mediterranean by taking Malta. I even persuaded Rommel to back me up. It was not until February 1942, that I succeeded in getting my plan approved. The occasion was an interview at the Fuehrer's G.H.Q. Tempers ran high. Hitler ended the interview by grasping me by

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the arm and telling me, in his Austrian dialect: 'Keep your shirt on, Field Marshal Kesselring, I'm going to do it.' - a typical sidelight on the tension at Headquarters.

Operations "Callboy" and "Pantaloon" (October 16 and November 12 1941).

In October and November, 1941, Malta was reinforced by the flying in of 53 aircraft (34 Hurricanes, 7 Blenheims, 11 Albacores and 1 Swordfish) in two operations involving the carrier Ark Royal and Argus. At the same time, the fighter reinforcement of Malta and British naval strength in the Mediterranean suffered a severe blow by the loss of the aircraft carrier Ark Royal. Indeed, it was not until the following March that carrier-borne aircraft reinforcement of Malta could be resumed.

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The first of these operations, known as "Callboy", was wholly naval in character. It took place on 16 October, when the Ark Royal, escorted by the battleship Rodney, the cruiser Hermione and seven destroyers, sailed from Gibraltar. (1) As a result of this operation, eleven out of twelve Albacores and one out of two Swordfish, which had taken off from the carrier Ark Royal, reached Malta safely.

Operation "Pantaloon" (known by the Navy as Operation "Perpetual") was planned for the transfer of 65 Hurricane Mark IIB and C aircraft, together with pilots of Nos. 242, 258 and 605 Squadrons, in the aircraft carrier Argus and Athens. The ~~carriers~~ ^{the aircraft transport} ships were to proceed to Gibraltar, where the aircraft were to be unloaded, assembled and embarked on the Ark Royal, from which the Hurricanes were to be flown off to Malta from a point in the Mediterranean some 650 miles to the west of the island.

In all, of the 72 aircraft allotted to the operation, 63 arrived at Abbotsinch, one of which crashed, and the remaining

(1) The Rodney had replaced the Nelson which had been damaged during Operation "Halberd" in the preceding month.

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Report on
Operation
"Pantaloon" by
W/Cdr. Royce.
C.S. 11450

62 were loaded, 23 aboard HMS Argus and 39 aboard Athene. The difficulties encountered in the loading of the aircraft on to the carriers were numerous. The Athene was berthed at King George the Fifth dock, Dumbarton, so that it was necessary to transport the dismantled aircraft by road and then by public ferry. Fuselages were transported by towing behind prime movers, the mainplanes, long-range tanks, cannons and so forth being carried on 60-ft low-loaders. The ferry could take only one low-loader or two fuselages, with prime movers, so that the loading was a very slow business. Furthermore, after the Athene had been partially loaded, it was discovered that the deck lashing rings were laid out for Swordfish and Fulmar aircraft and were not suitable for Hurricanes. The ship had therefore to be unloaded to enable further lashing rings to be welded in place.

In the case of H.M.S. Argus, the ship was anchored in mid-stream and the loading could only be completed from James Watt Dock by lighter, the aircraft being transported to the James Watt Dock by road, a distance of 15 miles.

The Athene was unsuitable for a deck cargo of lightly-protected dismantled aircraft, as she shipped large quantities of sea water and spray over her decks, even in a slight sea. This was mainly due to external refuse chutes, on either side of the bow, catching the top of the bow wave and spraying over the decks. In the high winds encountered during the voyage, engine cockpit covers were blown away and had to be replaced. In certain cases, even these replacement covers were lost. As a result, there was gross contamination of the aircraft by sea-water which led to bitter complaints from Malta to Air Ministry about the condition of the aircraft when they eventually arrived at their destination.

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On the arrival of the Argus and Athene at Gibraltar the R.A.F. maintenance crews which had travelled with the aircraft worked day-and-night shifts off-loading the dismantled aircraft from the Argus and Athene and erecting the first batch of 26 on the Ark Royal. Much of this work was carried out on the open quayside and on the deck of the Ark Royal in torrential rain, and the men finished the work in a state of considerable exhaustion. The Argus carried a further eleven Hurricanes, making a total of thirty-seven on the two carriers.

Force "H" consisting of the Malaya, the two carriers Ark Royal and Argus, Hermione and seven destroyers sailed from Gibraltar at 04.00 hours on 10 November. Vice-Admiral Sir James Somerville flew his flag in H.M.S. Malaya. Bad visibility at Gibraltar hampered the Blenheims which were to lead the aircraft from the carriers to their base at Malta and it was not until 10.00 hours on 12 November that the first flight of Blenheims appeared and began to circle the ship. The Ark Royal was immediately turned into wind and the first range of fourteen Hurricanes took off for Malta, making for Hal Far. At 10.55 hours, the second flight of Blenheims appeared and the remaining twelve Hurricanes took off from the Ark Royal. The operation was completed from H.M.S. Argus in two ranges of six and five aircraft. A total of thirty-four Hurricanes and seven Blenheims arrived safely at Malta. One Blenheim was forced to return to Gibraltar, while three Hurricanes (Sgts. Gray, Massey and Jones) landed for some unknown reason in North Africa.

Unhappily, whilst returning to Gibraltar, having successfully completed the first part of her mission, the Ark Royal was torpedoed at 15.41 hours on the afternoon of 13 November. The

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torpedo exploded under the bridge, on the starboard side, and

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caused serious damage. The Ark Royal was taken in tow and had got to within twenty-five miles of Gibraltar when she sank, after a fire had broken out in her port boiler room. Only one man was lost out of her complement of nearly sixteen hundred.

The serious effects of the loss of Ark Royal were felt immediately. The second part of Operation "Pantaloone" which was to have involved the flying off of a further twenty-five Hurricanes had to be cancelled. The Hurricanes were despatched to Takoradi in the Athene in December and none of them reached Malta. Furthermore, the aircraft reinforcement of Malta was drastically curtailed and no further carrier-borne reinforcements were received until 7 March of the following year, when the first Spitfires were flown from the Eagle.

H.Q.
Mediterranean
O.R.B.

The loss of the Ark Royal was followed, on 25 November, by the sinking by a U-boat of the battleship Barham, off the Libyan coast, with the loss of 56 officers and 806 men. (1)

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On December 14, the cruiser Galatea was sunk by a U-boat when only about 30 miles to the west of Alexandria. Five days later, the Malta Force ran into a minefield some 20 miles to the east of Tripoli, when in pursuit of enemy supply ships. ~~(see page)~~ The cruiser Neptune and the destroyer Kandahar were sunk, all the crew of the Neptune being either lost or taken prisoner. In addition, the cruiser Aurora was holed and the Penelope damaged, though not seriously. These did not end the disasters which befell the Mediterranean Fleet at this time. On 19 December, the same day that the Malta Force was put out of action by mines, the Italians carried out their "human-torpedo" attack on Alexandria when the battleships Queen Elizabeth and Valiant were

(1) U.331, under Freherr von Tiesenhausen, which sank the Barham was in turn sunk by aircraft in the Mediterranean on 17 November, 1942.

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seriously damaged and the destroyer Jervis and ^{the} oiler Saigon damaged, by limpet bombs.

These losses, together with events in the Far East - the Japanese launched their attack on Pearl Harbour on 7 December - soon led to a catastrophic decline of British naval power in the Mediterranean, so that control of sea communications there passed almost entirely to the air force.

The Effect of the "Crusader" Operations on the Strategic Situation in the Mediterranean.

Owing to the recurrent supply crises, due to the heavy sinkings on the convoy route to North Africa, Rommel was forced to postpone his projected offensive for the capture of Tobruk in September and again in October. He finally fixed 22 November as the decisive date for the attack.

Rommel flew to Rome on 14 November to discuss the supply question with General Ugo Cavallero, Chief of Staff Armed Forces.

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Mediterranean
R.258.

He complained bitterly that the supplies being shipped to Cyrenaica were not adequate even for the current requirements of the German and Italian forces, since only small ships could be employed. He insisted that, if the attack on Tobruk was to take place as planned, at least one half of the requirements for the next six weeks, amounting to about 90,000 tons, must be sent to Tripoli.

Axis Naval
Policy and
Operations.
R. 242.

As has already been seen, the November sinkings amounted to 77%, the highest the enemy had so far sustained, while the 5,000 tons gross which arrived in Libyan ports for the German forces - only a fraction of requirements - was the lowest. Owing to the naval and air blockade from Malta, no Italian ships had reached Tripoli since 19 October, so that supplies had to pass through Benghazi, where facilities for the

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discharge of cargoes were very limited.

In Operation "Crusader", General Auchinleck planned "not only to defeat the enemy forces in the field, but also to occupy the whole of Libya." This naturally involved the capture of Tobruk. The offensive was launched along the Libyan frontier on the night 17/18 November, only a few days in advance of Rommel's own planned offensive for the capture of Tobruk. Originally, General Auchinleck had hoped to launch the operation on 1 November, but shortage of trained troops and equipment had forced him, in turn, to postpone the date from 1 to 15 November and again from 15 to 17 November.

Auchinleck
Despatch
IIJ1/30.

After a disappointing start, when it appeared likely that Rommel would turn the tables on his attackers and, in a period of acute crisis in the land battle, General Auchinleck was compelled to change the Eighth Army Commander, the offensive (1) soon gained momentum. On 8 December, the enemy began a rapid withdrawal towards Gazala and, on the following day, Tobruk was relieved. Eighth Army armoured cars entered Benghazi on Christmas Eve and by 26 December, all the hill country up to and including Benghazi, with much booty, was in our hands.

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One of the effects of this period of intensive operations was that, with Rommel's extremely mobile method of waging war, the consumption of all kinds of stores was very high. A large part of the enemy's accumulated stocks of supplies was also lost when the area to the east of Tobruk was abandoned. Furthermore, Goering gave orders that the Luftwaffe was to concentrate on the relief of the crisis then developing in North Africa, and a further reduction in the number of German aircraft

(1) Lt. General Sir Allan Cunningham was replaced on 26 November by Major-General N.M. Ritchie.

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A.H.B.6.

used for the protection of convoys was the result. On 23 November, orders were given for the transfer of a group of coastal aircraft from France to Sicily for convoy escort duties, and as a result Unit K Gr 606, equipped with Ju 88s, was transferred to Sicily from the control of Fliegerfuhrer Atlantika.

At the beginning of December, the enemy supply crisis was such that the German Supreme Command gave orders that the most important stores were to be carried by air. This was the beginning of the Luftwaffe system of airlift, mainly by Ju 52 aircraft, which was to play such an important part in enemy operations in North Africa. As the Ju 52 was slow and cumbersome and thus very vulnerable to air attack, the air convoys to North Africa had to be escorted, which further reduced the number of aircraft available for other operations. These airlift operations placed a heavy drain on enemy supplies of aviation spirit which were already very limited.

The occupation of the Cyrenaican "bulge", brief as it was, meant that the strategic situation for the British forces in the Mediterranean was ^{temporarily} much improved. (1) With the occupation of the Martuba-Derna nexus of airfields, sea reconnaissance facilities were improved, the attacks on the enemy shipping lines were extended and made more easy and, above all, it ~~was not~~ ^{was now} possible to afford fighter cover for Malta-bound convoys from the east throughout the whole of their route.

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the Mediterranean
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Of Rommel's defeat in Operation "Crusader" the German Naval Staff wrote, "This heavy reverse ... is the inevitable result of the incompetent handling of convoy defence measures The hesitant and inept efforts of the Italian warships, the presence

(1) Rommel resumed the offensive on 21 January 1942 and quickly advanced to the Gazala line. Benghazi was not re-occupied by British forces for another twelve months.

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of the enemy base of Malta unshaken in the midst of our supply routes and the inadequacy of the measures taken by the Axis Air Forces to keep the supply lines open have resulted in North Africa being practically deprived of all supplies for weeks." The Sinking of the 10,540-ton Petrol Tanker Iridio Mantovani, December 1.

On 2 December 1941, Count Ciano noted in his personal diary:

Ciano's Diary

"Another of our ships has been sunk almost at the entrance to the port of Tripoli. It was the Mantovani loaded with 7,000 tons of petrol. It cannot be denied that the blow is a hard one."

The loss of the Iridio Mantovani came at a time when Rommel was experiencing great difficulties in countering the Eighth Army "Crusader" offensive and there is no doubt that it had a direct effect on the fortunes of that operation.

No.69 Squadron
O.R.B.

The Iridio Mantovani of 10,540 tons and one of the largest enemy tankers to operate in the Mediterranean was first located on the morning of 1 December by a Maryland of No.69 Squadron (Flt.Lt. Williams and Sgts. Doran and Beck) when on an early-morning reconnaissance of the Tunisian coast, 52 miles to the south-west of Lampion Island, near Lampedusa. The tanker was being escorted by a destroyer together with four Cr. 42s and one Cr. 310. Six Blenheims were despatched to attack the convoy, but two of them were forced to return. At 13.05 hours the tanker and her escort were sighted by the remaining Blenheims which carried out mast-high attacks, scoring four direct hits, two of which, however, bounced off the super-structure and dropped into the sea. There was light and heavy A.A. gunfire from both the destroyer and tanker and two of the Blenheims were also attacked by the Cr. 42s, but managed to evade them.

Malta Daily
Intelligence
Summaries.
A.H.B./IIJ5/113/5/15

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Another striking force of four Blenheims, belonging to No.107 Squadron, were despatched to attack the tanker, which was located at 16.50 hours 72 miles due north of Zuara, a port along the coast to the west of Tripoli. They found the tanker already in a sinking condition. She was awash and down by the stern and the crew, who had abandoned her, were pulling away in lifeboats. The escorting destroyer began circling when the aircraft approached. All aircraft carried out attacks from mast-height and one Blenheim (Sgt. Kidby) scored a direct hit amidships.

H.Q. Middle East
Weekly Opsums.
RAHQ 11/31/3.

The abandoned tanker, now little more than a hulk, together with the escorting destroyer, the Avisio Da Mosto, were finally sunk by the cruiser Aurora which was guided to them by an ASV Wellington. Following^a signal from another aircraft, Force ^{"K"} (Aurora, in company with Penelope and Lively) also sank another laden Italian supply ship, the Adriatico, of 1,976 tons, when she was 56 miles to the north of Benghazi. These successes were achieved in spite of the fact that a force of five Italian cruisers and a battleship, accompanied by a number of destroyers, were patrolling the Central Mediterranean at this time with express orders to protect shipping.

Sinking of the Cruisers Barbiano and Giussano by the Royal Navy,
Night 12/13 December.

Whilst surface ships of the Royal Navy were operating from Malta and before the disaster of 19 December, when the Malta Force ran into a mine field, there were a number of important incidents whose interest is primarily naval and yet in which the R.A.F. took a small but nevertheless vital part. An example is the sinking of the two Italian cruisers Barbiano and Giussano on the night 12/13 December. An entry in Ciano's diary for 14 December states:

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✓The usual naval woes. To-night we have lost two five-thousand ton cruisers, the Barbiano and Giussano and also two large ships, the Del Greco and the Filzi, loaded with tanks for Libya. This happened even before the great convoy (accompanied by battleships) ever had put out to sea. What is happening in the Navy is baffling, unless what Somigli says is true, and that is that our General Staffs are possessed by an inferiority complex that paralyses all their activities. The fact is that our naval losses become more serious every day, and I wonder whether the War won't outlast our Navy.

The two Italian cruisers were en route from Palermo to Tripoli carrying stores. The enemy force, which also included two torpedo boats and an "E" boat, heard a special Wellington which happened to be in the vicinity and, fearing a torpedo attack by aircraft, turned back towards their base. This manoeuvre enabled the destroyers Sikh, Legion, Maori and the

Malta Daily Int. Dutch Isaac Sweers, known as Group I and which had only left

Sums.
R.H.B./IJ5/113/5/15 and Gibraltar for Malta on 11 December, to get close in to Cape Bon
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and to launch an attack which was made during the night 12/13 December at very close range. The torpedoes ignited explosives in the cargoes of the Italian cruisers which blew up. In addition to the two cruisers Alberto di Giussano and Alberico da Barbiano both of 5,069 tons and carrying eight 6-inch guns, a torpedo boat, the Alcione, and an "E" boat were sunk. The United States Consul at Tunis reported that the beach was littered with survivors and dead. The special Wellington which inadvertently had helped to make the engagement so outstandingly successful was a surprised spectator of the encounter.

The Breconshire Convoy and Loss of H.M.S. Neptune and Kandahar
19 December.

As has been seen, the air and naval successes against the enemy convoys to North Africa, were offset by a series of heavy naval reverses which altered the balance of sea-power in the

/Mediterranean

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Mediterranean in favour of the Axis powers and, as a result, threw the main burden of the control of sea-communications on the Royal Air Force. The aircraft carrier Ark Royal was sunk on 17 November, the battleship Barham on 25 November, the cruiser Galatea on 14 December while the battleships Queen Elizabeth and Valiant were seriously damaged and put out of action for many months in Alexandria harbour, on 18 December. In addition, by the end of the year, German U-boats had sunk eight merchantmen and two escort vessels, mainly from the Tobruk convoys. During this period, only three out of the twenty-six U-boats operating in the Mediterranean were lost. Apart from the sinking of the Ark Royal, from the point of view of Malta the greatest disaster of all occurred on 19 December, the day after the damaging of the two battleships in Alexandria harbour, when Force X, based on Malta, ran into a minebelt in coastal waters near Tripoli.

Ciano's Diary

On 16 December, 1941, an important enemy convoy of three cargo vessels left Taranto bound for Benghazi and Tripoli. It was of this operation that Ciano wrote despairingly in his diary "All the ships and all the Admirals at sea. May God help us!" As close escort they had a battleship, three light cruisers and ten destroyers, while additional remote escort was provided by three battleships, two heavy cruisers and ten destroyers.

The situation was made particularly complicated for the R.A.F. reconnaissance aircraft by the fact that, at the same time, the Royal Navy had decided to break the blockade of Malta by running through the fast supply ship Breconshire, from Alexandria, carrying fuel for the cruiser squadron then operating from Malta. In addition to the enemy force which would be at sea at this time, the Royal Navy planned to provide this single supply ship with the following three naval forces:

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- 7 (a) the 15th Cruiser Squadron (Force 'Q') under Admiral Vian, comprising three cruisers and eight destroyers, to escort the Breconshire from Alexandria to approximately half-way to Malta and then to return to Alexandria.
- 8 (b) Force 'K' of two cruisers and two destroyers, from Malta, to take over the Breconshire and escort her to Malta.
- 7 (c) Force 'B' of one cruiser and four destroyers, from Malta, to cover the operation to the northward.

The Breconshire, escorted by the 15th Cruiser Squadron, left Alexandria at 21.00 hours on 15 December. From dawn on the 16th, fighter protection was provided by No. 204 Group.

H.Q. Middle East
Table of
Operations
A.H.8/IIJ1/31/3.
Appendix "H".

At 22.00 hours that evening, a signal was circulated from the C.-in-C. Mediterranean to the effect that the enemy fleet might be at sea the following day, 17 December, escorting convoys. From 09.50 hours until 13.00 hours on 17 December, the 15th Cruiser Squadron escorting the Breconshire were shadowed from between two and six enemy aircraft. Twice during the same period, at 10.25 hours and 11.22 hours, a reconnaissance aircraft from Malta notified the presence of enemy naval forces. In the first case, ^{three} ~~one~~ battleships and seven destroyers and in the second three battleships and seven destroyers with, eight miles ahead, two cruisers and three destroyers. This is probably the force which had a slight exchange of fire with C.S. 15 at 17.55 hours on the same day.

After having been shadowed for so long on 17 December, the expected enemy attacks on the 15th Cruiser Squadron materialised at 12.55 hours and continued until 18.00 hours, during which time the Cruiser Squadron and the supply ship they were escorting were attacked by some 25 torpedo bombers and fifty bombers.

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Their tactics included feints to induce change of course, high level and shallow dive-bombing, while twenty-two torpedo bombers dropped torpedoes. However, these attempts were inaccurate and no hits were scored.

At 15.25 hours, a No.201 Group reconnaissance aircraft reported a force of three battleships, two cruisers, ten destroyers and four merchant ships. The 15th Cruiser Squadron were well aware of the presence of enemy forces in the area at this time and at 15.45 hours the C.-in-C. Mediterranean issued instructions that "unless enemy battleships separate or other good reasons exist, do not seek out the battleships, but go for the convoy." Forty minutes later, a reconnaissance aircraft from Malta notified the position of an enemy force consisting of two battleships, two cruisers, twelve destroyers and four merchant ships. This aircraft continued shadowing the enemy force and signalled all changes of course.

At 17.45 hours, the 15th Cruiser Squadron sighted a large number of unknown vessels some fifteen miles distant and ten minutes later, when it was twilight, Admiral Vian's force came under heavy gunfire from the Italian warships. He thereupon sent the Breconshire south, with the destroyers Decoy and Havoc to screen her and then closed to attack the much stronger enemy force. In the meantime, however, the Italian C.-in-C., with the excuse that twilight was "a bad time to commence a surface engagement", had altered course towards the north, together with his own convoy, thus leaving the way to Malta open to the Breconshire. Force "K" was thereupon detached to escort the Breconshire to Malta which she reached safely on 18 December, the 15th Cruiser Squadron returning to Alexandria. Force "K" then left Malta to search for the enemy convoy which had been sighted on the previous day.

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Throughout this time, Malta and Egypt-based reconnaissance aircraft had done their best to shadow the enemy forces then at sea. From the night 16/17 December, all available reconnaissance aircraft on Malta had been placed at the disposal of the Vice-Admiral Malta and all searches carried out were decided on by the Naval ^dauthorities on the island, in conference with the Royal Air Force.

Unfortunately, however, the recently intensified enemy attacks on the Malta air bases, together with the heavy daily commitments, had reduced the serviceability of the Marylands of No.69 Squadron and that of the small detachment of special Wellingtons suitable for night reconnaissance. Such aircraft as were available operated to the full limit of their capacity. The extremely bad weather - the winter of 1941 to 1942 was the worst known on Malta for some forty years - with heavy rain, low cloud and electrical storms reduced drastically the visibility over the sea area and interfered with radio reception and transmission. The situation was also complicated by the fact that three British and two Italian naval forces, comprising some sixty naval vessels, were operating in the Central Mediterranean at the same time and, in these conditions of bad visibility, caused considerable confusion. Furthermore, in the case of the reconnaissance aircraft operating from North Africa, those from Sidi Barrani were at the extreme limit of their range and encountered the same wretched weather conditions which hampered the reconnaissance aircraft from Malta.

The air action against the enemy convoy, agreed by the R.A.F. in co-operation with the Vice-Admiral Malta, was for an

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air strike to be carried out by Albacores, the mining of Tripoli harbour by Wellingtons, a second air strike by Swordfish and an attack on the convoy, as it reached Tripoli, by Wellingtons. The extremely bad weather, with low cloud, rain and severe electrical storms, precluded any attacks by Wellingtons during the night 17/18 December and these conditions persisted throughout the whole of the following day.

During the night 18/19 December, there was considerable air activity from Malta, in spite of the fact that from 23.00 hours until 05.00 hours there were alerts. Luqa airfield was heavily bombed, causing loss and damage to Wellington aircraft lined up ready to take off. This was the airfield from which both bombers and reconnaissance aircraft operated. Hal Far was also machine-gunned and other targets in the island attacked. A special Wellington despatched to locate the convoy made several sightings and dropped flares over enemy ships before being forced to return to base shortly after midnight due to a failure in oil pressure. It was as a result of these sightings that six Albacores were despatched to attack the convoy. There were two attacks on M/Vs of 8,000 tons and two on M/Vs of 2,000 tons. One large and one small M/V appeared to have been hit, but observation was very difficult owing to an effective smoke-screen. The light A.A. gunfire from the ships was very intense and several of the Albacores were holed and one was shot down.

An enemy account stated:

The British air patrols from Malta had closely followed the convoy's course.... The positions of the Italian ships were also plotted during the night and so the attacking forces were directed right on to them. One supply ship was hit by a bomb, but was taken in tow. At the same time, Tripoli was attacked from the air. This and the fear of mines prevented the ships from entering port that night. They were ordered to anchor ten miles east of the harbour, in the shelter of the minefields.

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No.104 Squadron
O.R.B.

The mining of Tripoli harbour was carried out between 22.40 hours and 23.40 hours (night 18/19 December) by Wellington aircraft of No.104 Squadron. Three aircraft dropped bombs and flares in various parts of the town to create a diversion, while four other aircraft dropped their mines, four of them just outside the harbour and two just inside. The enemy account makes it clear that, in spite of the R.A.F.'s ~~not~~ ~~very subtle~~ deceptive measures, they suspected a mining operation. As a result, the ships were kept outside the harbour, in the shelter of a mine field and this led, indirectly, to severe losses to the Malta Force.

H.Q. Middle East
Table of
Operations
A.H.B./IIJ1/31/3.

A strike of five Swordfish was despatched at 22.40 hours to continue the attack on the convoy previously carried out by the Albacores. They searched for the target until 01.00 hours when, due to the high winds which caused a very high level of fuel consumption, they were forced to return to base.

It was now the turn of the Wellingtons. Unhappily, at a time when a force of fourteen Wellingtons, with bombs, was lined up ready to take off from Luqa, the severe enemy air attack already mentioned, developed. Four big craters were made in the runway. One of the Wellingtons was written off by blast. Another caught fire and blew up, with its bombs, causing such damage to the others standing by that the strike had to be cancelled. At this stage, no attempt had been made to attack the convoy with Blenheims. It was a very heavily defended target and heavy losses by the Blenheim squadrons, together with warnings from both Air Ministry and the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief not to risk these vulnerable aircraft against unsuitable objectives, decided the Air Officer Commanding Malta not to use the Blenheims. Experience both at home and in the Middle East had proved that low-flying attacks against

/convoys

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D/A.O.C.-in-C.
Malta
AAB/IIJ1/94/136(A)
Enc. 79A.

convoys in such strength as here, usually resulted in aircraft being shot down before they could drop their bombs. A medium altitude attack by Blenheims was also ruled out by the A.O.C. Malta. The cloud base was from between 2,500 to 3,000 feet and the A.O.C. Malta considered that "the high risk from concentrated A.A. at such a height did not justify the problematical hits which might be obtained by crews inexperienced in medium level attacks."

As has already been mentioned, during the night 18/19 December, the three supply ships anchored 10 miles to the east of Tripoli, in the shelter of minefields. It is to be assumed that any coastal waters in the vicinity of an important supply port such as Tripoli would have been extensively mined. In any case it would have been most unlikely that unescorted M/Vs of such military value as this particular convoy, would have dropped anchor away from the harbour defences without some such protection. The naval Commander's decision to hazard his ships in such dangerous waters is, therefore, not understood. Early the next morning, when moving in to attack the supply ships, the Malta Force became involved in a minefield. The flagship, Neptune, struck two mines, losing all steam and power. She afterwards struck two other mines and eventually capsized and sank, with the loss of all but one of her company. The destroyer Kandahar was also mined when trying to get alongside the Neptune. The Jaguar, in spite of the plight of the other two ships, very gallantly involved herself in the same waters and managed to rescue eight officers and 166 ratings from the Kandahar which had to be sunk by torpedo. A third casualty was the cruiser Aurora which, following in the wake of the Neptune, was ~~also~~ mined and holed, but fortunately she managed to reach Malta, where she was out of action for some weeks. Another cruiser, the Penelope,

/also

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also struck a mine while turning, but was not seriously damaged.

A striking force of Blenheims - three from No.107 Squadron and three from No.18 Squadron - were despatched to attack the convoy ten miles east of Tripoli, later the same day. ⁽¹⁾ However, by the time the striking force of Blenheims had arrived, the

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Squadron O.R.Bs.

ships had moved to the shelter of Tripoli harbour. The Blenheims, in two Vic formations, approached Tripoli flying at sea level. Intense and accurate light and heavy A.A. gunfire was encountered from both shore and ships and two enemy fighters attacked the Blenheims which were forced to return without having dropped their bombs.

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The safe arrival of this convoy, with its valuable cargoes, in Tripoli had a considerable effect on the course of the war in North Africa. "It is clear", says the enemy account, "that the material loss of the supplies carried in the three cargo vessels, at the height of the crisis in North Africa, would have had the gravest consequences for the Axis forces."

On 20 December, the day following the ^{disastrous} ~~grave~~ losses sustained by the Malta Force and the safe arrival of the enemy convoy at their destination, the Commander-in-Chief Mediterranean sent a personal signal to the First Sea Lord in which he expressed severe criticism of the degree of help given to the Royal Navy by the Royal Air Force, during the passage of the Breconshire convoy and the operations in the Central Mediterranean between 16 and 19 December. He complained that, whereas the Breconshire convoy had been effectively shadowed and attacked, R.A.F. reconnaissance had been so weak that he had remained in grave doubt whether there were one or two enemy forces at sea.

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- (1) The account given by the Royal Navy gives the position as twenty miles to the east of Tripoli. The enemy stated that it was ten miles. The R.A.F. also located the ships ten miles to the east of Tripoli.

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He had been uncertain of the position of the enemy convoy until 15.00 hours on 17 December and the Breconshire convoy had been completely surprised by a heavy enemy unit. From leaving harbour, until their return, neither the enemy convoy nor the covering forces had been bombed, although the afternoon of the 18 December had been spent within 200 miles of Malta and, so he alleged, the enemy had two crippled destroyers in tow. The only effective air action was by the Swordfish, which had made an abortive attack on the convoy.

G.A.S. Folder
A.H.B./D3/762(B)

"Sea operations," he wrote, "must be co-ordinated by one command and that command must have adequate air forces for its purpose. It is noted that this principle has to a large extent been accepted in the Western Desert. So long as decisions on selected reconnaissances to be sent out and targets and weight of attack to be launched rests with anyone not directly responsible for sea operations, failures of this sort will occur.

We cannot afford this total weakness in our naval operations. Nor is it right that we should send out our relatively weaker forces into arena and then fail to give them adequate reconnaissance or effective air support.

It will be remembered that before these operations, I pressed for a full air effort against enemy heavy forces. This was not accepted and air was to deal with convoy on way south and attack heavy ships on their return. In the event, no bomber attacks of any sort were made.

I realise fully the high importance of Western Desert commitments but we have allowed the enemy to learn a most dangerous lesson, namely that his heavy force of which he is so nervous can operate for three days with immunity from air attack in central Mediterranean. There may have been a temporary gain in immediate battle, but it is at cost of teaching enemy (? method) by which he can pass his supplies safely into Libya.

I appreciate also that adequate air forces to meet all calls are not available out here, but if this be so then matter becomes one of priority and if sufficient aircraft and adequate control are not provided, we shall lose our undoubted tenuous hold on central Mediterranean and that surely is a matter of prime importance to our land forces.

Damage now inflicted on our battleships in harbour makes this question of control of sea operations of still graver importance and unless vigorous action is taken, we shall find that we can neither support our advanced land forces by sea, nor provide any supply to Malta even by fast ships."

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The Air Officer Commanding Mediterranean replied on 23 December that on 17 and 18 December, only two Marylands (with the possibility of a third) and two special Wellingtons were available and this low serviceability was in spite of every economy in Maryland sorties. In fact, not one had been ordered off unless decided by the daily Naval Air conference at Malta. In discussing the employment of the Marylands and Wellingtons with the Vice-Admiral, Malta, the A.O.C. Malta had begun with the statement that all Marylands and special Wellingtons were at the disposal of the Naval staff. Furthermore, he had asked how the Naval staff at Malta wished them to be used, when he himself would issue orders in accordance with their wishes.

Further criticism of the R.A.F. conduct of operations from Malta was made by Admiral Cunningham, on 11 January, concerning the passage of an Italian convoy from Italy to Tripoli, on 4 and 5 January 1942. It was this which apparently decided the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief to enter into the controversy on 15 January 1942, when he sent a personal signal to the Chief of the Air Staff. He said that the C.-in-C. Mediterranean's personal signal of 19 December to the First Sea Lord reviewing operations in the Mediterranean between 16 and 19 December had not been referred to him or the Air Officer Commanding No.201 Group before despatch and that it omitted important facts regarding these operations and was therefore misleading. He pointed out that all available reconnaissance aircraft had been placed at the disposal of the Naval Staff and operated in accordance with Naval wishes, following discussion between the A.O.C. Malta and the Vice-Admiral Malta. It was considered that the best results were achieved with the number of aircraft available. The fact that there were two enemy forces at sea was clearly established from sighting reports, although the

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more easterly of the two forces was not sighted in subsequent searches. This was understandable, he considered, owing to the state of the weather and the small number of aircraft available for the search.

No sightings had been made by reconnaissance aircraft operating from Libya, as the enemy forces never came within range. Similarly, all light bomber squadrons in Libya were standing by for bombing attack, as soon as it was anticipated that the enemy forces might come within range, which in fact did not happen. Any bombing attack by Wellingtons, on the night 17/18 December was out of the question, owing to low clouds and rain, while attacks by Blenheims were considered inadvisable against such strongly defended targets. He then went on to enumerate the various other steps taken to destroy the convoy by air action from Malta.

The A.O.C.-in-C. stated, in a further signal of the same date, that it was quite incomprehensible how the Breconshire convoy came to be surprised, as it was clear both to the Air Officer Commanding No.201 Group, in Alexandria, and himself, in Cairo, on the morning of 17 December, that the Breconshire was in grave danger of being intercepted, unless a drastic change was made in her movements. When no such change was made, the A.O.C.-in-C. concluded that the C.-in-C. Mediterranean was prepared to take the risk.

No doubt as a result of the inescapable fact that all air action from Malta, during this period, had been planned in the closest co-operation with the Naval Staff there, the next communication from the C.-in-C. Mediterranean to the Admiralty was tantamount to a retraction of his earlier statement.

/s/ I

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"I wish to make it clear," he wrote on 17 January 1942, "that I have no desire to criticise the co-operation afforded by the R.A.F. either here or in Malta on this or the previous occasion on 17 December. To the contrary. The point which needs emphasis is the lack of suitable air forces. Air forces available for reconnaissance from Malta were, on both occasions, placed at the disposal of the Vice-Admiral Malta and reconnaissance was flown as required by him within the limits of forces available. Such errors as were made were in the positioning of (forces?) in the existing situations and were made by the Naval Staff concerned, but they were presented with an almost impossible problem owing to lack of aircraft. A further trouble was that neither myself nor the fleet were informed of this lack."

Perusal of the Operations Record Book of No.69 Squadron - the squadron whose Marylands were responsible for all the day-light searches - does not justify the somewhat apologetic tone adopted by H.Q. Middle East over the reconnaissance effort from Malta. Excluding the searches at night by special Wellingtons, aircraft of No.69 Squadron carried out unbroken reconnaissance over the sea from 08.00 hours to 18.35 hours on 17 December, from 08.35 hours to 18.05 hours on 18 December and, with a break of 1 hour 20 minutes, due to a technical failure, from 08.15 hours to 18.05 hours on 19 December. This gives an average of 9½ hours' reconnaissance on each of the three vital days, from 17 to 19 December.

No.69 Squadron
O.R.B.

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East Table of
Operations
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Day	Dec. 17	Hurricane	Reconnaissance 09.35 to 12.00 hours Sfax and Lampedusa
		Maryland	08.00 to 13.30 hours special search north Greek coast. Sighted Italian fleet.
		Maryland	14.00 to 18.35 hours shadowing Italian battle fleet.
Night	17/18	Special Wellingtons	Shipping searches south Ionian Sea made three sightings of enemy ships between 22.26 hours and 04.45 hours. Reported weather very bad and severe electrical storms encountered.
Day	18	Maryland	08.35 to 12.55 hours special search Ionian Sea.
		Maryland	09.00 to 14.50 hours search south- east of Malta. Sightings made of naval ships.

/Hurricane

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	Hurricane	10.15 to 12.45 hours. Reconnaissance Tripoli.
	Maryland	10.40 to 15.40 hours search south-east of Malta. Four separate sightings made.
	Maryland	13.55 to 18.05 hours. Search for Italian fleet which was located and shadowed. Heavy A.A. gunfire.
Night	18/19	Special Wellingtons Despatched to locate enemy convoy. First sighting made at 21.40 hours. At 00.41 hours aircraft forced to return owing to oil pressure failure.
	19	Maryland 08.15 to 11.05 hours. Search for H.M.S. <u>Neptune</u> off Tripoli at request of Navy.
	19	Maryland 11.05 to 14.15 hours search Libyan coast for possible enemy Naval units which might attack H.M.S. <u>Neptune</u> . Returned with oil leak.
		Maryland Search for British destroyer off Tripoli. Contact made. Destroyer sending S.O.S. and asking for verification of aircraft position.

H.Q. Middle
East Table of
Operations.
A.H.B./IIJ/31/3.

At the time the convoy was being run through to Tripoli, all aircraft available in the Western Desert were fully occupied by the heavy claims of the critical battle being waged at the time. However, this in no way affected the fortunes of the enemy convoy, for at no time during the two days was the convoy within effective striking range from the available airfields in eastern Cyrenaica and Egypt. The nearest point, so far as is known, to which the convoy approached was 360 miles from the El Adem-Tobruk area.

It would appear, therefore, that the enemy success in running this vital convoy through to Tripoli, and which undoubtedly did much towards helping Rommel to retrieve his fortunes in the Desert, was due to the following combination of circumstances:

/(a)

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- (a) Bad weather with low cloud and rain, ^{which} reduced visibility over the sea area considerably throughout the critical days.
- (b) Advent of Luftflotte 2 in the Mediterranean about this time. The bombing of the Malta air bases by the Luftwaffe had an immediate effect on the extent of the offensive air operations which could be carried out from the island. Soon the Wellingtons were to be driven away by the enemy attacks.
- (c) The lack of suitable aircraft - particularly torpedo-carrying ones.
- (d) The confusion due to the fact that both the Royal Navy and the enemy had chosen an identical period of time to run their convoys through.

The Royal Navy, as well as the R.A.F., were vexed by this confusion. The fact that they were escorting the Breconshire served drastically to limit their freedom of action. Even if aerial reconnaissance from Malta had given the 15th Cruiser Squadron all the desired information, it is doubtful whether, with the considerable disparity between the two forces, they could have done more than avoid all contact with the enemy and remove the Breconshire out of harm's way.

The ^{major} ~~major~~ incidents involving the Malta Force were purely a naval responsibility, although the Marylands of No.69 Squadron did what they could, in the way of reconnaissance, to help. These and other grievous naval losses sustained at this time by the Mediterranean Fleet ~~and~~ which were to have such a profound influence on naval strategy in that theatre, undoubtedly did much to cloud the Commander-in-Chief Mediterranean's judgement and precipitated the sharp criticism of the Royal Air Force which, as the preceding narrative of the facts show, was ill-deserved.

"I suggest," wrote the C.A.S. to the First Sea Lord, on 29 January 1942, "that the sending of signals by Admiral Cunningham to the Admiralty, before the matter at issue has been given a thorough and impartial examination on the spot, is apt to cause friction and waste of effort, serves no useful purpose and might, with advantage, be discouraged."

C.A.S. Folder
A.H.D/ID3/762 (B)

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I am sure you realise that we are making every effort to expedite the flow of aircraft and personnel to the Middle East and that we are always ready to meet, as far as possible, the balanced views and recommendations of the Defence Committee.

An investigation by H.Q. Middle East in the part played by the R.A.F. in these operations came to the conclusion that:

- (a) Within the limits set by bad weather and available aircraft, the fullest possible use was made of the air forces operating from Malta and Egypt.
- (b) There should be an increase in the number of long-range reconnaissance and striking force aircraft (especially torpedo-bombers) available in Malta, particularly during such times when the Royal Navy might be unable to provide Naval Forces of sufficient strength to engage and sink such powerful enemy units as were encountered in the operations described above.
- (c) A combined R.N.-R.A.F. Operations Room both at Alexandria and Malta was desirable. Such a liaison might have avoided the confusion over enemy forces which resulted in the surprise interception of the 15th Cruiser Squadron.

Appendix "H" to H.Q.
M.E. Opsums.
A.H.B./IIJ1/31/.

Factors Governing the Low Level of Sinkings of Enemy Ships by Malta-based Aircraft in December, 1941.

In spite of the success scored against the valuable enemy tanker, the Iridio Mantovani, which was awash and abandoned by her crew when sunk by the Royal Navy, the actual sinkings which can be claimed by the Royal Air Force and Fleet Air Arm in the Mediterranean, in the month of December 1941, amounted to only ⁽¹⁾ 2,148 tons. This was the lowest total for the whole of 1941. The reasons for this lack of success justify examination, and prove to be similar to those which obtained at the time of the Breconshire convoy.

on 17 Dec.

- (1) The Kind, an Italian tanker of 1235 tons sunk /The 5 miles off Kelibia by the Fleet Air Arm. The Pietrino (667 tons) & the SECRET Bagnoli of 246 tons.

S E C R E T

The winter of 1941/1942 in the Central Mediterranean area was extremely bad and was the worst which Malta had experienced for some forty years. Throughout December there were periods of heavy rain with extremely bad visibility. For twelve days out of the month, due to low cloud, it was impossible to operate Wellingtons at all. Furthermore, the torrential rains seriously affected the serviceability of the airfields and aircraft became bogged at their dispersal points.

Enemy raids were intensified, with the arrival of Luftflotte 2 in the Mediterranean, and this caused a general drop in aircraft serviceability. In addition, the Blenheim had proved far too vulnerable for attacks against heavily-escorted targets, while the enemy, having learnt their lesson, had increased the strength of both air and naval escorts for their convoys. Events were showing more and more clearly that the aerial torpedo and not the bomb was the most suitable and effective weapon for use in anti-shipping strikes.

The Effect of the Bad Weather on Malta's Airfields.

The effect of the extremely bad weather experienced in December 1941 and, indeed, throughout the winter of 1941/1942 on air operations from Malta justifies some elaboration.

The climate of Malta may be divided into three fairly well-marked seasons.

- (a) The hot, mainly dry summer, extending from May or June until August or September.
- (b) A rainy autumn and winter, extending from October to February or March.
- (c) The springtime of rising temperatures and decreasing rainfall.

From June to August, the skies are usually almost cloudless. In September, there is an appreciable increase of cloud and an

/occasional

J.I.B. 5/8
Western
Mediterranean
Islands.

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occasional fall of thundery rain. In October, disturbances begin to affect the island more frequently, giving occasional thundery rain or thunderstorms on about six days during the month. From October to February, or March - the winter months - the rainfall is appreciable, but often of a thundery character, with intervals of fine weather in between the disturbed conditions.

December is usually the wettest month with 4.3 inches of rain on the average, or about one fifth of the whole year's rainfall, with an appreciable amount of rain falling on thirteen days in the month. Rain, however, falls generally in short sharp bursts and as much as five inches of rain has been known to fall within twenty-four hours. Hail and thunder frequently, ^{accompanied} these heavy showers.

In a single week, from 2 - 7 December 1941, no less than five days produced impossible flying conditions, and attacks on Benghazi, in support of the Eighth Army's Cyrenaican offensive, were prevented. Fifty-seven bomber sorties (thirty-eight medium and nineteen light) were made against all targets during this period. The week 9 - 15 December showed an improvement and the total number of sorties numbered 110 (86 by Wellington and 24 by Blenheims). Impossible weather conditions, combined with the bogging of airfields and the heavy enemy attacks by the Luftwaffe, which were renewed about this time, caused a sharp drop during the week 16 to 23 December, so that during this period there was only a total of seventeen effective bomber sorties, all flown by Wellingtons. It was during this phase of low operational activity by the Malta-based bombers that the Breconshire convoy sailed. During the last week in December, an improvement in conditions enabled the sortie rate to rise to 72 (44 by Wellingtons and 28 by Blenheims).

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The only all-weather airfield on which bombers of the Wellington type could land was Luqa. This was a very serious limitation, particularly as, due to the faulty construction of the runway, the prevailing wind blew across it and sometimes prevented aircraft from taking off. Such an incident occurred on the night 25/26 December, when a force of Wellingtons, briefed for Tripoli, remained grounded. Owing to the lack of an alternative landing ground for the Wellingtons, they had to be recalled when weather conditions at Luqa became unfavourable. Generally speaking, it was difficult to obtain^a/certain weather forecast for more than six hours and sorties were mostly limited to that period.

H.Q. Med. O.R.B.
A.H.B./IIM/A 17/1.

The other two airfields, Ta Kali and Hal Far, were both grass strips with no hard-standings, so that they became waterlogged very quickly and were unserviceable for days at a time. At times, during the very bad winter of 1941/1942, this applied to all three airfields, so that Wellingtons, Blenheims and fighters were all bogged at their standings.

In November, after thirty-five Hurricanes had been flown to Malta, in Operation "Pantaloone", the airstrip at Safi, in the extreme south-eastern part of the island, had to be connected with Hal Far, in order to provide adequate dispersal. The Army could not provide labour, on the plea that they were busy with training, and they could not help with transport. However, by withdrawing all available labour from Luqa, Hal Far and ^{Ta Kali}~~Ta Kali~~, and the use of some two hundred police, together with certain public works and demolition gangs obtained from the Government, this work was completed, but not until the end of January 1942.

These limitations on air operations from Malta, caused by a chronic shortage of labour, equipment, petrol and motor

/transport

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transport hampering the repair and improvement of airfields on the island, serious as they were in December, 1941, were to increase with the intensive bombing and siege conditions of the spring of 1942 and will be referred to later.

Offensive Operations Against Ports and Bases - December.

In spite of these unfavourable conditions, Wellingtons of Nos. 40 and 104 Squadrons between them managed to carry out a total of 25 operations against enemy ports and bases during December. Some two hundred aircraft were engaged in these attacks and a total of three hundred tons of bombs dropped. The most important target selected was Tripoli which was raided eight times, Benghazi was attacked three times, Castel Benito, Naples and Taranto twice and Brindisi and Misurata once.

H.Q. Middle
East Table of
Operations
A.H.B./IIJ1/31/3.

Naples was attacked by a force of twenty Wellingtons on the night of 5/6 December and again by ten Wellingtons on the following night. Direct hits on the arsenal caused a large fire, while two 4,000 lb. bombs set the torpedo factory ablaze.

In the course of an attack by four marauding Blenheims, in the Messina area, on 4 December, bombs were dropped in the railway siding, setting on fire a train of twenty-four tankers, which was completely burnt out. On the same day, a Beaufighter attacked a transport convoy in the Nofilia-Sirte region. A petrol tanker and trailer were set alight, another tanker blew up and other lorries carrying fuel were damaged, so that their cargoes were lost.

Over thirty tons of bombs and incendiaries were dropped on store depots at Tripoli, including two 4,000-lb bombs, by Wellingtons on the night 9/10 December. Continuous explosions occurred in the target area, followed by a number of fires which developed into one large conflagration. On the nights of 10/11, 13/14 and 14/15 December, a total of twenty-six

/Wellingtons

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Wellingtons bombed Benghazi, a direct hit being scored by a 4,000-lb bomb on the Cathedral Mole, causing a series of violent explosions. Mines were also laid in the harbour.

Hurricane bombers, with fighter cover, carried out a very successful raid against Comiso airfield on 12 December when seventy-two 40-lb bombs were dropped on hangars and buildings, causing considerable damage. Swordfish aircraft of the Fleet Air Arm also attacked Castel Benito airfield on the same day. They claimed a direct hit on a fighter which blew up, two others being set on fire and when the aircraft left, a blaze in the hangars was visible for fifty miles. Another attack on Castel Benito by twelve Wellingtons on the night 21/22 December destroyed at least seven aircraft by fire and others were extensively damaged by blast and splinters. Explosions followed by fires also occurred in the hangars and other buildings on the airfield.

Idem and
Squadron
O.R.B.S.

Blenheims of Nos. 17 and 107 Squadrons were active on 17 December when a number of petrol tankers and coaches on the railway between Zuara and Tripoli were destroyed. Five days later, a force of eleven Blenheims attacked a westward-moving convoy of about one hundred and thirty vehicles full of troops and stores, on the road between Sirte and Misurata. Ten lorries and two tankers were completely destroyed and many other vehicles damaged. Casualties were also caused to personnel

The night 23/24 December began a series of night raids on Tripoli which continued until 28/29 December and involved a total of forty-four Wellingtons, eight Albacores and eight Swordfish which, between them dropped approximately one hundred tons of bombs and incendiaries. At the same time mines were also laid in the harbour. The enemy's extensive use of smoke, under favourable weather conditions, on the nights 23/24 and

/24/25

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24/25 December helped to make the results of the bombing difficult to assess and, in some measure, defeated the attacking aircraft. Good results were achieved on the other four night operations, when harbour installations and the railway station, together with shipping in the port, were attacked.

After the loss of Benghazi on 24 December, the enemy was compelled increasingly to use Zuara as a port for unloading supplies and a number of sorties by Blenheim aircraft were directed against the port and shipping there. On 24 December, three Blenheims attacked the harbour. A large schooner, the Pietrino of 667 tons, was bombed and sunk. (1) A Blenheim flew into a mast and crashed in the water while A.A. gunfire from the defences killed the observer in another Blenheim.

Three other attacks were made on the port of Zuara in the course of which a 1,500-ton M.V. was seen to blow up. This claim is not confirmed by ^{enemy records} ~~enemy records~~. Albacores of No.828 Squadron F.A.A. also staged diversionary attacks on Zuara while mines were laid in the harbour.

The Beginning of the Luftwaffe's Second Air Offensive Against Malta, 21 December 1941.

The date attributed by the enemy to the start of their all-out air offensive for the subjugation of Malta by air assault is 21 December 1941. This was the second air offensive Malta had endured, the first having begun in January 1941 with the arrival of the damaged Illustrious at Valetta.

The gradual installation of Luftflotte 2, in Sicily, on the direct instructions of Hitler, was preceded by an intensification of air attacks by the Italians which became noticeable at the beginning of December. From 4 to 8 December, enemy bomber forces operated at night, at a maximum strength of

(1) The Pietrino was later salvaged and towed to Italy where she was sunk in the course of an air attack on Genoa on 23 October 1942.

~~Enemy List.~~
A.H.B. list of
Enemy shipping
sunk in the
Mediterranean.

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26 aircraft. The main damage from a military point of view was at Hal Far where buildings were damaged and a soldier was killed and six others injured. During the second week in December, a further steady increase was noted. Some 67 aircraft were recorded as having attacked the island, the strength of the raids varying from one aircraft to 14.

H.Q. Middle
East Table of
Operations.
A.H.B./IIJ1/31/3.

By the third week in the month, it was plainly indicated to the defenders, from the scale of attack, that the enemy had begun air operations "with the fixed intention of neutralising the air effort from the island." From 16 to 23 December, attacks were made every night and day and sorties amounted to over 200. The bomber formations were usually escorted by fighters and varied in strength from seven to forty aircraft. It was during this period that the night-bombing attack on Luqa grounded the Wellingtons which were standing by ready to attack the enemy convoy to Tripoli, on the night 18/19 December. On 21 December, a force of some 24 bombers was intercepted by Hurricanes and broken up as they approached Malta. Two days later, Hurricanes intercepted an enemy force of 22 Me. 109s. and Ju. 88s attacking Grand Harbour and broke up the attack. Damage during this phase of operations against Malta was mainly confined to civilian property and casualties among the population. There was, however, a certain amount of damage to military objectives, the most outstanding being the raid on Luqa on the night 18/19 December. The first German casualty, in this new phase of enemy operations against the island, occurred on 22 December, when a Ju. 88 was lost over Malta.

A.H.B.6.

A.H.Q. Malta O.A.B.

During the last week of December 1941, the increase in strength, determination and frequency of enemy air attacks on the island was most apparent and more than 520 bomber and fighter sorties were made during the week. Interceptions and

/combats

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combats were a daily and nightly occurrence, during which claims were made of six Ju. 88s and one Me. 109 destroyed for the loss of six Hurricanes (two of which collided in the air).⁽¹⁾

A.H.B.6.

According to enemy records, they lost six Ju. 88s and two fighters during this period. The precise losses from A.A. gunfire are not known.

The effectiveness of these raids increased as the enemy developed the weight and precision of their attacks. In the course of two raids on Grand Harbour, on 24 December, damage was caused to a merchant vessel and one of H.M. ships. However, the first really successful operation by the enemy during this phase was on 26 December, when, in the course of a raid on Luqa, six aircraft were destroyed and five others damaged. Three days later came the heaviest raid when, between 08.00 hours and 17.30 hours and in the course of three raids, a total of ninety enemy aircraft attacked the island. The targets were airfields and H.M. ships. The last raid of the day on Luqa was disastrous and fifteen aircraft were destroyed on the ground.

Daily Int.
Summaries.
A.H.B./IIJ5/113/5/15.

By the end of the month, the strain of this incessant fighting had reduced Malta's fighter strength to less than one squadron. Thus ended the year 1941, with Malta on the defensive, out off from ^{newly} all sources of supply and about to endure one of the most concentrated air assaults of all air history.

/chart 12

(1) No account is taken of R.A.F. claims of enemy aircraft 'probably' destroyed.

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Chapter 12 ^{cap 12}

THE BEGINNING OF THE GREAT AIR ASSAULT

The General Situation in the New Year 1942

The return of the Luftwaffe to Sicily, in strength, towards the end of 1941, soon wrought a noticeable change in the strategic situation in the Mediterranean theatre of operations. For although, at the opening of 1942, the Eighth Army's 'Crusader' offensive appeared to be going from strength to strength, culminating in the withdrawal of the enemy in North Africa behind the Marse Brega defences, there was soon every indication that, with the enemy back on their bases and Malta unable to interrupt the flow of supplies and reinforcements to the Panzer Army, Rommel would soon be in a position to take the offensive again. Conversely, while the Panzer Army was poised like a coiled spring, back on its bases, the Eighth Army were already finding their lines of communication badly stretched and they were experiencing serious administrative difficulties. Soon, with improved supply lines, the Panzer Army were able to forestall the Eighth Army's own projected offensive and force them right out of Cyrenaica; the next major offensive by Rommel on May 26 sent a 'bewildered and baffled' Eighth Army back to El Alamein, to within 70 miles of Alexandria.

A Comparison Between the British Air Strength on Malta and the Luftwaffe Strength on Sicily, January 1942

The Air fleet which the Axis powers had been able to concentrate on Sicily and which was having such ^{an important} ~~a powerful~~ effect on the land-fighting in North Africa, amounted to some 500 aircraft, one half of them German. Malta could dispose of 9½ squadrons, with an I.E. of 140, only three of the squadrons being fighters and these were the obsolescent Hurricanes.

A detailed comparison between the strengths of the Axis air forces on Sicily and the British on Malta, in January 1942 gives the following figures:

/ Luftwaffe

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Luftwaffe on Sicily, 24 January 1942

Type		Strength	Serviceable	Location
Long-range Recce	Ju.88	23	17	Trapani and Gerbini
S.E. Fighters	Me.109F	97	67	Sciacca, Comiso and Gela
Night Fighters	Ju.88	15	11	Catania
T.E. Fighters	Me.110	19	8	Trapani
Bombers	Ju.88	103	60	Catania, Gerbini, Comiso
		<u>257</u>	<u>163</u>	

A.H.B.6

Italian Air Force on Sicily, 22 January 1942

Type		Strength	Serviceable	Location
Fighters	Me.200, Me.202 Cr.25, Cr.42, Re.2000	139	85	Palermo, Castelvetrano, Catania, Comiso, Trapani
Bombers	S.79	40	27	Castelvetrano and Palermo
Army Co-op.	Ro.47, Ca.311	27	15	Palermo
Navy	Cz.501, ² Cr.506	51	32	Augusta and Stagnone
		<u>257</u>	<u>159</u>	

The Italians also had another 90 fighters, 60 bombers and 30 Coastal aircraft, on Sardinia, for use as an anti-shipping force against convoys in the Western Mediterranean and in attacks against shipping.

The Malta Order of Battle, as at 30 January 1942 was:-

Type	Squadron	No. of Squadrons	I.E.	Total I.E.
Medium Bombers (Wellingtons)	No. 40	1	16	16
Light Bombers (Blenheims)	Nos. 18 & 21	2	16	32
Fighters (Hurricanes)	Nos. 126, 185 & 249	3	16	48
G.R. (Maryland, Hurricane and Spitfire)	No. 69 Squadron & 1435 Flight	1½	14	21
Fleet Air Arm (Swordfish & Albacores)	Nos. 828 & 830	<u>2</u> <u>9½</u>	<u>12</u> <u>74</u>	<u>24</u> <u>141</u>

Middle East
Weekly State of
Aircraft in
Middle East
Command ~~WB/2/4~~
A.H.B. / v B/4/1

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At this time, out of a strength of 130 R.A.F. aircraft approximately one third, or 45 aircraft, were serviceable (Cat. A). The figures were:

<u>Type</u>	<u>Cat. A.</u>	<u>Cat. B.</u>	<u>Cat. C.</u>	<u>Total</u>
Hurricane	26	38	19	83
Beaufighters		2		2
Maryland	1	7	2	10
Heinkel IV	7	4	3	14
Wellington	<u>11</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>7</u>	<u>21</u>
	<u>45</u>	<u>54</u>	<u>31</u>	<u>130</u>

About 75% of the Hurricanes were IIBs and armed with 12 machine-guns. The balance were Hurricane IICs, armed with ^{four} 20mm cannon and these were reserved for work with the Night Fighter Unit.

The Weakness of the R.A.F. Fighter Force on Malta - January 1942

Due to the pressure of operations, the strength and serviceability figures quoted above varied considerably throughout the month of January 1942. There is, however, one salient point which must not be lost sight of when considering the fighter defence of Malta. Between Operation 'Pantaloons' on 12 November 1941, when 34 Hurricanes were flown to Malta, to 7 March 1942, when the first consignment of Spitfires (15 in all) were flown off the aircraft carrier Eagle and known as Operation 'Spotter' - during 4 months in all - no S.E. fighter reinforcements reached Malta. This strength figure of 83 Hurricanes of which 26 were serviceable was a wasting asset, as indeed was the whole of Malta's air strength at that time. No new spares were being received and the serviceability of aircraft could only be maintained through a process of 'cannibalisation'. The enemy, on the other hand, were constantly building up their strength on Sicily, as fresh reinforcements were flown in from the mainland.

/ Irrespective

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Irrespective of such variables as strength and service-ability, the one factor that remained constant throughout this period and, indeed, until the arrival of Spitfire reinforcements on 7 March 1942, was the inferiority of the Hurricanes compared with the Me.109F. On 12 December 1941, the A.O.C.-in-C., Middle East, had written to the C.A.S.:

/I feel that since enemy is prepared to throw in his latest types into Mediterranean battles, we will need a proportion of our best here, also./

To which the C.A.S. replied, on 13 December:

/Am speeding up tropicalisation of Spitfires, but don't expose this carrot to units. (1) We cannot I think, be on top of the enemy everywhere, in every respect. He may have advantage of performance, but you have it in respect of numbers, morale and freedom of anxiety from short petrol rations. The last two have been won by the great efforts and success of your Command./

A.O.C.-in-C.
Correspondence
with Prime
Minister,
Secretary of
State etc.
A.H.B./IIJ1/183/271(C)

When tested by the enemy fleet of 100 Me.109Fs, in January 1942, the inherent weakness of Malta's fighter defence soon became apparent. For, in the case of Malta's fighter force, they did not have the advantage, cited by the C.A.S., of either numbers or 'freedom of anxiety from short petrol rations.' The Hurricane, on which Malta depended for its air defence, was outclassed.

/First problem here is fighter defence, the A.O.C. Malta signalled the A.O.C.-in-C., Middle East, in January. /Do not hold tools for the job. Must stop day bombing. 109s always have advantage in height and performance. Hurricanes cannot take on Ju.88s under these conditions without grave risk and always at disadvantage. Spitfire Vs only can make height in time to take on fighters./

Defence of Malta
Part II.
A.H.B./IIJ1/165/129 (B)

-
- (1) It was indeed as well that this 'carrot' was not exposed to the R.A.F. units in the Middle East, as the first consignment was not to arrive for another three months.

/ And

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And the A.O.C. Malta returned to the subject, which was dominating his thought at this time, again in February.

✓ Day 22 Feb. clearly showed inadequacy of our fighter force Am confident if we could shoot down a score, this daylight nonsense would stop. To do this, must have Hurricanes with cannon, as it is distressing to our pilots to see bombers go off carrying so much lead. Must also have Spitfires in adequate numbers for high cover.✓

The visit to Malta by Group Captain Embry, in January 1942 will receive detailed attention later in the narrative. He was the first observer, from outside Middle East Command, who was to bring forcibly to the attention of Air Ministry the complete inadequacy of Malta's fighter defence, at this time. He pointed out bluntly that the Me.109s were 'superior in every respect' to the Hurricanes. When discussing the morale of pilots, he wrote:

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✓ The morale of pilots seems to be high, although the obsolescent Hurricane IIs are having a certain effect on the pilots. I am informed that German fighter pilots often fly in front of our Hurricanes in order to show off the superiority of the Me.109Fs. This is bound to have an increasingly adverse effect on the morale of our pilots. I therefore consider that every possible step should be taken to make Spitfire Vs and Kittyhawks available, with the least delay.✓

An unsigned memorandum 'Notes on Fighter Engagement on 24 January 1942' in the Air Officer Commanding Malta's file "Fighter Operational Policy" states that:

✓ Everyone emphasized the difficulty of keeping adequate watch on fighters with the superior performance of the 109. In general, pilots said that the sky was simply full of 109s travelling at speeds far greater than the Hurricanes and simply all over the place. While taking steps to avoid one lot of 109s, one was probably jumped by another lot.

There is no doubt that the superiority of the 109s over the Hurricanes is having a very disastrous effect on the morale of our fighter pilots. Group Captain Embry's visit did a

/ tremendous

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tremendous lot of good, as now the pilots realise that someone is taking an interest in them and trying to get them better aircraft, but unless these better aircraft are shortly forthcoming, I am rather apprehensive of the result.'

Naval Policy
and Operations
in the Medi-
terranean. P.242.

It is instructive to compare the situation in Malta with that in the United Kingdom, during this period. In December 1941, only 13 enemy aircraft were reported over the United Kingdom. Furthermore, in the first three months of 1942, only 151 daylight enemy sorties were flown over the U.K. and a substantial proportion of these were solely reconnaissance flights. At the height of the Luftwaffe's assault against Malta, between February and April, the number of sorties flown against the island amounted to more than 17,000. Malta's fighter defence consisted of 3 squadrons of Hurricanes (83 aircraft of which 26 were serviceable). Fighter Command disposed of 102 squadrons, comprising 2,395 aircraft of which 58 squadrons or 1,370 aircraft were Spitfires. In squadrons, serviceable, they had 1,478 fighters, 886 of them Spitfires.

The importance of the security of the home base, in the United Kingdom, needs no elaboration. Nevertheless, this grave lack of balance in the Royal Air Force, at a time when the force on Malta was about to be subjected to such a severe ordeal can find no reasonable justification. Between the end of the first German offensive, in May, 1941, and the beginning of the second, towards the end of 1941, little effort would appear to have been made by Air Ministry to review the ^{needs} ~~pass~~ of the island's fighter defence in a realistic manner. The return of the Luftwaffe to Sicily, in strength, and an attempt to neutralise Malta by air assault were certain if enemy operations in North Africa were not to fail for lack of supplies and reinforcements. Yet, during these ~~vital~~ vital months, when the air offensive against Malta had been left to the Italians, no attempt was made to rearm the /island's

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island's three fighter squadrons with aircraft which would be adequate to deal with the enemy threat. Furthermore, tropicalisation of the Spitfire, in anticipation of its being used in the Mediterranean, was inexplicably slow. Events were to prove that it was indeed a policy, as the A.O.C.-in-C. himself said later, 'of too little and too late.'

Arrival of Personnel of Nos. 242 and 605 Squadrons at Malta

The personnel of two fighter squadrons, Nos. 242 and 605, arrived at Malta during January, but without aircraft. They were later absorbed into the other fighter squadrons on the island.

The overseas establishment of No. 605 Squadron was 22 Officers, Squadron O.R.Bs. 3 Warrant Officers and 308 N.C.O.s and airmen. Before leaving the United Kingdom, one third of the squadron's officers (the Commanding Officer and 7 other pilots described as 'the kernel of the squadron') were posted away. In replacement, three pilot officers who had never flown a Hurricane were posted in and four pilot officers who had previously been Sergeant pilots in the squadron, were retained.

The Possibility of an Enemy Attempt to Invade Malta.

It was apparent that Malta needed added protection not only against enemy air assault, but that actual invasion could not be ruled out.

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'I am sure,' the D./C.A.S. wrote to the A.O.C., Malta, on 15 December, 'you must be proving a great thorn in the flesh of the enemy and they must regard you with great bitterness. This is all the more reason why I feel you should be prepared for some attempt by the enemy to liquidate you. We have already sent you several signals urging you to husband your resources for the primary task of the defence of Malta and the interruption of enemy communications with Africa. We shall find it very difficult to provide you with more resources and particularly fighters.'

I hope that if you are attacked in strength that the lessons of Crete have been thoroughly learned and assimilated for the defence of Malta. You are a very strong garrison and I imagine that you have a greater scale of anti-aircraft defences than any other fortress in the world.'

In early January, 1942, the D./C.A.S. prepared a paper for the C.A.S. on the possible implications of the move of

/Luftflotte 2

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Luftflotte 2 to the Mediterranean. He stressed the strategic importance of the island. 'In fact,' he said, 'the enemy's virtual collapse in North Africa, during "Crusader" operations, can be primarily described as due to the interruption of enemy sea communications by naval and air forces based at Malta.' He considered it likely that the enemy would turn for success in the south and that, whether operations were conducted through Spain, Italy or Greece and Turkey, Malta was in every case of the highest strategical significance.

The move of Luftflotte 2 to the Mediterranean was deduced as evidence that the enemy were contemplating an attack on Malta in the near future. It was anticipated that by mid-February there would be 240 S.E. Fighters, 100 T.E. Fighters and 250 Long-Range bombers, all G.A.F., in Italy and that, by March or April there would be as many as 1,200 G.A.F. first-line aircraft in the
(1)
Mediterranean theatre.

For the defence of Malta, there were three fighter squadrons and two lodger squadrons, without ground personnel. The anti-aircraft defences consisted of 112 heavy and 120 light A.A. guns. The operation of fighters from Malta suffered because of the limited number of airfields and the small space available for organising defence in depth. Unless considerably reinforced, Malta's fighter force might be immobilised by a series of heavy air attacks. In fact, the destruction of runways alone might keep the fighters grounded. It seemed to the D./C.A.S. that the defence of Malta against air and parachute attack might devolve largely on the A.A. ground defences and especially the light A.A. defences. He stressed the importance of reviewing immediately the ground and air defences of Malta, so that advantage could be taken of 'what short time may be available to place Malta in a position to withstand a heavy and continuous attack by all arms.'

'Whilst heavy demands are being made on the Middle East,' he concluded, 'in order to send reinforcements to the Far East, there is a danger that we shall overlook the importance of Malta and fail to supply the reserves and reinforcements which should now be sent whilst the

/opportunity

(1) These figures were, of course, a gross over-estimate.

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opportunity remains open to us. We may find ourselves in a position where we are unable to do so at a later date.

Unfortunately, even by that date (January 1942) the opportunity for the air reinforcement of Malta, on any considerable scale, had ~~already~~ begun to slip past. The Luftwaffe's intensive attacks on the island had ~~already~~ started. The D./C.A.S. asked the C.A.S. to bring to the attention of the Chiefs of Staff, who at that time were considering a J.I.C. paper on Malta, the fact that heavy attacks by the Luftwaffe had already begun.

The report by the Joint Intelligence Sub-Committee, on the subject of "An Axis Attack on Malta" had been circulated to the Chiefs of Staff, on 3 January 1942. The J.I.C. view was that the air attack with the object of neutralising the island had already begun and would be progressively intensified. They considered that a combined operation against Malta would be so difficult that the enemy were unlikely to attempt it until they saw that the neutralisation was likely to succeed. In their opinion, there was no indication that all the necessary assault landing craft, parachute troops or gliders had been assembled in the Mediterranean. The necessary force would be:

1 parachute division

1 airborne division or infantry division

at least 2 infantry divisions brought by sea.

The availability of German troops on this scale was subject to events in Russia but could probably be mounted by the beginning of March. On the other hand, Italian formations could be made immediately available.

The substance of the J.I.C. report was submitted by the Chiefs of Staff to the Commanders-in-Chief, Middle East, on 6 January 1942. It was accompanied, on the same day, by a signal to the Governor of Malta, from the Chiefs of Staff, stating

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Papers.
A.H.B./IIJ1/94/183(D)

what was by no means implicit in the J.I.C. Paper that 'it looks to us as though you are next on the list.' It informed the Governor that General Auchinleck was being asked to place at his disposal officers who had taken part in the defence of Crete and that the possibility of sending urgently-needed stores, via Egypt, including supplies of small arms, ammunition and a few 2-pounder anti-tank guns was also being considered.

Six days later, Air Ministry signalled the A.O.C.-in-C., Middle East and the A.O.C. Malta that, in view of the possibility of combined operations against Malta, including heavy airborne landings, everything was to be done to improve the island's airfield defences. All Royal Air Force personnel were to be armed and trained for the land defence of airfields for an average of one hour a day. All those not essential for working on aircraft during an actual attack were to be formed into units to help in beating off the attack at the airfield.

The A.O.C. Malta pointed out, in his reply, that the total strength of his command was less than 4,000 O.R.s. This total included airmen for base personnel offices, command wireless, major overhauls and all repairs to airframes and engines, the stores depots, staffs of Command H.Q. and stations' filter rooms, A.M.E.S.'s and operations rooms. The remaining airmen operated 2 bomber squadrons, 1 recon squadron, 5½ fighter squadrons, fighter Blenheims and other detachments. They also had a heavy programme of transit aircraft. Conditions at Malta were not similar to the U.K. where there was an abundance of men, for example, 2,000 for one station with two bomber squadrons, with separately recruited airmen for defence. At Malta, all airmen and soldiers were fully employed on maintenance and worked 12 hours a day and more. All airmen were being trained in musketry, under arrangements made with the Army four months previously. Training for one hour a day for airmen was quite impossible,

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except at the expense of serviceability.

Air Ministry replied that they appreciated that conditions in Malta were different from those in the United Kingdom and were pleased to note that the A.O.C. Malta was generally content with the organisation and training of personnel.

At the Chiefs of Staff Meeting, held on 12 January, it was decided to ask the C.-in-C., Middle East to send Malta one light A.A. Regiment, one squadron of Valentine tanks and two infantry battalions. The C.-in-C. Middle East's view was, however, that he had reached the 'irreducible minimum' in the Middle East in light A.A. He would be able to spare a squadron of Valentine tanks, but the infantry brigade could only be sent by withdrawing them from a division.

At the very time when these proposals for the reinforcement of Malta's land forces were under discussion, a convoy for Malta was already being loaded at Alexandria. The Governor of Malta's own view was that stores and tanks were much more urgently needed than reinforcements of personnel and asked that they should be given priority.

At the Chiefs of Staff Meeting on 5 January which was held primarily to consider the J.I.C. paper on 'the likelihood, scale and method of an Axis attack on Malta', it is surprising to find that no allusion was made to the needs of the island's fighter defence, although the main lesson of Crete had been that no enemy airborne invasion could have succeeded had the defenders managed to maintain local air superiority.

The Italian Plan for the Invasion of Malta (Operation 'C.3').

The conclusion reached by the Joint Intelligence Sub-Committee in early January, that 'a combined operation against Malta would be so difficult that the enemy were unlikely to attempt it, at least until they had seen that the attempt to neutralise was likely to succeed' was an accurate assessment of the situation. As early as 14 October, 1941, General

/Cavallero

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Cavallero, the 'Comando Supremo', had instructed General Roatta, the Italian Army Commander-in-Chief, to prepare a study on the invasion of Malta, under the codename 'C.3'. It was not, however, until three months later that this preliminary study was sent to Cavallero and the first 'Comando Supremo' Directive on the 'coup de main' Operation 'C.3', for the invasion of Malta, was A.H.B.6 sources. not issued until the following May. By that time, the Luftwaffe forces assembled on Sicily for the air assault on Malta had been diverted to other tasks, predominantly support for Rommel in Operation 'Theseus', the offensive in North Africa which was launched on 26 May, 1942.

Operation 'C.3' is of more than academic interest, as it is the first plan for the invasion of Malta, using a modern force, including an air force. It envisaged a 'coup de main' for the surprise occupation of Malta, for which the following were considered the prerequisites:

- (1) Air and sea supremacy in the Central Mediterranean.
- (2) Continuous blockade of Malta
- (3) Continuous and heavy bombing attacks, aimed at the island's defences, without indicating the area in which the landings were to be attempted.

The 'coup de main' operation was to be carried out within an estimated maximum period of ten days, the sequence being:

- (a) a sea-borne landing by night on the S.E. coast
- (b) Night landings of paratroops to be co-ordinated with the sea landings, their preliminary objective being to occupy the principal airfields.
- (c) Air transport of units, as soon as the airfields had been captured.
- (d) Transport of troops by sea to follow up the initial sea landings to counterbalance the effect of any possible delay in the use of air transport.
- (e) Feint landings by means of M.T.B.s at as many coastal points as possible.

The Plan for the
Invasion of Malta.
A.H.B.6 Trans.
No. VII/47

/The

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The view of the Italian Air Staff was that the capture of Malta was primarily an air operation and that ground and naval operations were of a supporting nature. A total force of not less than 1,000 aircraft would be needed, of which the Italian Air Force would provide the following:

Fighters	3½ Stormi	240 aircraft	
Bombers	5 "	140	"
Torpedo-carriers	2 Gruppi	30	"
Dive-bombers	1 Gruppo	18	"
Assault aircraft (Cr. 42s with glider bombs)	1 "	30	"
Transport aircraft	1 Stormi	120	"
	Total	578	"
		—	

This force would need to be supported by about 500 aircraft from Luftflotte 2.

It was considered that night-landings by paratroops were only possible by moonlight, because of the need for formation-flying, the dropping of troops in different zones and for low-level reconnaissance with crew well-acquainted with the terrain. The ideal plan would be to make the sea and air landings almost simultaneously, the one during the last hours of darkness and the other in the first hours of daylight. As the success of the operation depended largely on the Airborne Divisions, it was planned to concentrate the paratroop descents at three points. These forces would aim at getting possession of the two main airfields, in co-operation with the troops landed by sea.

The operational tasks of the air force were divided up as follows:-

I Preliminary Phase:

- (a) Intense and systematic bombardment of the island. Dive-bombing and machine-gunning attacks were to be concentrated on the defence fortifications, with special emphasis on the .A.A. defences.

/(b)

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- (b) Visual and photographic reconnaissance of the disembarkation zones
- (c) Sea recon over a large area, to ascertain British naval movements.

II Operational Phase Part 1: Paratroop and naval landing
and the formation of beachheads.

- (a) Intensified bomber attacks on the points chosen for the landing of paratroops, with a brief pause prior to the time fixed for the landings. Attacks also to be made on the adjacent areas and on those chosen for the sea landings. Low-level attacks to be carried out against the adjacent zones and any potential source of danger to the air and sea operations.
- (b) Bombardment of the zone N.E. of the Rabat - Zebbug-Tarshin - Marsa Scala line.
- (c) At the same time, the following operations were to take place:
 - (i) Delayed action bombs to be dropped on lines of communication and approach roads to important objectives, such as centres of resistance, forts, pillboxes, etc, so as to create blockages, inflict losses and hinder the movement of personnel.
 - (ii) Incendiary bombs to be dropped on objectives where the effect would be greatest.
 - (iii) Feint attacks co-ordinated with the other operations for the purpose of diverting defences and to undermine morale.
 - (iv) Smoke-screen bombs to be dropped to hamper enemy observations and reaction against the low-flying aircraft and paratroops.

/(v)

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(v) Feint paratroop landings in areas other than those chosen for the actual sea and air landings, so as to confuse the defences as to the true landing zones.

(d) In addition to the above activities, fighter aircraft were to carry out attacks on defence positions, proposed landing areas and airfields and provide cover for the naval forces, air transport and bomber formations, and maintain air superiority.

III Operational Phase Part 2: The main airborne landings after the airfields had been made serviceable.

- (a) Offensive action on 'active' objectives, that is those capable of intervening ~~against the invading~~ against the invading forces.
- (b) Protection of transport aircraft.
- (c) Fighter operations in order to maintain air superiority.

IV Operational Phase Part 3: Air transport of various supplies (food, munitions, etc.).

During all these operational phases, torpedo-bombers were to stand by in order to take off at any moment to engage enemy forces and ships transporting reinforcements and supplies.

The Italian Operation 'O.3' for the invasion of
 ← Malta was later superseded by the German Operation
 ← 'Hercules' which is discussed later in the narrative.
The Embry Report on the Fighter Defence of Malta, January 1942.

(i) The Suggested Re-arming of Malta's Fighter Force.

As has already been mentioned, the first sign that, faced with a renewed threat from the Luftwaffe, a realistic attitude was being taken by Air Ministry over the fighter defence of Malta came with the visit of Group Captain B.E. Embry to the island

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in January 1942. In spite of pleas from the Middle East that the Hurricane^e was inadequate to deal with the superior performance of the Me. 109F, it was not until the Embry report was received that the decision was made by Air Ministry to rearm the Hurricane squadrons with Spitfires.

In this report, Group Captain Embry pointed out that the Hurricane II lacked the necessary performance to deal with the interception problem at Malta. If a Hurricane squadron were scrambled as soon as a warning plot had been received, that is, when the enemy aircraft had crossed the coast of Sicily, the Hurricanes could only reach a height of 15,000 feet by the time the enemy aircraft had crossed the coast of Malta. As the enemy aircraft were usually flying at a height of 20/25,000 feet, they had a big advantage over the Hurricanes which found it impossible to take on the Me. 109s which 'were superior in performance in every respect to the Hurricanes.' Consequently, the Hurricanes could not take on escorted bombers without grave risk to themselves, as top cover could not be provided. In Group Captain Embry's view, the answer to the problem was for three Spitfire V Squadrons to be made available as soon as possible, as they climbed to 25,000 feet in 15 to 20 minutes, enabling them to achieve a height advantage over the Me. 109s.

Group Captain Embry's final recommendation was that Malta's fighter force should consist of three Spitfire and two Kittyhawk squadrons. As neither of these aircraft was suitable for night operations, he suggested that one Hurricane squadron, equipped with Hurricane II Gs (with four 20 m.m. cannon) should be retained for use as a Night Fighter unit.

(ii) Training

Group Captain Embry considered that an immediate improvement in the training of fighter pilots could be brought about by paying more attention to air firing. He affirmed that the key to success

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in air fighting is accurate shooting and this could only be obtained by constant practice in shooting at moving targets in the air. He recommended that two aircraft should be made available for drogue-towing and also equipment for clay-pigeon shooting.⁽¹⁾

(iii) Morale

Group Captain Embry also stated, as has already been mentioned, that although the morale of pilots on Malta was high, the obsolescent Hurricane IIs were having a certain effect on pilots. He considered that every possible step should be taken to make Spitfire Vs and Kittyhawks available with the least delay.

He recommended that, owing to the constant flying over the sea and the living under cramped conditions which affected the outlook of the fighter pilots, personnel should be changed every six months and squadrons changed with the Middle East every two or three months.⁽²⁾

(iv) Operations Room Control

Group Captain Embry considered that stricter control in the Operations Room was necessary. There was far too much talking which affected good control and there were too many spectators present. No-one should be permitted to enter the Operations Room without the permission of a senior officer or the Senior Controller.

He observed that the method of control was not the same as was used in Fighter Command. Pilots were given a running commentary on what was happening, for example, 'Enemy approaching from the North East, at such-and-such a height' or 'Enemy are over a given point'. Group Captain Embry recommended that pilots

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- (1) Group Captain Embry did not suggest how slow-moving, unarmed drogue-towing aircraft could be operated at a time when Malta was being subjected to daily air attack.
 - (2) This transfer of fighter squadrons from the Middle East to Malta and back again would have involved the switching of some 18 squadrons, equivalent to the whole strength of the Desert Air Force.

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should be given definite instructions, for example, 'Enemy in your vicinity Vector 240 Angels 15,000.' He considered that pilots had sufficient to think about and that it had been proved at home that definite instructions produced better results. Moreover, R/T security was compromised. This method of control had not been possible up to that time on Malta, through the lack of Fixer Stations, but a third station would be in use within a few days.

Although Malta's requirements were somewhat different from other theatres of war, Group Captain Embry declared that he preferred to see centralised control by one Controller from the Operations Room. He considered that it was better to have all information passed to a Central Operations Room and to make one man responsible for controlling. He recommended that a really experienced Controller who would improve the room organisation and standard of control should be introduced.

(v) R/T Security.

Group Captain Embry felt that insufficient consideration had been given to R/T security. The broadcasting of information to pilots from the Operations Room, referred to above, could, if picked up by the enemy and made use of, materially affect interceptions. He recommended that a wireless security officer from the Middle East should be sent to Malta to investigate the matter.

Decision to Send Spitfires to Malta, January 1942.

The Embry Report had extensive repercussions at Air Ministry. After discussions between the D/C.A.S., D.O.O. and D.F.Ops. and Group Captain Embry, on the latter's return to the United Kingdom, the general conclusion reached was that the ideal defence of Malta would be:

5 squadrons of Spitfires Vs
1 squadron of Hurricane^{II}s.

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The Spitfire was chosen in preference to the Kittyhawk, as the latter aircraft did not have the necessary ceiling to provide high cover, nor had it the speed of climb necessary for interception in an island where there was so little defence in depth. It was agreed that the Hurricane was outclassed by the Me. 109 and could not be considered for anything save night defence, for which both the Spitfire and the Kittyhawk were unsuitable.

Malta and
Gibraltar
Defences
R.H.G./IIJ5/74

If it were found impossible to provide five squadrons of Spitfires, a proportion of Kittyhawks might be substituted, but it was agreed that there should be a minimum of three squadrons of Spitfires in Malta. The Air Garrison would then be:

- 3 squadrons of Spitfire Vs
- 2 squadrons of Kittyhawks
- 1 squadron of Hurricane II Cs.

The practical implications involved by such radical changes in the fighter defence of Malta were considerable. They entailed:

- (a) The transport to Malta of about 550 men for the additional squadrons, with the addition of some 50 expert personnel for the squadrons which were to be re-equipped.
- (b) The replacement of stocks of Hurricane spares with Kittyhawk and Spitfire spares.
- (c) The provision of spare Spitfire and Kittyhawk engines from the Middle East.

It was pointed out by the D/C.A.S. that it was unlikely that there would be any Spitfire spares in the Middle East, until the end of April, 1942. If Malta were re-equipped with the new types, the island's fighter defence would be dependent on an extremely hazardous supply line. Moreover, a series of technical failures might immobilise the greater part of the island's defence. A wiser course would be to infiltrate Spitfires into the island, superimposing them on the units over and above the

/Hurricane

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Hurricane equipment, which should be maintained until the new types had been proved satisfactory.

"I agree," the C.A.S. wrote to the D/C.A.S. on 6 February, "but we must gamble with the Spitfire being a success i.e. we must lose no opportunity of stocking Malta with the men and material that would be required if the Spitfire proved successful immediately. Please be sure that all concerned realise the importance of this."

It is surprising that it should have been thought necessary to advocate such a cautious policy, as late as February, 1942, with a well-tried aircraft like the Spitfire. Having reached a decision to introduce the Spitfire into Malta, the basic problem was how to get them there in sufficient numbers.

Enemy Air Operations Against Malta January, 1942.

In the meantime, the enemy's plan to neutralise Malta by air attack was beginning to get into its stride. According to Kesselring, the order given to Luftflotte 2 for the air assault on Malta were:

- (1) Eliminate the British fighters by a surprise attack or, at least, reduce them to such an extent that they could no longer be a serious menace to subsequent bomber raids.
- (2) British fighters were to be engaged in the air and the three airfields were to be attacked in order to ground all aircraft by destroying or damaging the aircraft and making the airfields at least temporarily unserviceable.
- (3) Anti-aircraft defences were to be neutralised.
- (4) Subsequent bomber attacks were to:
 - (a) Augment the effect of the earlier attacks on the airfields and ground staffs until these were finally eliminated.
 - (b) Make the dispersal areas and shelters on the airfields unusable.
 - (c) Destroy the harbour installations, including as far as possible shipping, but at the same time sparing all municipal installations.

/(a)

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Mediterranean
Part I by Field
Marshal
Kesselring
A.H.B. 6 Trans.
No. VII/106.

- (d) The daylight attacks were to be carried out uninterrupted and in such great concentration, with such strong fighter cover, that the British fighters would be kept away from the bomber forces and pursued until they had been finally wiped out.
- (e) At night-time, continuous nuisance raids by single aircraft were to impede clearance and repair work. In addition, in due course, they were to destroy the few British supply ships entering the port, by dive-bombing attacks and by dropping mines in the harbour entrance.

During the month of January 1942, attacks by enemy aircraft on Malta caused 258 alerts, 157 by day and 101 by night. According to R.A.F. estimates 1160 enemy aircraft were involved in these attacks and actually crossed the coast of Malta, 990 by day and 170 by night. The enemy figure for the number of sorties flown against the island was 1973.⁽¹⁾ The largest number of enemy aircraft to attack Malta was 114, on 4 January, but the most destructive series of raids was on 19 January when a total of 93 enemy aircraft attacked the island. The primary objective was the airfields. Out of 64 daylight bombing raids, 36 were against airfields. At night, bombs were dropped on land during 54 raids and there were 17 attacks on airfields.

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The Malta
Situation.
A.H.B. 6 Trans.
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At the beginning of the month, Luqa was the main target, but towards the end of January, the majority of the attacks ^{Went} ~~had been~~ switched to Hal Far. This was in accordance with the enemy plan to neutralise the island's fighter defence.

The average proportion of fighters to bombers in these raids was three to one, although at times it was as high as seven or nine to one. In ten raids, thirty or more aircraft took part

(1) Comprising 591 bomber, 1,145 fighter and 237 recon sorties.

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A.A.H.Q. Med.
O.R.B. IIM/A17/1.
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and the heaviest, by over 70 aircraft was on a convoy. A feature of these January attacks was the number of raiders which appeared off the island, both by day and night, and, without pressing home their attacks against their objectives, dropped their bombs in the sea. Sometimes, out of five alerts, as many as four would prove abortive in this way.

In spite of the reluctance of many enemy pilots to cross the coast, due in large measure to the lethal appearance of the A.A. barrage as they approached the island, when attacks were pressed home, they were very destructive. The damage to airfield buildings and the airfields themselves was extensive and a considerable number of aircraft were destroyed or damaged on the ground. Out of a total of 6 aircraft destroyed and 54 damaged, two of the destroyed aircraft and 42 of the damaged ones were Hurricanes. As the island's strength in Hurricanes was in the region of 80 at this time, it follows that about one half of Malta's fighter force suffered in this way in a single month, the majority (6 destroyed and 38 damaged) being at Hal Far.

Hal Far and
Ta Kali O.R.Bs.

R.A.F. Fighter Activity January, 1942

The adverse weather conditions of December, 1941 were continued into the New Year. Owing to the heavy rains and the bombing, the fighter airfields were unserviceable for days at a time, as aircraft were unable to take off from the waterlogged surfaces. The bombing attacks which left behind extensive cratering of the runway and dispersal areas also affected serviceability of aircraft to such an extent that, at times, all fighters were grounded.

A.H.Q. Med.
O.R.B.

After initial difficulties with the Army authorities on the island, mainly concerned with a policy decision as to whether the soldiers should be used for work on the maintenance of airfields, at the expense of military training, a very high level of co-operation was obtained and 'invaluable assistance' was rendered by the provision of as many as 2,500 men for work on the airfields. 'We would long have been out of business', the A.O.C. Malta wrote,

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DO File IIJ5/113/
9/5. / R.H.B.

'had it not been for the Army'. It was almost impossible to get a civilian labour force for work on the airfields at this time. Civilian contractors engaged on building deep shelters for the population were able to outbid the Services with inflated wages. There was no system of conscription of labour and, as a consequence, nearly all the work on the airfields was being done by Service personnel. ~~[The A.O.C. complained of 'shelteritis' among the R.A.F. which held up work and he contrasted this with the conduct of the Army personnel working on the airfields as an example of good discipline.]~~ The shortage of petrol was so acute that all R.A.F. personnel living within three miles of their station had to walk to work. This caused not only hardship to the men, in the inclement weather, but wasted many valuable man-hours. In spite of these difficulties, however, the existing dispersal tracks were gradually being improved and additional ones, together with new taxi-ing tracks, were being constructed, so that aircraft could be handled much more easily.

Malta O.R.B.

In the course of air combat during the month of January, the R.A.F. on Malta claimed 1 Ju. 88 shot down for the loss of 8 Hurricanes (5 pilots safe). A further 3 Ju. 88s and 2 Me. 109s were claimed by A.A.

The actual operational losses by the Luftwaffe units, based on Sicily, during January amounted to 23 aircraft (13 Ju. 88s, 9 Me. 109Fs and 1 Me. 110). Of these, 7 aircraft (5 Ju. 88s, 1 Me. 109F and 1 Me. 110) were lost over Malta. Two Ju. 88s and 1 Me. 109 were shot down by fighters (1 Ju. 88 by night-fighter), 2 Ju. 88s and 1 Me. 109 were lost "due to causes unknown" and 1 Ju. 88 was noted as having been probably shot down by A.A. gunfire. The balance were annotated as 'not due to enemy action' or, in one case, 'probably shot down by own fighters.' The losses sustained by the Italians over Malta are not known.

A serious incident occurred on 25 January when 7 Hurricanes were shot down for 'no claims'. At 10.25 hours, in fine weather

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and Daily Int.
Sums.

with high, 2/10 cloud and visibility extending for 10 - 15 miles, 22 Hurricanes were scrambled, 7 of No. 185 Squadron, 6 of No. 242 Squadron, 5 of No. 126 Squadron and 4 of No. 249 Squadron. Three of the Hurricanes returned early due to mechanical trouble and an attempt was made to vector the remainder on to enemy aircraft, when they were jumped by Me. 109s and seven of the Hurricanes were shot down. Four of the pilots baled out (2 of No. 126, 1 of No. 242 and 1 of No. 185 Squadrons), two belly-landed (1 of No. 126 and 1 of No. 242 Squadron) and one Hurricane was shot down into the sea and the pilot was killed. This engagement was a severe blow to Malta's fighter defence, as in it they lost approximately one quarter of their serviceable fighter aircraft.

Anti-Shipping Strikes January 1942.

A combination of adverse circumstances caused a severe drop in the number of shipping strikes which it was possible to make from Malta, in the New Year. The ^{bad} ~~adverse~~ weather with torrential rain, high wind and severe electrical storms continued until well into February. The water-logging of the fighter airfields forced the A.O.C. to divert the fighters to Luqa, the only all-weather airfield, which in turn became over-crowded, thus affecting operations. The bombers themselves were frequently bogged down at their dispersal points and the strong cross-winds at times prevented them from taking off.

Any deterioration in weather conditions meant that all bombers had to be recalled to their bases, and as it was impossible to obtain weather forecasts for more than six hours in advance, sorties had to be limited to this duration. The airfields were constantly in need of repair, due to the extensive bombing, and for this there was inadequate equipment, labour and transport. The pressure of operations, together with the bombing reduced serviceability and by the end of the month, the serious decision was taken to transfer all Wellingtons from Malta to the Middle East.

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The Royal Air Force on Malta did not sink any enemy ships during January. The month's totals were:

<u>Navy</u>	<u>Air</u>	<u>Total</u>
8 ships 22,036	2 ships 18,839	40,875 tons

The enemy shipping losses from air attack, during January 1942, were:

	<u>Date</u>	<u>Ship</u>	<u>Flag</u>	<u>Tonnage</u>	<u>Position & Remarks</u>
Enemy Shipping Losses in the Mediterranean. A.H.B.	Jan. 7	<u>Perla</u>	Italian	5,741 tons	By F.A.A. Returning from Tripoli. 36.26N 11.42E.
	23	<u>Victoria</u>	"	13,098	R.A.F. and By F.A.A. 33.30N and 17.40E.

In January, the enemy were making great efforts to transport supplies to North Africa for the support of Rommel's offensive which began on 21 January. In addition to the air attacks on Malta, with the primary object of neutralising that island as a base for offensive naval and air operations, the enemy considerably strengthened the naval escort to convoys and twice during the month convoys set forth with heavy forces to support them.

The first of these enemy fleet movements took place early in January, when a reconnaissance aircraft from Malta sighted one battleship, three cruisers and eight destroyers, at 17.50 hours on 4 January, between Sicily and Greece. As a result, submarines were posted to intercept the enemy fleet and the Unique scored a possible hit on a battleship. At 11.35 hours on the same day, a reconnaissance aircraft over Tripoli saw a convoy of 9 large M/Vs of between 8/10,000 tons entering the harbour, escorted by destroyers. In support of this large convoy, the enemy made a series of three heavy raids, comprising 116 aircraft, on Malta airfields, mainly Luqa, and a further 17 aircraft carried out attacks during the night 4/5 January. Unfortunately, in addition to this heavy bombing, weather was bad and the offensive air effort from Malta was concentrated on the bombing of Castel Vetrano airfield, in Sicily. This was an

/Italian

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Italian-occupied airfield which was of insignificant importance compared with the convoy which was missed entirely. Undoubtedly it was the safe arrival of this convoy which made possible Rommel's drive from Marsa Brega, on 21 January, which was to alter the whole strategic position in the Mediterranean.

H.Q. Middle
East Opsums

The first of the successful shipping strikes by Malta-based aircraft occurred on the night 6/7 January, when an Albacore of No. 828 Squadron F.A.A., torpedoed and sank the 5,741-ton Italian ship Perla, some 45 miles to the north-west of Muriat Island. The Perla was unfortunately unladen at the time and on the return journey to Tripoli.

Ciano's
Diary

On 24 January, Count Ciano noted in his diary that the "Victoria the pearl of our merchant fleet" had been sunk. The motor liner Victoria (13,098 tons) left Taranto at 17.00 hours on 22 January escorted by the battleship Duilio and four destroyers. She had 1,455 troops on board. She was first sighted by a Special Wellington from Malta in the early hours of 23 January. In the course of a special search of the south Ionian Sea, a Maryland of No. 69 Squadron (Sergeants McDonald, Hall and Cameron) located the Victoria, in company with three other merchant vessels and a strong naval escort. As a result of these sightings, a series of attacks were made on the convoy throughout 23 January by aircraft from Malta and also Cyrenaica, where a force of Blenheims from Nos. 11, 14 and 55 Squadrons, Albacores from No. 826 Squadron and three Beauforts of No. 39 Squadron were assembled at Berca Satellite (Benghazi), which had been recently captured by the Eighth Army. The Beauforts of No. 39 Squadron attacked at 17.30 hours. It was described in the Squadron War Diary as the "baptism of the Squadron to torpedo attack", and was surprisingly successful.

A.H.Q. Malta
D.I.Ss.
A.H.B./IJJ/113/5/13

No. 39 Sqn
and information
by
Admiralty
Historical
Section

According to the enemy report the Aosta sighted hostile aircraft at 17.25 hours. Intense anti-aircraft gunfire from all ships forced the aircraft to launch their torpedoes "at a great distance" but No. 39 Squadron say "1,500 yards". Shortly afterwards the destroyer Vivaldi

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saw two torpedo tracks and ordered the convoy to turn 90° to starboard. While this manoeuvre was being completed, the Victoria sustained a torpedo hit in the starboard quarter. It was about this time that a Swordfish of No. 830 Fleet Air Arm Squadron from Malta made their unsuccessful attack on the convoy and returned to base to refuel and attack again later.

In the meantime, Albacores of No. 826 Squadron from Cyrenaica attacked about 18.40 hours and reported a hit on the Victoria. In point of fact, the Albacores scored two more hits and the Victoria sank 30 minutes later. The accompanying destroyers managed to rescue many survivors but 391 of those on board were lost. The sinking of this important merchant vessel, one of the ^{biggest} ~~largest~~ sunk in the Mediterranean during the war, was thus shared between No. 39 Squadron Beauforts and Albacores of No. 826 Squadron Fleet Air Arm.

More attacks were ^{made} ~~launched~~ on the convoy by Wellingtons of No. 156 Squadron and Fleet Air Arm Swordfish of No. 830 Squadron from Malta which launched their second attack at 01.35 hours on 24 January. The Wellingtons were unsuccessful but the Swordfish claimed two torpedo hits on the Victoria. As a result of this attack Lieut.-Commander Hopkins, C.O. of No. 830 Squadron Fleet Air Arm, was strongly commended by the C.-in-C. Mediterranean for taking on the search in very bad weather, low cloud and rain and outside the safe endurance of his aircraft. He was awarded the D.S.O. It is now known, however, from enemy documents that the Victoria had already foundered several hours before this attack was launched, the confusion being undoubtedly due to the conditions of very bad visibility ruling at the time. No other enemy ship was reported as having been sunk out of this convoy, but there is always the likelihood that one of them was hit and severely damaged as a result of the Fleet Air Arm attack.

/A third

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Shipping in
the Medi-
terranean.

A third ship, the Giovanni Battista of 5,628 tons which was not claimed as a 'sinking' was seriously damaged on 30 January, in the course of an attack by four Fleet Air Arm Swordfish, from Malta. The convoy, which had been located by a Special Wellington, was taken by surprise and two hits with torpedoes were registered. When last seen, the Giovanni Battista was stationary, listing to starboard and down by the stern, with smoke issuing from below decks. She was eventually beached two miles to the west of Ras Jajura. After a chequered career, during which she was used as a blockship at Tripoli by the Germans, she was salvaged by the British and made a prize.

Other Offensive Air Operations from Malta

H.Q. Med.
O.R.B.

The bad weather, overcrowding of airfields and the enemy air attacks, which had severely curtailed Malta's shipping strikes so that, according to a German report, their ships were 'able to proceed, on the west route, along the Tunisian coast, almost without interference', also had a serious effect on all other offensive air operations from Malta. Wellingtons of No. 40 Squadron carried out a total of 26 operations involving 112 sorties, during the month, in the course of which 152 tons of bombs were dropped. The enemy's main North African supply port of Tripoli was attacked 15 times, Catania in Sicily four times and Castel Vetrano, Comiso and Naples once each. On two occasions, very large fires were started at Tripoli, in the M.T. Depot, and petrol stores near by blazed furiously. Photographs confirmed that many buildings were destroyed, including part of the Government Offices. In the harbour, a small naval vessel

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was set on fire and claims were made of hits on four other vessels, including a 13,000 ton ship. During the night 26/27 January, Wellingtons bombed the airfield at Comiso, where buildings were hit and violent explosions were caused on the runways. In the course of a raid by Wellingtons on Naples, on the night 2/3 January, many fires were started near the airframes factory and the railway station.

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Blenheims of Nos. 18, 21 and 107 Squadrons carried out seven operations against shipping, together with eight low-level attacks against enemy road transport in the neighbourhood of Homs, Zliten and Misurata. The attacks made on the Italian-occupied airfield at Castel Vetrano has already been mentioned. This airfield was crowded with enemy transport aircraft when Blenheims made a low-level attack on 4 January. That night, Wellingtons repeated the attack and, in addition to aircraft, a petrol dump was set on fire. Photographic reconnaissance later showed that fourteen aircraft had been destroyed and the Italians admitted that the raids were very destructive ones and

Memo on the Malta that many of their aircraft were destroyed. Unfortunately, Situation. A.H.B.
6 Trans. No. there is no evidence that any German aircraft were included.
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The arrival of Luftflotte 2 on Sicily had crowded the Italians into four bases at Vetrano, Palermo, Sciacca and Chinisia, but the Italians were taking no very active part in the air operations against Malta, at this date.

The January Convoys to Malta (Convoy Operations M.F. 2, 3 and 4).

In January 1942, there were three convoy operations to pass supply ships into Valetta harbour and bring empty ones out. All were on a small scale. Between 5 and 8 January, the convoy Operation M.F.2 was carried out to pass the Glengyle in to Malta and bring the Breconshire out and this passed without incident, probably due to the fact that the weather was very bad and the enemy had been preoccupied a little earlier in passing their own convoy through to Tripoli.

/Operation M.F.

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Operation M.F. 3 comprised two convoys, the M.W. 8 A, consisting of the S.S. Ajax and Thermopylae and the M.W. 8 B with the S.S. Glan Ferguson and City of Calcutta both of which left Alexandria on 16 January. The next morning one of the escorting destroyers, the Ghurka, was torpedoed and sunk by U.133. The Dutch destroyer Isaac Sweers very gallantly towed the Ghurka clear of burning oil fuel and so managed to save nearly all her crew. On 19 January, the S.S. Thermopylae, which had developed engine trouble and was on her way back to Alexandria, was attacked by enemy aircraft when south of Crete, at a time when she was out of range of R.A.F. fighters. In these attacks, the Thermopylae was set on fire and, as she was carrying ~~of~~ ammunition, she had to be sunk, the Havoc rescuing 350 of her passengers and crew.

In the meantime, the main convoy was covered by protective patrols of Hurricanes of No. 1 Squadron S.A.A.F. and Beaufighters of Nos. 252 and 272 Squadrons, operating from North Africa, and they managed effectively to hold off enemy air attacks. Throughout the morning of 19 January, Malta-based Hurricanes maintained continuous protective patrols over the convoy which arrived safely at Grand Harbour, with 24,000 tons of stores, early in the afternoon. The enemy then attacked with a powerful force of 72 aircraft, the attacks continuing without respite for over two hours. It was the most concentrated series of attacks so far experienced during this second German air offensive. Bombing was extensive and 12 civilians and one airman were killed and 26 civilians and two airmen injured. However, the Hurricanes managed to protect the convoy effectively and the enemy lost 2 Ju. 88s (one annotated 'probably shot down by own fighters').

The third operation of this nature, known as M.F.4, began on 24 January the object being to pass in to Malta the Breconshire, with fuel and stores and the destroyer Kingston for /repairs

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figures.

repairs and to bring out the Glengyle and Rowallan Castle.

The enemy again launched very heavy attacks, with a total of 140 aircraft, over the two days during which the operation lasted, 24 and 25 January. It was on 25 January that seven Hurricanes were shot down by the enemy, without loss to themselves. In spite of the concentrated attacks on Malta and the fact that no fighter cover could be provided from Cyrenaica, owing to the military situation there, Operation M.F. 4 was successfully completed.

The Panzer Army's Improved Supply Position

Axis Naval
Policy and
Operations in
the Mediterranean
R. 242.

The steady deterioration in the British air and naval control of the Central Mediterranean, which occurred during the early part of 1942, is revealed by the fact that, in January, only these three small British convoys (six ships in all, one of which was sunk) sailed for Malta. On the other hand, the enemy were able to run two convoys, consisting of 10 large merchantmen, direct to Tripoli, while on the west route single supply ships were able to proceed along the Tunisian coast almost without interference. The immediate result was a spectacular improvement in the Panzer Army's supply position. Over three times as much tonnage reached North Africa in January as in the preceding month (59,000 gross tons compared with 18,000 tons).

Malta's weakness was immediately reflected in the military situation in North Africa. The improved supply position of the Panzer Army and the way in which the Eighth Army was dispersed over Cyrenaica decided Rommel to exploit the situation and so anticipate a British offensive. On 21 January, he launched his 'reconnaissance in force' eastwards from Marsa Brega. Caught at a moment of weakness, the Eighth Army were forced to withdraw rapidly in order to avoid encirclement. Benghazi fell to the enemy forces on 28 January and by 4 February Rommel's

/spectacular

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spectacular advance had been brought to a halt at Gazala, slightly to the west of Tobruk.

In spite of the success of this offensive, it is questionable whether Rommel was wise in yielding to his own flair for opportunist tactics. After the long retreat and the intensive operations of the 'Crusader' offensive, the Panzer Army was in no position to sustain a major offensive, and nothing else could finally decide the issue in North Africa. Luftflotte 2's air offensive against Malta was just beginning to get into its stride, and although the enemy supply position had much improved, insufficient time had been allowed for really adequate stocks to be built up in North Africa. The capture of Tobruk was ^{important} ~~valuable~~, but along with it went hundreds of miles of desert which lengthened the enemy's lines of communication, while the Eighth Army's ~~forward up against Tobruk~~ had been correspondingly shortened. Valuable air bases for the protection of Malta-bound convoys from the east had certainly ^{as a result of the Eighth Army's 'Crusader' offensive,} been won. But it was soon to be seen that, once Malta's own air defences had been beaten down, there remained little chance of safeguarding the ships on the last stages of their journey or, indeed, even when they had successfully berthed in Valetta harbour.

The Enemy Air Offensive against Malta Continued.

Malta O.R.B.
and Weichold.

In February, 1942, the Royal Air Force on Malta recorded 1,580 enemy aircraft on offensive sorties over the island, 900 less than the official German figure. ⁽¹⁾ This was a rise of 25% over the preceding month.

There were 235 alerts, in which 222 bombing attacks were made against airfields which bore by far the heaviest proportion of the attacks. The airfield at Luqa and Luqa dispersal area at Safi were attacked 142 times, Ta Kali 37,

(1) The official German figures for the sorties flown against Malta during February 1942 were 568 bomber sorties, 1,606 fighter and 323 recon.

/Hal Far

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Hal Far 23 and the Krendi strip 'Q' site 20 times. Improved measures for the dispersal and protection of aircraft showed good results and comparatively few aircraft casualties were sustained on the ground. Among service personnel, there were 17 killed and 57 injured, most of them on airfields, while among the 90 civilians killed and 223 injured the majority were in villages adjacent to the airfields.

Apart from widespread cratering of runways, there was extensive damage to buildings on the airfields. At Ta Kali, for instance, a heavy raid on 4 February, in which landmines were used, wrecked the Headquarters, the M.T. Section and billet, the Equipment and Parachute Sections and the Accounts Office. As a result, the evacuation of Headquarters and other buildings was ordered and a move made to a dispersed site. On 9 February,

Ta Kali O.R.B.

the Sick Quarters and Photo Section were wrecked and four were killed and others badly injured, including the Unit Medical Officer and Sergeant. On 13 February, transport vehicles were destroyed, barrack blocks damaged and a number of airmen injured. The next day, the Photo Section, the Equipment Section and the Guard Room were bombed and three lorries destroyed. Following these heavy raids came violent electric storms with torrential rain. All living conditions were described as 'deplorable' with living accommodation, which had suffered severely from the bombing, wet and leakage^{ing.} At the same time, the airfield became completely unserviceable, while working conditions for the maintenance of aircraft became almost impossible. On 22 February, the precious steam-roller was damaged, together with the fire-fighting equipment. On the next day, in the course of intensive bombing attacks which lasted throughout the day, widespread damage was done to vehicles and other equipment. On 24 February, there was further damage

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to buildings and one airman was killed and two others injured.

An innovation by the enemy was a daily patrol of two to six Me. 109s which patrolled the approaches to the island in order to intercept reconnaissance and transit aircraft.

Altogether 15 transit aircraft were lost during the month (8 Wellingtons, 6 Beaufighters and 1 Albacore). On 6 February,

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3 Blenheims of No. 21 Squadron which had been on a mission to attack shipping at Buerat, were intercepted in this way by Me. 109s which were lying in wait for them and all three were shot down with the loss of all their crews.

Furthermore, the enemy aircraft systematically attacked all Air Sea Rescue craft they could locate, making the rescue of air crews in the sea very hazardous. In the course of an attack on an Air Sea Rescue launch on 5 February, two of the crew were killed and six wounded. As a result, fighter escort were provided for the Air Sea Rescue launches, as far as possible, but the steady decrease in fighter serviceability, the shortage of spares and maintenance facilities made it very difficult to counter these tactics.

Continued bad weather during the month again had an adverse effect on operations. The month's rainfall amounted to $5\frac{1}{2}$ inches, twice what is normal for the time of the year. Luqa was frequently the only airfield from which aircraft could be operated, and even there dispersal areas were 'a sea of mud'. Both Hal Far and Ta Kali, which had no all-weather tracks, were waterlogged for days on end and, as has already been mentioned, living conditions in the leaky barrack blocks and working conditions on the cratered, saturated airfields were quite appalling.

The abnormal rainfall, together with the constant air raids - on some days alerts lasted from dawn to dusk and then continued throughout the greater part of the night - and the

/shortage

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shortage of civilian labour reduced the work that could be done on the runways, dispersal areas and hardcore standings to a very grave extent. As soon as an alert went, 'buses had to be provided to take the civilian labour to the rock shelters, wasting a high proportion of working hours and making progress extremely slow. However, this was ~~offset~~^{offset} to some extent by the help given by the Army who loaned squads of men, together with their own transport and drivers, and the work of the R.A.F., all ranks working hard helping to fill in bomb-craters. The help given by the Army to the R.A.F., in the maintenance of airfields, was invaluable and became increasingly important as the enemy air attacks on the island's air bases ~~became~~^{were} intensified.

Fighter Operations February, 1942.

In February 1942, five fighter squadrons were operating from Malta. They were the permanently established squadrons Nos. 126, 185 and 249, together with Nos. 605 and 242 squadrons which, without ground staff, were operating on a lodger basis. When the fighter airfields of Hal Far and Ta Kali became unserviceable, due to the heavy rain and the bombing, the fighters were operated from Luqa. On occasion, however, the fighter squadrons had to stand down because of the waterlogged condition of the airfields and the damaged runways. The fighter defence of Malta still depended wholly on the Hurricane, of which there were 87 on the island and 27 of them serviceable, on 13 February. Furthermore, as nearly all the cannon Hurricanes were reserved for the Night Fighter Unit, the fighter defence of Malta by day depended almost entirely on Hurricanes carrying machineguns.

Weekly State of
Aircraft (Middle
East). VB/9/1.
/A.H.B./

On 8 February, the A.O.C. Malta wrote to the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief.

/Last

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Malta Part II
A.H.B./ILJI/183/160(B)

Last four days in clear sky 109s have come out like summer flies making great nuisance.... There is an abundance of enemy. They fly round island at various heights. If attacked low down, speed is such that Hurricane has no chance of killing. They interfere with reconnaissance and in view of high cover and number Hurricanes are invariably jumped when covering incoming and outgoing aircraft. Hurricanes always outnumbered by aircraft of superior performance. Am most anxious about daylight delivery under these conditions and should it coincide with main enemy sweep, little chance of protection.... Protection of incoming convoys also very difficult, as our fighters would be engaged by superior numbers while Ju. 88s bomb at will.... Ju. 88 great nuisance by day as owing to escort difficult to kill them, except at great risk of loss.

This was one of a series of signals from the A.O.C. Malta in which he described graphically the progress of the enemy air assault on the island. On 23 February, he wrote to H.Q. Middle East:

Defence of Malta
Policy and
Requirements.
A.H.B./ILJI/165/129(B).

The day 22 February clearly showed inadequacy of our Fighter Force here. Continuous alerts. Attacks on our aerodromes all day. Apart from material damage to buildings, aircraft, aerodromes and runways which is very serious, loss of working time very grave. Loading of mines on to 37 Squadron aircraft, for example, had not been completed by nightfall. It also largely accounts for bad serviceability among fighters and reconnaissance aircraft. I could only get one reconnaissance aircraft off all day.... Our few fighters did gallant work, but pace and numbers too hot for them, also when they did get in machine-gun fire they did not kill. Enemy fighters in great numbers and in pairs were sweeping round Island so that in addition to attacking bombers, Hurricanes had to escort out and in reconnaissance aircraft. Sea rescue unable to rescue pilot shot down close to Island owing to impossibility of providing adequate cover for high speed launch. Number of bombers to fighters in each attack very few, bombers seldom exceeding four. Some bombers and fighters had Desert camouflage. All attacks well-escorted, together with high cover. Am confident if we could shoot down a score this daylight nonsense would cease. To do this must have Hurricanes with cannons, as it is very distressing to our pilots to see bombers go off carrying so much lead. Must have Spitfires in adequate numbers for high cover.

A.H.Q. Malta
O.R.B.

The R.A.F. claimed 2 Ju. 88s and 7 Me. 109s shot down for the loss of 7 of their own Hurricanes in combat, only one pilot being saved. Enemy records of operational losses show that the Luftwaffe lost 33 Sicily-based aircraft, 15 of them Ju. 88s,

A.H.B.6 figures 15 Me. 109s, 2 Me 110s and 1 He. 111. Of these aircraft 12 were /lost

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lost over Malta, 6 of them Ju. 88s, 4 Me. 109s and 2 Ju. 87s. Owing to the conditions of the fighting over Malta, only rarely were the enemy able to be specific about the actual cause of the loss, whether from A.A. gunfire or fighters. Italian losses for this period are not known.

The Pilot Situation at Malta February 1942

On 6 February, the A.O.C. Malta sent a signal direct to Air Ministry complaining that he had not received a single pilot to replace casualties since his arrival at Malta the previous May. Other than the pilots of Nos. 242 and 605 Squadrons, all the pilots (98 in all) had been on Malta for 8 or 9 months and they were stale. He asked for 30 fully-experienced pilots to be sent by flying-boat.

No copy of this message was sent to the A.O.C.-in-C. Middle East who was justifiably nettled when he received a signal from the C.A.S. urging him "to make supreme effort to keep Malta fresh, anticipate their wants and press us to provide them." In reply, it was stated that Air Marshal Drummond, the Deputy Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief had himself enquired into the state of Malta's fighter pilots when visiting the island a short time previously and had been assured by the A.O.C. Malta that the position was "satisfactory". At the end of Sept. 1941, there had been 100 pilots to operate 3 squadrons, and since that date 34 pilots of Nos. 242 and 605 Squadrons had arrived. It would be possible to supply Malta with relief pilots from the Middle East, but it was naturally difficult to spare experienced pilots from the Western Desert who were not operationally tired. The A.O.C.-in-C. Middle East urged that Malta should be placed under Middle East Command for all

/administration

V.C.A.S. Defence
of Malta.
A.4.41D7/27(A)

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administration. "Although I have already insisted that Lloyd sends me certain administrative returns and reports," the message concluded, "it is difficult to keep fully in the picture unless all administration is done from here."

A.O.C. 47 Malta
Part II
A.H.B./11J1/183/16 /(B)

On 19 February, Air Ministry sent a signal in which it which it was agreed that "responsibility for administration as well as for operational control of Malta should be with the Middle East." Finally, the A.O.C. Malta was informed by D/C.A.S. that fifteen pilots would be sent by flying-boat and a further fifteen when another flying boat was available. "I am ensuring," the message concluded, "with C.-in-C.

Fighter Command that they are really a choice lot of pilots."

Offensive Operations by Wellingtons and Transfer of No. 40 Squadron to the Middle East.

A.H.Q. Med.
O.R.B.

In spite of the constant bombing, the bad weather and the maintenance difficulties, Wellingtons still managed to operate from Malta throughout the month. Altogether 21 operations were carried out, involving a total of 96 sorties. The primary target still continued to be Tripoli which was attacked ten times. A total of 64 tons of H.E. and 870 incendiaries was dropped. Damage was done to harbour installations there, to the M.T. depot and a 2,000-ton ship was claimed as sunk. This claim was not confirmed by enemy documents. German-occupied airfields at Catania were attacked four times and 17 tons of H.E. and 1080 incendiaries were dropped, fires being started among dispersed aircraft and airfield buildings. Two other attacks were on the airfield at Gerbini, where $3\frac{1}{2}$ tons of H.E. and 610 incendiaries were dropped, with claims of fires among dispersed aircraft. There was a single heavy attack on Naples where damage was done to marshalling yards and the docks. Attacks were also carried out by the Wellingtons on Syracuse, Palermo, Sirte and Comiso.

H.Q. Middle East
Table of Operations.
A.H.Q./11J1/31/1.

A.H.B.6.

S.E.C.R.E.T.

Squadron O.R.Bs.

On 15th February, the Wellingtons of No. 40 Squadron left for the Middle East, being replaced by No. 37 Squadron which arrived at Malta from the Middle East on 22nd February.

In February, the A.O.C. Malta was informed by S.A.S.O. Middle East, on 12th February, that the agreed number of A.S.V. Wellingtons that Malta was permitted to hold was four, whereas they held six. He also understood that Malta had two spare crews. "A.S.V. Wellingtons also urgently required this end," and, he added tartly, "you are not repeat not to retain Malta more than agreed four or interfere flow of reinforcements from England without prior reference here."

H.Q. Middle East were assured by the A.O.C. Malta that he only held 5 A.S.V. Wellingtons, of which 3 were unserviceable. One Wellington would be forwarded to Middle East when it had been made serviceable. As for the crew, he had only four and, with the long, arduous flights of never less than 7 hours, he could not do with less.

A.H.8.
Malta IIJ1/183/160(B)

"Regret exceedingly," he concluded, "that we have such an unenviable reputation for sticky fingers."

Night-Flying Training of Wellington Crews in the U.K.

At much the same time as this correspondence was going on, the A.O.C.-in-C. Middle East was informed by the D/G.A.S. that the additional training for Wellington crews, including long cross-country flights to enable them to make the long flight from Gibraltar to Malta was costing 40 Wellingtons written off or seriously damaged for every 100 received safely in the Middle East. He felt that even if the risk of interception between Gibraltar and Malta became appreciable, some losses in that way could be accepted if the night-flying training casualties were thereby reduced. He asked whether, in order to reduce the overall casualties in the U.K., the whole flight from Gibraltar to Malta might be undertaken in daylight and whether Middle East would be willing to accept crews with slightly less experience of night-flying.

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The view of the A.O.C. Malta was that it would be unwise to accept any lower standard of training in night-flights to Malta owing to the increased risk of damage to the aircraft and the tremendous difficulty in repairing them with such limited facilities and maintenance crews. He was prepared to accept day deliveries from Gibraltar provided that the aircraft flew in formation^S of not less than 6 aircraft and at less than 500 feet from the vicinity of Cape Bon. (1)

Air Marshal Drummond's view, expressed in a signal to the D./C.A.S., on 18th February, was that it would be shortsighted to adopt a policy which might limit the passage of aircraft through Malta. He considered the arrival of aircraft at Malta, in full daylight, out of the question. He considered that the safest procedure would be for the aircraft to arrive in the vicinity of Malta, by night, and land at first light, when enemy night-intruder aircraft had left. He suggested that the Wellingtons should ^{travel} ~~travel~~ from Gibraltar to Cape Bon by daylight and finish the remainder of the journey by night. Crews would then be required to navigate some 200 miles over sea, by night.

He did not feel that it would be practicable to accept a much lower standard of night-flying training, as to do so would mean more damaged aircraft in Malta and the Middle East, where repair measures were very much more limited than in the United Kingdom. His own impression was that, provided that the pilot received thorough training in taking off and landing at night, it should not be necessary for him to engage in numerous long cross-country training flights, assuming, of course, that both navigator and wireless operator were fully qualified.

/After

Malta Part II
A.H.B./ILJ1/183/160(B)

(1) This point of view conflicts with the statement made a week earlier, "Am most anxious about daylight delivery under these conditions (of enemy air superiority) and should it coincide with main enemy sweep, little chance of protection."

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After further correspondence along these lines, Air Ministry and the A.O.C. Malta finally accepted Air Marshal Drummond's suggestion that future deliveries of Wellingtons should fly to the vicinity of Cape Bon, by day, and then on to Malta, by night.

Anti-Shipping Strikes from Malta, February 1942

February was another bad month for the R.A.F. on Malta, as far as shipping strikes were concerned and they had no successes. Apart from the heavy bombing and the bad weather, the main reason was that they had no suitable torpedo-carrying aircraft at their disposal. The enemy's shipping losses amounted to 34,994 tons, made up as follows:-

Anti-Shipping Losses in the Mediterranean	<u>Navy</u>	<u>Air/Navy</u>	<u>Air</u>	<u>Mine</u>
	(1)			
	23,255 tons	10,257	145	1,334

A small ship, the Eleni (145 tons) was sunk by the Greeks and is included in this list. There were two ships, both listed as shared between the Fleet Air Arm and the Royal Navy.

No. 69 Squadron
O.R.B.

On the afternoon of 2 February, a Maryland of No. 69 Squadron (Sgt. Macdonald), on a reconnaissance, from Kerkennah to Tripoli, located the Napoli of 6,142 tons one mile off Ras Mahdia. That night four Albacores of No. 828 Squadron left Malta on a shipping strike. They managed to intercept the ship and at 02.15 hours on 3 February the attack was launched. At least one and possibly two torpedoes hit the ship which was seen to be beached the next day by another reconnaissance aircraft of No. 69 Squadron. According to enemy documents, the Napoli was in ballast, as she had discharged her cargo at Tripoli. She is listed in "Anti-Shipping Operations" as shared with the Navy, a British submarine having helped in her sinking. Although beached, she eventually became a total loss.

H.Q. Middle East
Daily Opsums

A.H.B.6.

(1) An interesting sidelight on Italian psychology is revealed in Ciano's Diary over the sinking by British submarine of the Italian tanker Lucania (8,106 tons) on 12 February. According to Ciano, this ship had been detailed for the evacuation of civilians from East Africa (on the face of it, a most unlikely role for a tanker). After the sinking, the Italian Navy wanted the Lucania to be replaced by a British tanker. "Unless this is done," they said, "we shall have one tanker less when peace comes." Mussolini's own comment was, "either we shall win the war and we shall have tankers to throw away, or we shall lose it, and they will not even leave us eyes to weep with."

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"Nave Perduti"

The Ariosto of 4,115 tons was located by a special Wellington, based on Malta, during the night 13/14 February. She was in the company of another M/V and escorted by destroyers. The Wellington remained shadowing the convoy for 5 hours, from 22.00 hours on 13th February until 03.00 on the 14th when a striking force of ^{four Fleet} ~~4 Fleet~~ Air Arm Albacores of No. 828 Squadron arrived. In spite of a very effective smoke-screen, the Ariosto was hit ^{by} ~~by~~ a torpedo. She was left on fire, stationary and listing to starboard and was later confirmed by the enemy as having been sunk. She was said to have been carrying 300 prisoner-of war and 69 of them were drowned. As with the Ariosto, the Napoli is listed as 'shared' with the Royal Navy.

Altogether, the Albacores of No. 828 Squadron Fleet Air Arm carried out ten operations against enemy forces and shipping and the Swordfish of No. 830 Squadron F.A.A. four. The Elenheims of No. 21 Squadron were also active on operations against enemy communications, and, as will be seen, they suffered heavy losses. An interesting combined air and naval operation against enemy naval craft took place during the night 15/16 February and is related in the Section which deals with supplies to Malta.

Enemy Convoys to Tripoli, February, 1942

A combination of bad weather and the weakness of the naval and air striking forces at Malta at this time, enabled the enemy to run through two important convoys to Tripoli, in February. During the night 21/22 February, a special Wellington shipping ^{four} search found ~~10~~ ^{four} ships in two columns, including ^{four} ~~4~~ large ships with battleship cover, in the Central Ionian Sea and making for Tripoli. The almost continuous day-and-night attacks on Malta, of the previous 24 hours, together with a severe deterioration of the weather, had reduced the chance of air attack from the island.

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/accordingly

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Accordingly, ^{eight} ~~8~~ submarines of the 10th Flotilla were concentrated in the Tripoli approaches. In the course of an attack by submarines of the Royal Navy, on the convoy, ~~three~~ ^{but} hits were heard, ~~by~~ ^{an} immediate counter-attack prevented any observation of the results. There were no ships sunk, according to enemy sources.

It has been the intention of the Vice-Admiral Malta to send out Force ~~XXX~~ ^K (Penelope and Legion) at dusk on 22nd February, but the order had to be cancelled owing to the high seas. Egypt-based aircraft attacked the convoy on 22nd February, but with no success. Another search by a special Wellington, during the night 23/24 February, located the convoy. Two strikes of Albacores of No. 828 Squadron and Swordfish of No. 830 Squadron set out from Malta, but they were forced to return to base with their torpedoes, owing to the impossible weather conditions. Independently of this ^e ~~K~~ convey, a single Fleet Air Arm Albacore scored a hit on an enemy tanker of 4,000 tons which was stationary 25 miles to the West of Tripoli. A large flash was seen and the ship was claimed as damaged. However, both this convoy and another important one managed to get through to Tripoli unscathed, the second convoy not even being sighted.

The effect which the arrival of Luftflotte 2 had on the strategic situation in the Mediterranean is fully apparent in which the following official figures of supplies/reached North Africa. In November and December, 1941, a total of 69,000 tons arrived, of which 15,000 tons were for the German forces. During the first two months of 1942, however, the figure had risen to 125,000 tons, with 49,000 tons for the German forces in North Africa. The amount of fuel received rose from 2,527 tons in November and December, 1941, to 16,628 tons in January and February, 1942. The actual cargo tonnage lost in January and February was negligible, being less than one half per cent of the tonnage despatched.

"La Marina
Italiana Nella
Seconda Guerra
Mondiale. Dati
Statistici."

Daily Int. Sums
A.H.B./II/17/113/5/15

H.Q. Middle East
Opsums
A.H.B./II/17/113/1/1

SECRETNo. 21 Squadron (Blenheims) Transferred to Middle East, 22nd February.

No. 21 Squadron
C.R.B.

H.Q. Middle East
Daily Opsums. and
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Summaries.

A.H.B. / IIJS / 11.3 / 5 / 15.

Defence of Malta
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ments.

A.H.B. - J1/165/1 (B)

three /

During February, 1942, No. 21 Squadron sustained very heavy losses of both aircraft and personnel. Mention has already been made of the ^{three} ~~the~~ Blenheims which were intercepted and shot down when returning from an attack on shipping, at Buerat. Two days earlier, six Blenheims had been despatched to make a low-level attack on shipping at Palermo. The formation made land-fall at Carini, but as the leader (Wing Commander Selkirk) banked to turn north, his wing-tip touched the sea and the aircraft sank. The remaining five aircraft were forced to break formation when crossing the mountains, in the vicinity of Palermo, due to thick cloud. Three aircraft were last seen by a fourth bombing a goods train, which had been brought to a standstill. After this incident they vanished. It was thought, at Malta, that they had probably crashed in the mountains, due to thick cloud and poor visibility. (1) Two more Blenheims from No. 21 Squadron were lost later in February, bringing their total losses up to eight.

On 22nd February, the A.O.C. Malta sent the following message to H.Q. Middle East:

✓21 Squadron shaken as a result of losses here. The best of the squadron has gone. I feel I shall get nothing out of them until they are made up to strength with crews. This will take time. Meanwhile the squadron is a liability to me and I cannot rely on it for any work. Am therefore sending the squadron on to you.

No. 21 Squadron was transferred to the Middle East on 22nd February where they were disbanded. They were reformed in the United Kingdom on 14th March.

/Operations ...

(1) Captured enemy documents now confirm this. Before crashing, they destroyed a truck on the train and killed four occupants.

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Operations by No. 69 Squadron.

Aircraft of No. 69 Squadron carried out 85 reconnaissance flights in February, 1942, covering enemy shipping routes to the east and west of Malta. Enemy convoys were reported twelve times and single ships thirty times. The enemy's tactics of keeping patrols of Me. 109s off the island, had resulted in the loss of three of the squadron's aircraft.

On 13th February, a Maryland returning from a reconnaissance of the area Cape Bon - Pantellaria^e - Marettimo was attacked by two Me. 109s when south of Malta. The first burst of cannon-fire, from forty yards, killed the top-gunner and wounded the bottom-gunner, Sgt. Watson, in the leg, arm and head. The aircraft was badly damaged in the rudder, tail-plane and fuselage, and fire broke out in the bomb-bay tank and this spread to the turret. Sgt. Watson, although himself wounded, removed the body of Sgt. Moore, the dead top-gunner and took his place just in time to open fire at the second Me. 109 which was coming in for the kill. He shot down the Me. 109 - confirmed by enemy documents - into the sea, and then extinguished the flames in the back of the aircraft. Although the front cabin was filled with smoke, the elevators useless and the tail, which had been almost completely shot away, had jammed, the pilot (Pilot Officer Channon) made a perfect belly-landing on Luqa, the aircraft being a complete write-off. Sgt. Watson was decorated with the immediate award of the D.F.M.

No. 69 Squadron
O.R.B. Daily Int.
Sums. and A.H.B.6.

A.H.B./J.S.5/113/5/15-

Two days later, another Maryland which had been sent back to Egypt for engine change and had crash-landed there, was lost off Malta from enemy fighters. By the end of the month, No. 69 Squadron was left with only three serviceable aircraft.

The February Convoy to Malta (Operation M.W.9.) 12th to 14th February.

The February convoy to Malta was in two parts, M.W.9A which consisted of the Glan Chatton and Glan Campbell escorted by the Carlisle, A.A. cruiser, and four destroyers,

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and M.W.⁹/B, the Rowallan Castle escorted by four destroyers. At the same time, there was also a return convoy from Malta (M.E.10) consisting of three merchant vessels, the Glan Ferguson, City of Calcutta and the Broomshire. It was arranged that the two convoys should meet and exchange escorts on the afternoon of February 14th.

The special provision made by the R.A.F. for the passing of the convoy was:

- (a) Increased anti-submarine patrols from Alexandria and Malta.
- (b) Continuous fighter cover by day, while the convoys were still within range of fighters operating from Gambut and Malta.
- (c) Special reconnaissance by Malta and Egypt-based aircraft, with particular reference to units of the Italian Fleet.
- (d) A maximum striking force to be held at Malta, during the final approach of the convoy. A striking force of six Beauforts and six Blenheims to stand by at El Adem and two Fortresses and six Blenheims at Fuka.
- (e) The strategic bombing of enemy air bases at Heraklion, Catania, Gerbini, Comiso and the submarine base at Salamis.

R.A.F. Ops. in the
Western Desert and
Eastern Mediterranean.
A.R.R./I.IJ1/12.

Both parts of convoy M.W.9 left Alexandria on February 12th. They were joined by Force B, the cruisers Naiad, Dido and Euryalus and eight destroyers on the next day. Fighter protection from North Africa, to the west of Sidi Barrani, was weak and Malta's own fighter strength had been seriously depleted by constant operations and the severe bombing. On 13th February, the convoys were subjected to severe air attack by a total of 79 bomber and torpedo-carrying aircraft and during the afternoon the Glan Campbell was so badly damaged that she had to put into Tobruk. The next day,

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14 February, high-level and dive-bombing attacks were continuous from 13.45 hours until 16.00 hours and the Glan Chattan was hit when north of Benghazi and had to be sunk, after her personnel had been taken off.

The return convoy from Malta (M.E.10) met the incoming convoy (M.W.9E) at 14.40 hours on 14 February with the sole surviving ship bound for Malta, the Rowallan Castle, and escorts were exchanged as arranged, under cover of fire from all the warships, and aided by Malta Beaufighters which shot down a Cant. 2506. The convoys then continued their respective journeys. At 15.15 hours, however, in a position to the north of Benghazi, a near-miss disabled the Rowallan Castle. She was taken in tow by the Zulu, but could not make enough speed to have any chance of reaching Malta safely. At 19.56 hours, therefore, she was sunk by the Lance on the orders of the Naval C.-in-C. Two days later, four destroyers brought the damaged Glan Campbell back from Tobruk to Alexandria. No single ship, therefore, of the February convoy reached Malta.

One of Malta's main preoccupations at this time was reconnaissance of the Central Mediterranean and the enemy naval bases to ensure the safety of the convoy and escort from the superior naval force which at that time was at the enemy's disposal. In the course of a patrol of the Central Ionian Sea, on the afternoon of 15 February, a Maryland of No. 69 Squadron (S/Ldr. Lowry, F/O Bosley, Sgt. Rasmussen and Sgt. Durant) located an enemy force consisting of three cruisers and nine destroyers, which were on their way to intercept the convoy. The Maryland was attacked by four Me. 109s and severely damaged, causing one engine to fail.

/Yet

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No. 69 Squadron
O.R.B.

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Malta O.R.B.

Yet another attack was launched on the damaged aircraft, as it approached Malta, by two Me. 109s and it was forced down into the sea. As a result of this, news was not received at Malta of the enemy fleet movement until 18.30 hours, when the crew of the Maryland were rescued by launch. By that time, the air striking force which had been standing by on Malta for just such an eventuality had been released and the opportunity was missed.

However, the ^{enemy naval} force was again located at 00.32 hours on the night 15/16 February by a Malta-based A.S.V. Wellington which remained shadowing the ^{ships} force, which consisted of two 8-inch and two 6-inch cruisers and nine destroyers, and it actually witnessed the attack launched by a striking force of five Albacores at 05.25 hours. Four torpedoes were dropped and hits were claimed on two cruisers and one destroyer. A fire was seen on one of the cruisers which was dropping astern, as the enemy force made their way back northwards. Later, at 13.15 hours, submarine P.36 attacked two cruisers and some destroyers. Four explosions were heard and the rear cruiser was believed hit. Although in the course of these air and submarine attacks, none of the enemy ships appears to have been sunk, the air attacks particularly achieved their purpose in diverting the enemy fleet back to their base.

In spite of the enemy's concentrated attacks on the Malta airfields, Wellingtons of No. 40 Squadron were active attacking enemy air bases at Catania and ^GMerbini, during the night 12/13 and 13/14 February, in the course of which they started six fires and caused a number of explosions. Further attacks were carried out during the night 14/15 February, but operations were hampered by 9/10ths cloud and no results of the bombing were observed. It is not apparent, however, that these attacks had any appreciable effect on the enemy air force on Sicily. On 15 February, for instance,

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/the

H.Q. Middle East
Daily Opsums.

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the heaviest series of air raids on Malta, up to that date, was experienced and the record total of 165 enemy aircraft were counted over the island.

A.H.B.6 figures.

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The February convoy to Malta had thus ended in disaster. None of the three ships had reached the island, in spite of the complex arrangements made by both the Royal Navy and the Royal Air Force for their protection. It was now fully apparent that the advent of Luftlotte 2 on Sicily, with approximately 400 aircraft, combined with the weakness of the Royal Navy in the Mediterranean and the loss of air bases in Cyrenaica, had effectively sealed off Malta. From the air point of view, this had been achieved at a comparatively low cost. Between 21st December, when the second German air 'blitz' on Malta began, to the complete failure of the convoy, on 14th February, Luftwaffe units based on Sicily had lost 66 aircraft, 27 of them described as being "not due to enemy action."

The Weakness of Malta's Fighter Defence February, 1942.

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The failure of the February convoy had immediate and serious repercussions. On 21st February, the Governor of Malta, Lt.-Gen. Sir W. Dobbie stated in a signal to the Secretary of State, "I feel that we have reached a critical point in the maintenance of Malta." He pointed out that if the opportunity presented by the March dark period were not taken to rush in supplies, Malta would have to wait until April, when the lengthening days and possible intensification of the war might increase the risks at sea. By that time, Malta's supply position would be such that the loss of the whole, or even a substantial part of a convoy, would create a most dangerous situation.

Malta Strength
and Reinforcement.

R.H.B/ ID3/674

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07 "The spirits of the people," he went on to say, "throughout the heavier attacks of the recent weeks have been remarkably good, though loss of civilian life has been greater than during any other equal period. Nevertheless, there is some evidence of a beginning of despondency beneath the surface. World events and particularly our set-back in Libya have their natural effects here, but other causes nearer home operate more strongly. The people have always drawn their greatest encouragement from the success in the air over the island and the arrival of convoys. The consolidation of the latter has not lain solely in securing food or other supplies. It has also been a demonstration of our control of the surrounding seas. The inferiority of our fighter aircraft to those of the enemy in performance has been a cause of marked depression. Steps are being taken to reverse the situation, but in the meantime the lowering effects of the present position are joined to those of the failure of the present convoy and of the increased restrictions which that failure had made necessary."

Three days earlier, the Governor of Malta had sent a signal to the War Office stressing the seriousness of the supply situation in Malta, due to the failure of the February convoy. He pointed out that nearly all supplies would be exhausted by the end of June. Excluding the Fortress Reserve of 750 tons, petrol stocks would only last until the end of April or early May.

07 "All service and civil expenditure of petrol has been cut to the bone. Training of army units is almost at a standstill and important works have been stopped or curtailed. Further cuts would prejudice our offensive activities and defence of the island. Consumption of all other items has been reduced to a minimum, especially drastic cuts having been made on coal, fodder and kerosene."

On 19~~th~~ February, the Middle East Defence Committee sent the following message to the Minister of Defence and the Chiefs of Staff:

War Cabinet
Correspondence.
A.H.R./ID8/34

07 "We are seriously concerned at air situation in Malta. We realise you have this very much in mind, but should be grateful for any measure you can possibly take to augment and accelerate arrival of reinforcements of fighter aircraft. Would it be possible to repeat "Quarter" and "Spotter", if first attempt is successful?" (1)

07 (1) Operations "Quarter" and "Spotter" to fly the first Spitfires into Malta, from the aircraft carrier "Eagle", are dealt with in a later section of the Narrative.

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On his copy of the signal, the Prime Minister wrote:
General Ismay,

Show me draft answer telling them what has been done.

W.S.C.20/2.

The effect on Air Ministry of the grave warnings from both the Middle East Defence Committee and the Governor of Malta on the island's plight was immediate. By 21 February, arrangements had been made with the Ministry of Aircraft Production for working parties "to work night and day" to prepared 16 Spitfires for despatch to Malta, in addition to the "Spotter" Operation which was already under way. It is surprising to find that, thirteen months after the first German air assault on Malta, there were only 16 tropicalised Spitfires in the United Kingdom. To make up this number for consignment to Malta, it was necessary to rob the Middle East.

ibid.
The Commander-in-Chief, Middle East, General Auchinleck now added to the spate of messages being received by Whitehall on the subject of Malta. On 21 February, he signalled to the War Office stating that, of the seven ships forming the January and February convoys, only three had arrived in Malta. He confined himself to enumerating the purely Army requirements which had arrived, had been lost 'en route' or were still outstanding, a grave omission being that no mention was made of petrol.

It appears, he added, useless to try to pass in a convoy until the air situation in Malta has been restored and the military situation in Cyrenaica improved. Recommend policy of reinforcement be considered.

On the day this signal was received in London, the Prime Minister called for a report from the Chiefs of Staff

/ Committee

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Committee on its contents. From this evolved a detailed reconsideration of the whole strategical implications of the war in the Mediterranean in which, not only was the paramount importance of the island base stressed, but the fact that the fighting in that theatre had become primarily a struggle for air bases was made apparent.

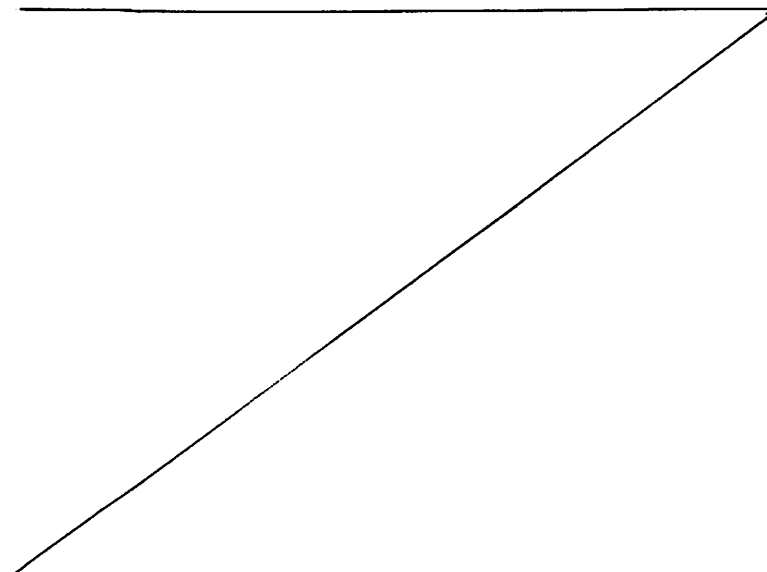
At the 62nd Meeting of the Chiefs of Staff Committee, held on the 24 February, the Joint Planning Staff were instructed to prepare an Appreciation of the Situation in the Mediterranean for the Commanders-in-Chief Middle East, and specifically of:

ibid.

the relative strategic importance of Malta in comparison with the effort and cost of maintaining it, with particular reference to the latest date by which the offensive in the Western Desert must be launched, in order to permit the maintenance of Malta during the winter.

The Joint Planning Staff's view was that "they saw no reason why attempts to pass supplies to Malta, by convoy,

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unorthodox /
 ← should be treated as the primary military commitment of the time." All ~~unorthodox~~ ^{unorthodox} methods of supply should be developed, including such obviously practicable measures, as the increased use of submarines and fast mine^{layers} and air transport for small bulk items, together with some which were patently absurd, for example the suggestion that Special Operations should arrange for supplies, particularly of fodder, to be smuggled in from French North Africa, and even more astonishing, bearing in mind the geographical, military and political limitations, from as far off as Turkey. A further suggestion which was made by Air Ministry Planning Staff was that a raid by Liberators on the Ploesti oilfields might draw off German fighters from the Mediterranean and reduce the scale of attack on a convoy.

In the meantime, the Deputy Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief, Middle East, Air Marshal Drummond, who was acting for Air Marshal Tedder during the latter's absence on sick-leave, sent a message to the C.A.S. which stated bluntly that, in his view, Malta was "now an expensive liability." However, the Chiefs of Staff, in an important signal to the Commanders-in-Chief Middle East, on 28th February, stressed forcefully Malta's strategic significance.

A.O.C. 47.
 A.O.C.-in-C.
 Malta.
 A.H.B./ILJ1/183/160(B)

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 Our view is that Malta is of such importance both as an air staging post and as an impediment to enemy reinforcement route that the most drastic steps are justifiable to sustain it. Even if Axis maintain their present scale of attack on Malta, thus reducing value, it will continue to be of great importance to war as a whole by containing important enemy forces during critical months.

07
 It was impossible to reinforce Malta from the west, and the chance of so doing from the east depended on an advance in Cyrenaica. The Chiefs of Staff urged that the timing of the offensive should aim at ^{our forces} being so placed in Cyrenaica by the April dark period that it would be possible to pass a substantial convoy to Malta. Furthermore, the passing through of a convoy

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to Malta in March should be considered as the Commanders-in-Chief "primary military commitment". However, owing to the difficult supply position, the reinforcement of Malta with Army units should be discontinued. To the statement that a convoy to Malta, in March, should be the Commanders-in-Chief, Middle East's "primary military commitment" the Prime Minister added the proviso, "unless, of course, a battle on land is in progress." An amendment to this effect was made in a further signal.

In this interchange of signals and ⁿminutes, no reference was made to the important point that, in order to safeguard Malta as an offensive base and also the incoming convoys, the island must be kept supplied with a steady stream of Spitfires. Fortunately, the first consignment of Spitfires, which were eventually to play such an important part in Malta's survival as an air and naval base, ^{was} ~~were~~ ^{its} already on ~~their~~ way.

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Chapter 13

THE NEUTRALISATION OF MALTA AS A NAVAL AND AIR BASE - MARCH
AND APRIL, 1942

The arrival of the First Spitfires at Malta (Operation "Quarter"/
"Spotter") 7 March, 1942.

Although the worst of Malta's ordeal from air assault was yet to come, Operation# "Quarter"/"Spotter", which culminated on 7 March with the arrival of Malta's first Spitfire reinforcements, marked the real turning-point in the battle for air supremacy over the island.

The first tentative planning for the transport of Spitfires to Malta began with discussions between Air Ministry and the Admiralty, in May, 1941. It was then established that the transport of fully-erected Spitfires would be possible in the Argus, Hermes, Eagle, Furious and Indomitable. Owing to the size of the lifts, Spitfires could only be carried in the Ark Royal, Formidable and Victorious if dismantled, or ranged on deck. If the Spitfires' wings were removed, then at least twice the number of aircraft could be carried. There was, however, the additional complication that the Spitfire's undercarriage is attached to the wings and not the centre section, so that the removal of the wings entailed the use of a jury or temporary undercarriage. The Spitfire took thirty man-hours to dismantle and thirty-five to erect.

Operation "Quarter"
A.H.R./IHK/24/101

As has already been noted, the decision to strengthen Malta's fighter defence with Spitfires was taken as a result of recommendations made by Group Captain Embry, after his visit to Malta and the Middle East, in January, 1942. The code-name for the operation to ship Spitfires to Malta on the aircraft-carrier Eagle was "Quarter" and "Spotter". The latter code-name, "Spotter", was given to the second and primarily naval phase of the operation, when the aircraft had been embarked on the Eagle, at Gibraltar, from which they were to be flown to Malta.

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The number of aircraft involved was sixteen, one spare. They had already been tropicalised and fitted with long-range tanks and were being prepared for shipment to the Middle East, via Takoradi.

The D.C.A.S. informed the A.O.C. Malta of the projected operation on 1 February, 1942. He pointed out that the small number of Spitfires in the consignment was due to the design characteristics which greatly restricted the number which could be carried to the fly-off position, compared with the Hurricane.

This factor, he continued, will also off-set any replacements which we might subsequently be able to send. You will therefore have to conserve these aircraft as much as possible and restrict their use to essential high-flying operations over Malta for which their performance makes them especially suitable. We have found here Spitfires are generally not as robust as Hurricanes and require good-surfaced runways. Anything you can do to improve surfaces of selected aerodrome will prolong their serviceable life.

On 10 February, the British ship Cape Hawke (10 knots) sailed from the U.K. having on board sixteen cased Spitfires and one Fulmar, together with other miscellaneous cargo. Also on board were thirteen R.A.F. officers and 131 O.Rs. Eight Blenheims were flown from the U.K. to act as escort.

The first attempt to fly off the aircraft, on the morning of 28 February, was unsuccessful, owing to petrol supply difficulties with the long-range tanks. A failure of the petrol supply was caused by an air-lock developing between the spring-loaded joint on the aircraft and a rubber ring on the outlet supply pipe of the long-range tank. It was established that not only had the long-range tanks not been fitted and tested before the aircraft left the United Kingdom, but the Spitfires' cannons had not been air-tested. The assembly parties which sailed with the aircraft had no previous experience with long-range tanks. A large number of the

/Spitfires

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Spitfires' parts were also missing and this entailed stripping one aircraft to make the others serviceable.

The V.C.A.S. referred to this matter in a Minute to the D.A.M.S.O. After alluding to the matters mentioned in the preceding paragraph, in justifiably critical terms, he went on to say,

C.S.12763
Operation "Quarter"
and "Spotter".

The C.A.S. had great difficulty in obtaining the use of a carrier for this operation. These failures are unfortunate, put the C.A.S. in an impossible position and bring discredit to the Service. Apart from this, it is clearly wrong to expect pilots to take-off on a hazardous flight, under abnormal conditions, with an untested petrol system and unsatisfactory armament.

A crated Spitfire which had been packed for despatch overseas, was accordingly used in an experiment at Odiham, on 1 March. In order to simulate the conditions of erection at Gibraltar, the working party used was not given special instructions. The first time the jettison tank was assembled and tested, a severe leak occurred at the spring-loaded connection. After the tank had been partially drained, removed, re-assembled and refilled, the joint proved satisfactory. The tanks of three aircraft were found to have been dented so severely, before the aircraft were received into service, that there was a possibility of fuel starvation occurring. Arrangements were made on the spot, with Vickers Chief Designer (Mr. Smith of Supermarine) for the damaged tanks to be replaced and a modification added to eliminate the trouble with the spring-loaded connection.

On the eve of the second attempt to fly the Spitfires to Malta, from the aircraft carrier Eagle, it was found that the Blenheims which had been sent especially from the U.K. to

Operation "Quarter" Gibraltar for the operation were "in poor condition". One and "Spotter" crashed at Gibraltar, due to engine failure and another due to hydraulic trouble. It was found, also, that of the eight Blenheim crews, only four were capable of the night take-off which was essential to assure early rendezvous with the ships.

A.H.B./
IIK/24/101 and
C.S.12763.

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There was only one really experienced navigator among them, the rest being ex-O.T.U. without experience. In fact, these^s "specially selected^h Navigators" from No. 2 Group were found to be "much below average."

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The final operational phase of "Spotter" took place on 7th March, 1942. Owing to the fact that the pilots were inexperienced in night flying and the weather conditions (wind west Force 7, fly-off only just possible), it was decided to postpone the actual departure of the aircraft from the carrier until after daylight. One Blenheim had to return to Gibraltar owing to engine trouble. Naval Force ^H was reported five times by enemy aircraft, the reports being received on Rome re-broadcasts and, according to naval calculations, the ships were shadowed by enemy aircraft for nine hours (between 09.00 hours and 16.00 hours). When the Spitfires were ranged on deck, it was found that the majority of the cannons could not be fired until adjustments had been made.

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The first flight of Spitfires took off from the Eagle at 10.20 hours on 7th March and the second at 11.46 hours, and a signal, "15 Spitfires and 7 Blenheims arrived safely. "Very many thanks", from Malta showed that the operation had been successfully completed. The Spitfires took off when in a position 50 miles to the north east of Algiers and the Blenheims from Gibraltar. The Spitfires took 3 hours 45 minutes, using an average of 130 gallons of petrol.

16id./

Though the object of the operation was successfully accomplished, yet the very weak link in plan, namely connecting up Blenheims with Spitfires was always giving cause for anxiety, in spite of excellent conditions of visibility. Inability of Blenheims to take off from Gibraltar in dark, irregularity of their time keeping, unexpected direction from which they approached rendezvous, H.M.S. Eagle's inability to communicate with them and their small margin of endurance created difficulties any of which might well have jeopardised the operation.

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This justifiable criticism concluded the account of the operation by the Senior Officer Force H.

Operation "Quarter"/"Spotter" was the first of a series of similar operations in which Spitfire reinforcements were flown to Malta from aircraft carriers of the Royal Navy and United States Navy, and which were to play such an important part in Malta's survival.

Operations "Scantling"/"Picket" (Repetition of "Quarter"/"Spotter")
March 21 and 29, 1942

Following on the series of urgent messages from Malta and the Middle East and the Prime Minister's interest in the strengthening of Malta, a similar operation to "Quarter"/"Spotter", and known as Operation "Scantling"/"Picket", was immediately put in hand. Arrangements were made for a further sixteen tropicalised Spitfire Vs, already assigned to Malta to be packed up ready for despatch to Malta. Air Ministry's instruction was that the preparation of these aircraft was "to take precedence over any other Spitfire VB commitment." Fighter Command were instructed to provide sixteen pilots "of the highest quality and specially selected". Eight Blenheims IV aircraft, with experienced Bomber Command operational crews, were also required to act as escort, the navigators to be supplied by Coastal Command, as the previous specially selected navigators, for Operation "Quarter", had been found to be "much below average". At the same time, assurances were given to the Admiralty that the Blenheim crews would all be specially selected and would be "fully qualified for any form of night flying." Furthermore, the navigators would be fully qualified ones, drawn from Coastal Command.

Malta Strength
 and
 Reinforcement
 AHB./118/400(A)

On 11 March, instructions were issued to Coastal Command to provide the four navigators and these were selected from the station at Sumburgh, in the Shetlands.

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In the event, bad weather delayed not only the despatch of the eight Blenheims to Gibraltar, but also the arrival of the navigators from the Shetlands. As instructions were received from Gibraltar that the Blenheims were not to arrive there later than 18th March, and as the four Coastal Command navigators had still not arrived at Portreath by the 17th, it was decided that the original Bomber Command air observers should accompany the machines. The Blenheims accordingly left Portreath on 18th March and duly arrived that afternoon at Gibraltar. (1)

Operations 'Scantling'
and 'Picket' 57
AHB/II K/24/106

Operation "Picket", the second naval phase of Operation "Scantling", was launched on 20th March. At 14.40 hours, on the way to the flying-off position, there was an under-water explosion, due to an attack by an Italian submarine. It was established that the torpedo, having missed its objective, had exploded harmlessly at the end of its run. The agreed plan was for the Spitfires to take off in two flights of eight, escorted by two Blenheims, with a 45-minute interval between each flight. At the time of take-off from Gibraltar, however, it was discovered that only four of the Blenheims were serviceable. Of the remaining four, the first two failed to arrive over Force "H" at the set time, due to what was described as "an unwarrantable error of judgment" on the part of the leading pilot who considered that the head-wind was too strong to permit safe passage to Malta. Only one flight of Spitfires could take off on that date and these nine Spitfires, together with the two escorting Blenheims, arrived safely at Malta on 21st March.

(1) On a minute in which the D.O. Ops explained the failure of the four navigators to reach their destination in time, the C.A.S. minuted, "It's quicker by rail."

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The completion of Operation "Scantling/Picket" was accordingly postponed for 24 hours, by which time, although the Blenheims had been made serviceable, the weather had closed in so that visibility was reduced to 300 yards, the winds also being contrary.

The second phase of the operation was eventually launched on 29th March. More trouble was experienced with the Blenheims, two of which, owing to a misunderstanding of a message from the Eagle to "Go", returned to Gibraltar^r. However, that day a further seven Spitfires, together with three Blenheims and two Beauforts landed safely at Malta, bringing the total Spitfire reinforcement of the island to date up to 31.

Squadron O.R.Bs.

The first fighter squadron to become operational with Spitfires, at Malta, was No. 249 on 10th March, when they drew blood by shooting down a Me. 109. By 17th March, the Squadron had been completely rearmed with Spitfires. No. 126 Squadron did not finish rearming until the second week in April. No. 185 Squadron had been rearmed with Hurricane II (cannon) aircraft by 24th March.

A repetition of Operation "Picket" to be known as Operation "Gilman" was immediately put in hand by Air Ministry. Unfortunately, Operation "Gilman" had to be cancelled due to the fact that the Eagle had become temporarily unserviceable. The Decimation of No. 229 Squadron (Hurricane IIC) March, 1942.

In March, the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief, Middle East decided to reinforce the fighter defence of Malta with No. 229 Squadron which were equipped with Hurricane IIC aircraft. This made Malta's fourth fighter squadron (apart from the two "lodger" units Nos. 242 and 605 Squadron), the others being Nos. 126, 185 and 249 Squadrons. The A.O.C.-in-C. pointed out that he would be unable to follow up the move of

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Fighter Aircraft
Operational Policy
A.F.B./IIJ5/101/4(B)

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due to the diversion
of Hurricanes

No. 229 Squadron to Malta with other aircraft from the Middle East to India.

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No. 229 Squadron
O.R.B.

The move of No. 229 Squadron from the Middle East to Malta began on 27th March, when 10 aircraft (Hurricane IIC) fitted with long-range tanks, were flown from Gambut to Malta, landing safely at Takali. The second party of No. 229 Squadron comprising eight aircraft, arrived on 6th April and yet a third party of six aircraft on 19th April. The Squadron was attached to Hal Far Station and became operational on 1st April.

This squadron's record in Malta was nothing short of tragic and shows what small chance of survival there was on Malta, at that date, for a squadron equipped with admittedly obsolescent aircraft. By the end of No. 229 Squadron's first month on Malta (29th April) and without a single enemy aircraft confirmed as shot down to their credit, half the squadron's pilots had been either killed or wounded (4 killed and 5 wounded) and two thirds of their aircraft had been put out of action (nine destroyed, six of them on the ground, and seven damaged Cat. II). After 29th April, the squadron ceased to function. It was reformed at Ta Kali, on 3rd August, 1942, when it was rearmed with Spitfires.

Intensification of the Air "Blitz" on Malta, March, 1942.

March began with a sharp intensification of the Luftwaffe air attacks on Malta. Enemy sorties rose from 2497 in February to 4927 in March, an average rate of 160 aircraft a day throughout the whole month. (1) Attacks reached their climax in the period 20th March to 28th April, when Fliiegerkorps X and the forces of Fliiegerfuhrer Afrika joined in the raids and a total of 6,500 tons of bombs^{was} dropped on the island. The latter part of this phase is covered when dealing with April.

(1) 1425 bomber sorties, 3041 fighter sorties and 461 ~~see~~ ^{see} sorties.

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Axis Naval Policy
and Operations in
the Mediterranean
R.242.

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A comparison of the British and enemy air strengths, in mid-March, gives the following figures:-

R.A.F. on Malta, 13~~th~~ March, 1942

(1)

<u>Fighters</u>	<u>Cat. A</u>	<u>Cat. B.</u>	<u>Cat. C.</u>	<u>Total</u>
Spitfire	9	5	1	15
Hurricane	14	25	34	73
Beaufighter	1	6	-	7
<u>Light Bombers</u>				
Blenheim IV	-	2	1	3
<u>Medium Bombers</u>				
Wellington	3	5	2	10
	29	45	39	113

Middle East Strength
& Serviceability Returns
A.H.B./B/9/1

G.R.

Maryland

Light Bombers

Blenheim IV

Medium Bombers

Wellington

The above figures exclude Fleet Air Arm aircraft.

Luftwaffe on Sicily 14~~th~~ March, 1942

	<u>Strength</u>	<u>Serviceable</u>	<u>Strength</u>	<u>Serviceable</u>
<u>Recce.</u>	17	11	17	11
<u>Fighters</u>				
S.E.	146	115	-	-
Night	14	6	-	-
T.E.	19	12	179	133
<u>Bombers</u>				
D./Bombers	131	65	-	-
D./Bombers	25	20	156	85
Total.	351	229	352	229

Although the Italians had about 230 aircraft on Sicily (120 fighters, 60 bombers and 50 coastal) with a further 170 on Sardinia (60 fighters, 70 bombers and 40 coastal), they took only a minor part in the offensive against Malta at this time.

The R.A.F.'s average serviceability in fighters throughout March was only 12, so that the odds against them were in the region of 10 to 1, ignoring the Italian aircraft.

(1) Cat. A: Serviceable. Cat. B. Serviceable in 14 days. Cat. C. will take 14 or more days to pass into Cat. B.

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The ^serviceability of the two Naval Squadrons (Nos. 828 and 830 F.A.A.) also suffered severely and their striking power was reduced to merely one or two aircraft.

Apart from the period covering the arrival of the Vian convoy, the main weight of the enemy air assault was directed against Malta's air bases, and the following figures give an idea of the scale of the attacks:

R.A.F. Estimate of Enemy Sorties Flown AgainstMalta - March, 1942

<u>Target</u>	<u>Bombers</u>	<u>Fighters</u>	<u>Total</u>
Ta Kali	241	200	441
Hal Far	181	118	299
Luqa	245	309	554
Kalafrana	15	24	39
Dockyard	182	101	283
Elsewhere	194	600	794
	1058	1352	2410

Malta O.R.B.

These R.A.F. estimates are only approximately one half of the real figures revealed by German records (4927 sorties).

The A.O.C. Malta reviewed the situation in a signal to the A.O.C.-in-C. Middle East on 20th March:

Approximately 129 Me. 109 in Sicily. Our much attenuated fighter force putting up super effort against great odds, but it is impossible to go on. Unable to get near bombers owing to heavy escort. Attacks are sustained and time arrives when fighters must land when they are then bombed making refuelling and rearming very difficult, also grave risk damage to aircraft. It amounts to one sortie by all our fighters in sustained attack of several hours with varying numbers of fighter escort all greater than ours. Also have to cover all outgoing and incoming reconnaissances, day delivery and sea rescue.... When can we have more Spitfires?... We are convinced we can deal with the Germans if we have the tools here even reasonable quality.

D/A.O.C.-in-C. Malta
A.H.B./IIJ1/94/136(A)

Although the Malta O.R.B. gives the total of aircraft destroyed on the ground in the course of the above-mentioned attacks as 29 (18 Wellingtons, 5 Hurricanes, 2 Marylands, 2 Spitfires, 1 Blenheim and 1 Beaufighter), analysis of the

/reports

Station O.R.Bs,
Daily Int. Sums.
and Middle East
Opsums.

A.H.A./IIJ1/31/1

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reports from the various Stations (Halfar, Ta Kali, Luqa and Kalafrana), together with Intelligence Reports show that 46 aircraft were destroyed on the ground and a further 63 damaged.⁽¹⁾ R.A.F. losses in combat were 12 fighters (10 Hurricanes and 2 Spitfires), 9 of the pilots being killed. A further 5 pilots were killed, together with an Intelligence Officer, when a direct hit was scored on the Officers' Mess at Rabat, on 21st March.

From the beginning of the Luftwaffe's intensified air attacks, in the third week in December, 1941, to the end of March, 1942, Malta had lost 166 aircraft destroyed on the ground or in combat. Some idea of the magnitude of this figure, relative to the island's total air strength, is obtained when it is compared with the total R.A.F. strength on 13th March of 113 aircraft, with a serviceability of 29.

Casualties were beginning to mount and during the month they totalled 614 of which 191 were killed and the balance wounded. In the course of the concentrated air attacks on their stations, the R.A.F. lost 28 killed and 34 wounded. The Army lost 24 killed and 41 wounded, the balance being civilians.

The most outstanding feature of the month's air operations was the massed raids, sometimes with as many as one hundred bombers, on the R.A.F. bases. At Ta Kali, for instance, very extensive damage was done to barrack blocks, hangars and administrative buildings^{ings}, while the damage at Halfar and Luqa was only less serious in degree. A series of concentrated ^{Ju. 88s} and heavy raids on Ta Kali, by a total of some 200 ~~500~~ put the airfield out of action for days on end demolished nearly all the buildings. In the course of two days' heavy raids on 20~~th~~ and 21~~st~~ March it was estimated that 1500 bombs were dropped on Ta Kali airfield. The Station reported "a large number of absentees" and special police patrols were inaugurated and all shelters searched. Large Army salvage and

/working

(1) Part of this discrepancy is due to the fact that Stations counted as "burnt out on the ground" aircraft which had already been damaged past repair in previous air-raids.

Raids on Malta.
A.H.R./IJ5/113/5/66.

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working parties were brought in and, assisted by all available officers and men, under the direction of the Commanding Officer, the runways had again been made serviceable by the night of 22nd March.

67 The work involved in repairing the aerodromes is enormous, the A.O.C. Malta wrote to the V.C.A.S. on 27th March. We have had three shifts of Army, two by day and one by night. Even with that effort we are not clear after three days. The aerodrome is clear but inviguable taxi-tracks to dispersal point are still blocked. A serious limitation is rollers. We have nine and there are ten on the island. We work them all day and all night, in shifts of three. Another limitation is cranes. We have only two on the island. Removing salvage, normal repair work which requires cranes, moving engines and packing cases is very, very difficult with our limited resources.

67 A raid on Hal Far by 30 Ju. 88s and 87s on 26~~th~~ March caused severe damage and casualties. The Naval Wing of the Officers' Mess⁵ and a number of barrack blocks were destroyed and there was extensive damage to other buildings. After the raid, there were 25 Service personnel and 4 civilians either killed or missing and many others injured. In spite of this, Hurricane²s were airborne from Hal Far that very afternoon. They intercepted eight Ju. 88s which were about to attack the Station again, scoring hits on at least three of them and causing the others to jettison their bombs.

67 We had a taste of Ju. 87s on Hal Far yesterday, the A.O.C. Malta wrote on 27th March. Unfortunately two shelters had direct hits and some men were killed. Shelters are a grave danger unless they are really deep in the rock. Shelter trenches are far better and our losses in the event of a direct hit far less. Bombs were all of heavy calibre. Some very heavy. The mess on the station must be seen to be believed. Big double-deck barrack blocks completely destroyed. The spirit on the station is first class compared with Ta Kali. We had few aircraft there as somehow we felt that Hal Far would be next on the visiting list. Two aircraft were slightly damaged.

67 Hal Far Another heavy raid on Hal Far took place on the last day of March when, among other damage, a hangar was hit and a number of aircraft burned out.

/Luqa

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D.O. file
A.H.B./IIJ5/113/9/5.

Hal Far O.R.B.

D.O. File
A.H.B./IIJ5/113/9/5.

67
Hal Far

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Station O.R.B.
and Daily Int.
Sums.
A.H.R./H.T.57/113/5/15.

Luqa was bombed almost daily by small formations of enemy bombers and suffered heavy loss of aircraft. In all, 63 aircraft were destroyed or damaged at Luqa during the month, 44 of them Wellingtons (20 destroyed and 24 damaged). The balance consisted of Blenheims (1 destroyed and 6 damaged), Marylands (1 destroyed and 5 damaged), Beaufighters (4 damaged), and a Spitfire and a Mosquito damaged. Among these were a number of delivery aircraft, destined for the Middle East. Many administrative buildings were severely damaged and, as had happened on all the other airfields, precious motor-transport and petrol-bowsers suffered.

One of the worst days at Luqa was 8th March when there were continuous alerts from dawn until dusk. In addition to casualties to aircraft from bombing, ^{nine} 9 airmen were injured in a 'bus travelling to the station and ^{two} 2 of No. 37 Squadron aircraft collided during the night, on the airfield, killing ^{five} 5 and injuring ^{eight} 8. On 9th March, ^{seven} 7 Wellingtons were burned out and ^{four} 4 damaged and a number of soldiers wounded in a series of raids involving 40 bombers which attacked Luqa in waves throughout the day.

In spite of the arrival of 31 Spitfires from H.M.S. Eagle and 21 Hurricanes of No. 229 Squadron from the Middle East, the whole of Malta's fighter force could not muster an average of more than 12 ^{serviceable} aircraft a day. The arrival of the Spitfires had temporarily a deferrent effect on the enemy, but the Germans immediately countered this by greatly increasing their fighter cover, thus making it very difficult for the R.A.F. fighters to reach the bombers. Maintenance of the fighters was greatly hampered not only by the constant air-raid alert, but ^{by} the acute/shortage of spares.

Yet, in spite of the serious air situation at Malta, in ~~(and prospects)~~ March, 1942, the A.O.C. was still able to write in optimistic vein:

/s/We

D.O. Letters. 67

"We are doing a good deal of quiet consolidation against the day when we can hit back. That day is not far distant. When that day arrives, Malta will be a far better place and a very good air base."

7

Naval Damage from Air Attack March, 1942

"The War at Sea"
Volume III

During March, the Royal Navy also suffered considerable losses from enemy air attack. On 3rd March, the submarine Upright which was due to sail for the United Kingdom to refit, was damaged. As a result, the naval authorities at Malta decided to disperse the submarines and to keep them dived by day, unless they were alongside for repair. As will be seen, enemy air attacks finally forced the 10th Submarine Flotilla to evacuate the island on 26th April, when they were sent to Alexandria.

Fairly extensive damage was also caused in the dockyard, and on 25th March the Naval Armament Depot had a direct hit ^{which} ~~which~~ completely demolished the joiner's shop. This happened at a time when Operation "Fullsize", the Vian convoy, had reached Malta, details of which are given in a later part of the Narrative. Enemy air attacks then reached a high degree of intensity and destructiveness. In addition to the sinking of the three merchant ships from the convoy, Breconshire, ^{Talabot} ~~Talabat~~ and Pampas, the cruiser Penelope was holed both forward and aft, the destroyer Legion was sunk and the submarine P.39 was split amidship and had to be beached.

TALABOT/

It was in March that orders were given to pass the 3rd Motor Launch Flotilla through from Gibraltar to Alexandria. Two of the motor launches⁵ arrived safely at Malta, but two others failed to arrive. It ^{became} ~~became~~ known later that one had been sunk by Italian aircraft and the other, having been badly damaged, was forced into Bône to effect temporary repairs. The French, however, refused permission for the repairs to be carried out at Bône and the crews of both motor-launches were interned. In the light of this experience, the balance of the 3rd Flotilla,

/together

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together with the 27th Flotilla, were sent to Alexandria via the Cape.

Comparative Enemy and R.A.F. Air Losses March, 1942

During March, the Luftwaffe on Sicily lost 51 aircraft, 20 of them listed as being "not due to enemy action", 22 "cause unknown", 6 by fighters and 3 from A.A. gunfire. All the "cause unknown" were over Malta, or in the vicinity of the island, and were therefore almost certainly due to either R.A.F. fighters or A.A. gunfire. The Luftwaffe's operational losses in action against Malta, during March, therefore, amounted to approximately 30 aircraft.

Malta O.R.B. and
Station O.R.Bs.

As has already been noted, the R.A.F. losses in combat during March, 1942, amounted to 12 fighters (10 Hurricanes and 2 Spitfires), with 9 pilots killed or missing. A further 46 aircraft of all categories were destroyed on the ground by hostile action, among them being a number of transit aircraft.

Claims by the R.A.F. amounted to 31 destroyed; by A.A. gunfire to 28 destroyed; and by Naval vessels, in the vicinity of the island, to 1 destroyed; a combined total of 60.

Although the R.A.F. losses during the month, particularly on the ground, were little short of catastrophic, the Luftwaffe's own operational losses were undoubtedly serious. In a single month they had lost 20% of their Ju. 88 bomber force based on Sicily, some 14% of them over the island of Malta. Their Me. 109 fighter losses totalled 15%. The proportion of the serviceable aircraft lost was, of course, much higher and, in the case of the bombers amounted to 40%, and 20% of the fighters.

Operations by No. 37 Squadron (Wellingtons) and Return of the Squadron to the Middle East March 28th, 1942.

Within less than a month of commencing operations from Luqa, on the night 23/24 February, the detachment of No. 37 Squadron had been forced to evacuate the island and return to Egypt.

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No. 37 Squadron
O.R.B.

The heavy bombing of Luqa so decimated the squadron that, by 18 March, of the fifteen aircraft which had flown to Malta, nine had been destroyed on the ground. Two others were lost in an accident on the night 8/9 March. Two more aircraft were allotted, but in turn these were destroyed by enemy action. The Detachment's three remaining aircraft were so badly damaged that they were virtually useless. This left only one serviceable aircraft for the return trip to Egypt and thus squadron personnel had to wait at Malta for the arrival of reinforcement Wellingtons, in transit to the Middle East, before they could make the return trip. The squadron carried out its last operation from Malta on the night 13/14 March and the Detachment was reunited with its parent unit at Shallufa, Egypt, by the end of the month.

A.O.C. Malta
A48/11J1/94/136(A)

In view vital importance maintaining fighter escort with additional Spitfires and 229 Squadron, the A.O.C. Malta signalled H.Q. Middle East, on 19 March, must banish Wellington effort from here for time-being. Fighter repairs must be on 24-hour shift. Must get on top German effort before taking Wellingtons again. May ask loan of Squadron short period special jobs. Regret this very much. Am sure it is right at present. Will give us far greater dispersal and more room in which to operate.

No. 37 Squadron
R.B.

In spite of the destruction of all but one of their aircraft and a tragic accident on the night of 8/9 March, when two aircraft collided, No. 37 Squadron Detachment managed to account for 13,000 tons of enemy shipping in March. In the collision between the two Wellingtons, due to one of them moving on to the runway without receiving a "green", 5 aircrew were killed and 6 injured. One of the aircrew, F/O Kirkman, rear-gunner, had a miraculous escape, being blown out of his turret when the aircraft's mines exploded and he escaped virtually unhurt. But this was not all. Earlier in the day, a crowded 'bus carrying No. 37 Squadron Maintenance personnel to Luqa was attacked by an enemy aircraft which dropped four personnel bombs, one just in front of the vehicle and the other behind. The 'bus was riddled with shrapnel and there

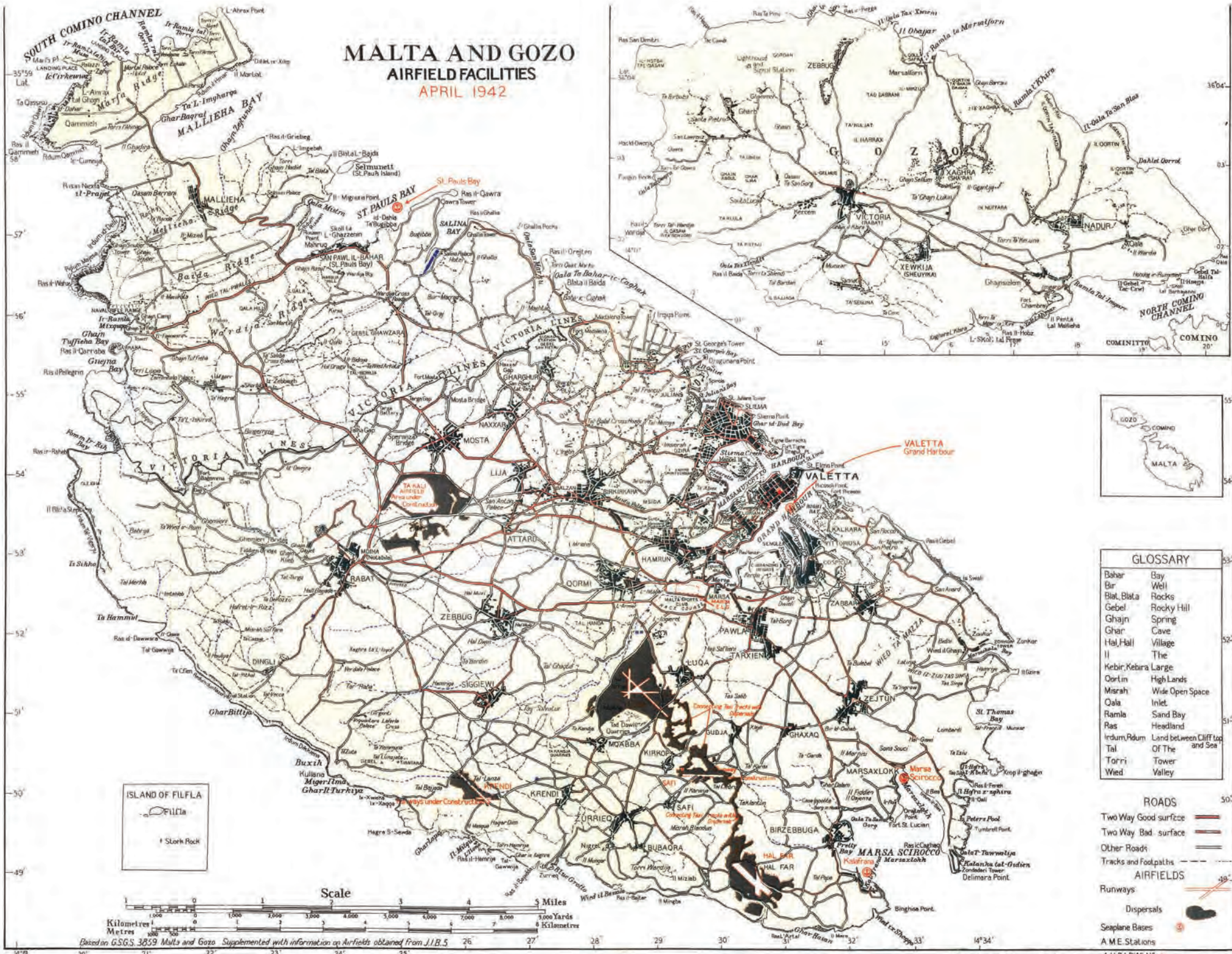
/were

S E C R E T

MALTA AND GOZO

AIRFIELD FACILITIES

APRIL 1942



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were six casualties, one subsequently dying from his injuries.

During March, the Wellingtons of No. 37 Squadron carried out ^{eight} operations, involving 39 sorties, before returning to Egypt. Tripoli, Palermo and Catania were bombed and mines were laid outside Tripoli harbour. The detachment's most successful operation was at Palermo, on the night 2/3~~rd~~ March. The story begins with a reconnaissance flight on 2~~nd~~ March (12.15 to 17.05 hours) by Flight Lieutenant Warburton of No. 69 Squadron over Palermo. On the previous day his aircraft had been attacked and damaged over Palermo, on photographic reconnaissance, but he set out again on 2~~nd~~ March and, in spite of being attacked by two formations of 7 and 5 Me. 109s, he managed to evade the enemy and bring back the required photographs which led to a brilliant bombing strike by Wellingtons of No. 37 Squadron. The aircraft attacked in two waves, during the night 2/3~~rd~~ March sinking the Cuma of 6652 tons (German), the Securitas of 5366 tons (Italian) and the Tre Marie (Italian) of 1086 tons.

The Italian report on this highly-successful operation is most interesting:

During the night of 2/3~~rd~~ March, bomber aircraft flying in fairly close formation carried out two attacks on important targets in the Port of Palermo, dropping a very large number of H.E. bombs and incendiaries. A German ship ~~anchored~~ close to one of the moles was hit, causing it to explode. This explosion seriously damaged one merchant ship, one tanker and a lighter further along the quay: later all three sank. Among the warships which were in port, one destroyer was seriously damaged and three others suffered slight damage. In addition, a number of civic buildings in the district adjoining the harbour were hit, killing and injuring a large number of civilians.

The hits on the German ship, the Cuma, mentioned in the above report, were scored in a simultaneous attack by two aircraft, one led by Sqn.Ldr. Tomkins and the other by Sgt. Fuller. No. 39910 Sqn.Ldr. Tomkins was awarded the D.F.C. and No. A402052 Sgt. Fuller the D.F.M.

Enemy Shipping Losses March, 1942

The total of enemy shipping sunk by all causes in the Mediterranean during March amounted to 53,692 tons,

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H.Q. Middle East
Ops and No.
(Squadron O.R.B.

A.H.B.6.

anchored

No. 37 Squadron
O.R.B.

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(1) made up as follows:

<u>Navy</u>	<u>Mine</u>	<u>Aircraft</u>	<u>Air Raid</u>
32,714 tons,	6,008,	1,778	13,192

A.H.B. List of
Enemy Shipping
Losses.

The Achaia, a German ship of 1,778 tons, was attacked by Fleet Air Arm Swordfish of No. 830 Squadron, on the night 17/18th March, when located about 25 miles to the north-east of Tripoli. She was blazing fiercely when the Swordfish left. One aircraft was lost in this attack. According to the Admiralty, the Achaia was shared between aircraft and a mine.

Details of the sinking by Wellingtons of No. 37 Squadron of 13,104 tons of shipping at Palermo on the night of 2/3rd March are given in the preceding Section. A French tug Porthos of 88 tons was also sunk by air action.

"Navi Perdute"

In March, the enemy lost 10,000 tons of supplies for their forces in North Africa out of 57,500 tons despatched. Only one third of the tonnage despatched, or 19,000 tons, was for the German forces and of this total 6,000 tons was lost. It is not surprising that Rommel complained frequently that, in spite of the fact that the Germans did the major part of the fighting, a disproportionate amount of the tonnage of supplies shipped to North Africa was for the Italians. For example, out of 924,000 tons despatched to the Axis forces in North Africa in 1942, only 332,000 tons was for the Germans.

Improvements to the "Y" Intercept Service at Malta, March, 1942.

Between 14th February and 11th March, 1942, a W.A.A.F. "Y" Intercept Service expert visited Malta, at the request of Air Ministry. She found that the main difficulties being experienced there were due to the lack of suitably trained personnel, and also equipment. At the time of her visit, Malta had one Signals Officer, one W/T Officer, one Flight Sergeant, two Sgt. Interceptors (one German and one Italian), one Sgt. Computer and 20 W/Ops. They had the standard general purpose W/T communication equipment for long-range inter-Command working,

D/AOC-in-C
Malta.
A.H.A./I.I.J.1/94/136(A)

for aircraft guard and aircraft D/F. But the number of sets
(1) A small balance of 148 tons, due to cause unknown, is
excluded from this total. /in

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in use (two R.1084, one R.1082, one DFG.10, one SX.24, one S.27 and one S.21) were quite inadequate for their varied requirements which, besides point-to-point communication, included H/F and M/F, D/F, H/F and V.H.F. beam-watch and R.D.F. coverage.

Middle East was circularised for fluent German linguists, but only one proved worth-while. However, a pilot officer, two sergeants posted in from the Middle East and a civilian borrowed from the Navy at Malta, were added to the personnel and various improvements were also made to the serviceability of equipment and the siting of stations. As a result, the intercept service was much improved and found to be of high operational value. For instance, one of the enemy bomber units, KG 77, based at Comiso, was found to follow a definite routine beginning with the announcement of their take-off, when the fighter escort had started, when they had crossed the coast and the height at which both they and their escort were flying.

Frequently, a warning could be given to the Controller of the approach of enemy bombers up to forty minute before an R.D.F. plot appeared on the board. From both fighter and bomber intercepts, it was possible to keep the Controller informed of flying heights, tactical instructions and the intention to attack.

On 20th March, the A.O.C.-in-C., Middle East, ⁱⁿ ~~the~~ a signal to the C.A.S. mentioned that the:

Recent visit to Malta by "Y" expert has greatly improved length of warning. From all accounts morale at Malta is extraordinarily high, in view of almost impossible conditions under which they are operating. Improved information regarding raids and above all arrival of Spitfires was most valuable tonic, but one is disturbed at limited degree of help able to give from this end at present.

/Operation

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(M.W.10)

Operation "Fullsize" ~~(M.W.10)~~, the Vian Convey to Malta, 20-23 March.

War Cabinet
Correspondence.
A.H.B./ID8/34.

(M.W.10) /

As has already been noted, the total failure of the February convoy to Malta (MW 9) resulted in a revaluation of the strategic significance of Malta and a directive from the Chiefs of Staff to the Commanders-in-Chief, Middle East that a convoy to Malta was to be "your primary military commitment". (M.W.10) ~~(M.W.10)~~ Operation "Fullsize", the March convoy to Malta, was therefore planned as an important combined operation in which the resources of the three Services were fully employed.

"The War at Sea"
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Admiral Cunningham, the naval Commander-in-Chief, decided to use the whole British Mediterranean strength in cruisers and destroyers, under Rear-Admiral Philip Vian. (1) In addition, the land forces in North Africa were to stage a feint attack, with four strong armoured columns, against enemy positions and landing-grounds at Tmimi and Martuba, in order to divert the enemy's attention from the convoy by leading him to think that a full-size attack was imminent.

The role assigned to the Royal Air Force was :

- (a) Provide the Royal Navy with reconnaissance.
- (b) The strategic bombing of enemy air bases in Crete and Greece.
- (c) Provide the convoy with fighter cover.
- (d) Support the feint land-attack with reconnaissance, fighter-sweeps and the bombing of landing-grounds.

Convoy MW 10 consisting of H.M.S. Breconshire (10,000 tons and 17 knots), Glan Campbell (7,500 tons and 14 $\frac{1}{2}$ knots), Talbot (Norwegian of 7,000 tons and 14 $\frac{1}{2}$ knots) and Pampas (5,500 tons and 15 knots) assembled at Alexandria. The naval escort for the major part of the voyage, known as Force 'B', comprised the A.A. cruiser Carlisle and the 5th Destroyer Flotilla, which acted as close escort, together with a covering force of the

Admiralty Battle
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/15th

(1) Operation "Fullsize" was the last operation in which Admiral Sir Andrew Cunningham participated before leaving for Washington, in early April, 1942. He was succeeded as C.-in-C. Mediterranean by Vice-Admiral Pridham-Wippell who in turn was succeeded by Vice-Admiral Sir Henry Harwood, in May, 1942.

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15th Cruiser Squadron, the Cleopatra, Rear-Admiral Vian's flagship ⁽¹⁾ the Dido and Euryalus and the 14th and 22nd Destroyer Flotillas. In all, there were ^{sixteen} ~~16~~ destroyers. ⁽²⁾

It was planned that the convoy should rendezvous as early as possible after daylight on D3 (22~~nd~~ March) with Force 'K', H.M. cruiser Penelope and the destroyer Legion which were to leave Malta on D2 (21~~st~~ March). The convoy would then finish its voyage to Malta under cover of the combined escorts, while Force 'B' returned to Alexandria.

The convoy, carrying approximately two months' maintenance stocks for both the military and civil populations of Malta (with the exception of oil fuel) left Alexandria at 07.00 hours on 20~~th~~ March, accompanied by the A.A. cruiser Carlise and ^{six} ~~6~~ destroyers. At 18.00 hours on the evening of the same day, Rear-Admiral Vian left Alexandria in his flagship the Cleopatra with Dido Euryalus and four destroyers. On 21~~st~~ March they were joined by six "Hunt" destroyers from Tobruk.

Prior to the sailing of the convoy and during the operation, the R.A.F. and F.A.A. supported the Army's feint advance to

divert enemy attention from attacking the convoy by bombing the airfields at Martuba, Derna, Berka and Barce. On 18~~th~~ March, the night 18/19~~th~~ and on 19~~th~~ March, Bostons and F.A.A. Albacores attacked Martuba. Wellington and F.A.A. Albacores bombed Berka and Derna on the night 20/21~~st~~ March. On 21~~st~~ March Bostons attacked Barce. During the night 22/23~~rd~~ March, Wellingtons attacked Berka and Martuba was again bombed on 23~~rd~~ March.

/In

(1) The flagship of Rear-Admiral Vian, the Naiad, had been sunk on March 11~~th~~ with the loss of 2 officers and 80 ratings by a submarine off the North African coast, when searching for a southbound enemy convoy.

(2) The Heythrop had been sunk on 20~~th~~ March in the course of a submarine sweep.

S E C R E T

Middle East
Strategy and
Defence Policy.

A.H.B./J A / 9 / 22 (A)

R.A.F. Operations
in the Western
Desert IIJ1/12 and
Middle East Opsums.

A.H.B./J J 5 / 3 / 1

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In accordance with the plan for Operation "Fullsize" strategic bombing attacks were also carried out against enemy air bases on Crete and Greece, between 20th March and the night 23/24 March by Blenheims and Wellingtons. Unfortunately, these operations were hampered by bad weather with 8 to 9/10ths cloud, together with severe electric storms, and the results were poor.

R.A.F. fighter patrols accompanied the convoy to the "utmost limit of their range" and, according to the Royal Navy "this duty was nobly performed until 09.00 hours on 22nd March, when the aircraft were over 300 miles from their base."

The combined air and army attacks against enemy airfields on the Cyrenaican "hump" (the Army were particularly successful and managed to shell the Martuba landing-ground) did help materially to reduce the enemy air reconnaissance. It was only by chance that the convoy was located at 17.02 hours on 21st March, by five Ju. 52s, when north of Derna. (1) "Air attacks," says a report by Admiral Weichold, "on the same scale as in February were organised and the Italian Navy decided to join in the operations also. The new battleship Littorio, two heavy cruisers and one light cruiser accompanied by eleven destroyers, sailed for the waters east of Malta." (1)

At 01.30 hours on 22nd March, submarine P.36 reported that heavy ships were leaving Taranto. It was evident that both the convoy and her escort were not to remain unmolested for much longer by the enemy and naval forces.

/The

(1) Sighting reports were also made by two Italian Submarines on 21st March.

(1) The British report states erroneously that there were two heavy and four light cruisers. In this case, Weichold is wrong as only eight destroyers took part in the action.

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Malta Convoys for
1942. Battle
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^s
Axis Naval Policy
and Operations in
the Mediterranean.
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The air attacks began at 09.30 hours on 22nd March half an hour after the last fighter patrol had had to leave the convoy. A Ju. 88 had been shadowing the convoy from daylight, apparently waiting for this opportunity. Altogether, it was estimated that no less than 150 enemy aircraft - torpedo and high-level bombers, shadowers and spotting aircraft - were engaged in the subsequent attacks. Those made by the Italian S.79 aircraft were described as "futile", but those made by the German bombers were much more serious and the merchantmen and their escorts were only able to avoid damage, at this stage, with great difficulty, by taking evasive action and using every A.A. gun in a barrage.

*Italian Account
of the Second
Battle of Sirte.
Admiralty Hist.
Section.*

At 14.30 hours, after the convoy had been joined as arranged by Force ^AK from Malta, the first contact was made with enemy naval forces. This was the Italian 3rd Division, the Gorizia and Trento (8 -inch cruisers) and the Bande Nere (6-inch cruiser) which approached from the north, but after an exchange of fire, they were driven off by the covering force under Vice-Admiral Vian. According to the enemy, "At 14.30 hours, the cruisers drawn up ahead, sighted the British force, whereupon they turned in close formation for a running battle. However, shortly afterwards, they received an order from the Commander-in-Chief to form up with the battleship which was still some distance astern, as the C.-in-C. wanted to go into battle in close formation. The cruisers therefore broke off the action, with the result that both sides lost contact again." Reinforced by the battleship ^{Littorio}~~Littorio~~, naval action was again joined at 16.40 hours and continued sporadically for some two-and-a-half hours, until 19.00 hours, when the Italian Commander-in-Chief called off his forces and returned to port.

In addition to the Italians' disinclination to fight at night, they also feared air attack. They had been told by their Air Ministry that a squadron of English bombers had left

/Malta

H.Q. Malta Daily
Int. Sums and
Middle East Opsums.
44.8/15/31/1

Malta at sunset on 22~~nd~~ March. This formation had penetrated the German fighter screen and was steering east. Shortly afterwards, the Italian Air Ministry's order to return to base was received. The aircraft which caused such alarm were five Albacores of No. 828 Squadron F.A.A. on a shipping sweep to the south-east of Malta. They were escorted for part of the way by three Spitfires which shot down a Me. 109 into the sea. Visibility was very bad. The Albacores sighted nothing and were recalled.

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The British escort,^a says Admiral Weichold, in his account of the engagement, "always kept between the Italian force and the ships in convoy and, by skilful manoeuvring and the use of smoke-screens, deprived the Italians of the chance of firing on the ships. Any attempt by the Italians to fight a running battle in close formation with the whole area hidden in smoke was bound to fail."

Italian Official
Account.

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The Italian Admiral attributed his failure mainly to the effect of the violent weather on the optical firing instruments which became misted and salted up in the heavy seas which also, he asserted, affected the hulls of the warships. He also paid tribute to the Royal Navy's skilful use of smoke.

In the course of the action, the battleship Littorio was hit by gunfire (not a torpedo, as was thought by the British). Two destroyers, the Lanciere and Scirocco, sank in the rough sea "due primarily to shipping large quantities of salt water through insecure portholes" in the hurried return to port, and a cruiser, the damaged ^aGiovannia delle Bande Nere was torpedoed and sunk by the ^eUrag on her way back to base at La Spezia, on 1~~st~~ April.

On the British side, the flagship Cleopatra had been hit on the bridge, sustaining minor damage, while three destroyers, the Havoc, Kingston and Lively had also been damaged ^aby shellfire, hardly supporting the Italian Admiral's claim of the effect of the high seas on the ships' gun-sights. Throughout the action, the convoy was being attacked by German bombers. Although they failed to score any hits, they caused the ships' escort

Battle Summary
No. 32. IIC/18/25.
(A.H.B.)

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to exhaust the greater part of their ammunition which had a direct bearing on success of the enemy aircraft on the following day. ²¹Winghold attributed the lack of success of the bombers to the fact that they were operating at the extreme limit of their range. The bad weather conditions and the pall of smoke over the area must also have been a great hindrance to accurate bombing.

The Italian fleet, by forcing the convoy to the south of its route, had delayed its arrival at Malta and thereby gave the Luftwaffe a second chance. In spite of the thick weather, enemy aircraft appeared at first light on the morning of 23rd March and, on the last stage of their journey to Malta, the convoy had to run the gauntlet of heavy air attacks, in company with their escort Penelope and Legion, a number of destroyers and the Havoc and Kingston which had been found to be too badly damaged to make the return trip to Alexandria, in the face of a rising gale.

Attacks on the Malta air bases, during this time, had been concentrated and severe. Between 18 and 22 March, 570 aircraft attacked the island, their objective being mainly to ^{Hal Far.}ground the fighters at Ta Kali and ~~Walfar~~. In this they had been largely successful and on 23rd March, when the convoy should have come within the protection of Malta's shore-based fighters, Malta's Spitfires and Hurricanes were able to fly only 42 sorties, the aircraft being airborne mainly in pairs. The island's A.A. defence was also constantly in action. On 23rd March, the enemy concentrated the whole of their air effort against the convoy, no bombs being dropped on land objectives. The scale of attack was such that the fighter defence which the island was able to provide the incoming convoy was swamped.

At 10.30 hours, the Clan Campbell was hit and sunk when ^{twenty} only 20 miles from her destination by a bomb which was dropped

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H.Q. Middle East
Opsums and Malta
Daily Int. Sums.

A.H. 8/IIJ/113/5/15

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from only fifty feet, her escort managing to save 112 officers and men in a very heavy sea. Signals were received from the Clan Campbell's bridge until she disappeared and her Master went down with ^{his} ship. Ten minutes earlier, when no more than eight miles from Grand Harbour, the Breconshire was hit in the engine-room. As the Carlisle was by that time almost out of ammunition, the Penelope decided to take the Breconshire in tow. However, owing to the heavy swell running and her great draught, that was found to be impracticable, so she was anchored and three destroyers stayed to protect her. In the course of the attacks on the Breconshire, the Legion was also badly damaged and had to be beached at Marsaxlokk.

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In spite of having been hit by two bombs which failed to explode, the Pampas arrived safely at Grand Harbour at about 09.30 hours, together with the Talabot, which was also undamaged. The last casualty during this phase of the convoy operation happened when the destroyer Southwold, which was standing by the damaged Breconshire, outside Grand Harbour, was sunk by a mine. Heavy weather made it impossible to move the damaged Breconshire into harbour until 25th March, when she was towed into Marsaxlokk Bay.

In the meantime, Force 'B' which had separated from the Malta convoy at 19.40 hours on 22nd March, soon after the Italian ships had disappeared, had set course for Alexandria. There was an easterly gale and the ships met only light air attacks. Protection was given by R.A.F. fighters at very long distances from their base. Apart from some slight damage to the destroyer Lively which put into Tobruk, the main force arrived safely at Alexandria at mid-day on 24th March.

The arrival of the Breconshire, Pampas and Talabot at Malta, on 23rd March, virtually completed Operation "Fullsize" which, up to that particular moment and under the conditions

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then prevailing of enemy air and naval superiority, must be considered as a success. The combined army and air attacks on the Martuba landing-grounds had prevented enemy air reconnaissance in the convoy's early stages, thus enabling it to pass through "bomb-alley", between Crete and Cyrenaica, in safety. Subsequently, in the engagement in the Bay of Sirte, four British light cruisers and eleven destroyers had held off and finally routed an enemy force consisting of a capital ship, three cruisers (two heavy and one light) and eight destroyers. Three out of four ships (Breconshire, Talabot and Pampas) had reached Malta, a fourth, the Glan Campbell, having been sunk when only twenty miles short of her destination.

The heavy bombing of Malta's landing grounds, together with adverse weather conditions, reduced the air reconnaissance activity from Malta very seriously throughout the vital period when the convoy was subject to interception by the Italian fleet. In March, No. 69 Squadron sustained heavy losses. Two Marylands were destroyed by enemy action on the ground, two more were shot down on operations and two were damaged. A seventh Maryland was damaged, on landing, through undercarriage failure and subsequently had to be written off. The unit's only Mosquito was shot down and a Beaufighter damaged by enemy bombing. This left the squadron with only one Maryland and one Beaufighter serviceable and one Spitfire.

No. 69 Squadron
O.R.B.

Enemy Air Attacks Against Malta, 24 - 26 March: Loss of the Breconshire, Talabot and Pampas.

The arrival of the Breconshire, Talabot and Pampas, with 26,000 tons of supplies for Malta, was the signal for the Luftwaffe to launch a series of ferocious attacks which reached a peak of intensity on 26th March when, according to enemy sources, they put up 326 aircraft in order to sink the three remaining ships.

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67 On 23rd March, when the Glan Campbell was sunk and the Breconshire seriously damaged, the enemy flew 88 sorties against the convoy. However, as has been seen, both the Pampas and Talabot arrived safely in port. According to the A.O.C. Malta, instead of the naval authorities moving the two ships to the best-sheltered quays, with towering fortifications, where they would have been afforded some protection and thus avoided being an "easy target in all directions", the Talabot was left in mid-stream and the Pampas was moored at an open quay. No use was also made of smoke with which, according to the A.O.C. Malta, it would have been easy to have covered the ships.

c) Before the arrival of the convoy, the A.O.C. Malta had also pressed that "regardless of bombing, every soldier, airmen and civilian must unload every minute of every 24 hours." In the event, little was done between the arrival of the ships, on the morning of 23rd March, until they were finally sunk on 26th March. R.A.F. personnel took off their deck cargo and what they could get hold of "with great difficulty and no assistance". Only some 5,000 tons of cargo was salvaged including 10 cases of Merlin aero engines (4 for Spitfires and 6 for Hurricanes), a large 14-cwt. case of parachutes, 18 drums of Glycol, 1 bomb-trolley, 152 drums of red dope, together with miscellaneous cases and drums of paints and dopes, many of which had been damaged as deck cargo. Some petrol was also salvaged from the Breconshire.

It should be pointed out that it would have been dangerous to have moored the Talabot anywhere but in mid-stream, as she was carrying explosives.

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During the night 23/24 March, there was no enemy air activity whatsoever over Malta and it was evident that resources were being conserved for the following day when some 200 aircraft attacked targets in the Grand Harbour and the airfields of Halfar and Luqa. This high level of effort was attended with but slight success in the ^erepeated attempts to sink the ships. Another 100 sorties were flown on 25th March, but it was not until 26th March when 326 aircraft operated against the island that the main objective was achieved. In the course of these attacks, which continued from dawn to dusk, the Talabot was hit twice, set on fire and scuttled in order to avoid her ammunition exploding. The Pampas was hit and grounded, with decks awash and all but two of her holds flooded. The Breconshire was set on fire and she sank at 11.00 hours the next day, 27th March. In the course of these heavy and sustained attacks, on 26th March, the cruiser Penelope was holed both forward and aft and the submarine P. 39 was so badly damaged, being split amidships, that she had to be beached.

The Enemy Air Offensive April, 1942

As has already been seen, the arrival of the "Fullsize" Convoy off Malta, on 23rd March was the beginning of Malta's greatest ordeal. It was an all-out attempt to neutralise the island's air and A.A. defence by concentrated air assault. Between 20th March and 28th April, units of Fliegerkorps X and Fliegerfuhrer Afrika joined in the raids on Malta and a total of 6,500 tons of bombs was dropped. The March figure of 4,927 sorties, high though it was, was almost doubled in April and rose to 9,599 sorties. (1)

The number of aircraft destroyed or damaged on the ground throughout the month of April, amounted to 126 (44 destroyed and 82 damaged) which was equivalent to practically the whole of /Malta's

(1) The R.A.F. estimate of enemy sorties flown against the island, 4904 sorties, was almost half of the official enemy figure, but their estimate of the weight of bombs dropped, 6,727 tons, was reasonably accurate.

'The War at Sea'
"THE WAR AT SEA"
Vol. 3.

Weichold. R.242.

H.Q. Middle East
Table of Operations
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A.H.B./
H.Q. Mediterranean
O.R.B. IIM/AL7/1.

Malta's air strength. Of the aircraft destroyed, 18 were Wellingtons, 10 Hurricanes, 7 Spitfires, 3 Beauforts, 2 Albacores, 2 Hudsons, 1 Swordfish and 1 Walrus, a number of these aircraft being in transit (e.g. the Beauforts). Of the aircraft listed as damaged, more than one half (54) were fighters. A further 20 fighters were destroyed in combat (11 Spitfires, 8 Hurricanes and 1 Beaufighter), the pilots of 6 of the Spitfires and 5 of the Hurricanes being lost. Before the arrival of Spitfire reinforcements, on 20th April, there were days when the whole of Malta's fighter force was grounded due to unserviceability. The average daily serviceability of fighters throughout the month totalled no more than 6 fighters.

The R.A.F. estimate of sorties flown against Malta during April gives the following figures:

Attacks on Malta
~~AB34~~ IJJ5/110
A.H.B./

<u>April</u>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
	249	149	187	204	261	109	357	272	179	167
	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20
	186	187	55	163	20	9	2	204	164	328
	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30
	151	160	136	165	255	134	128	216	39	68

The combined total proved to be about one half of the sortie figure given by the enemy in their records.

A measure of the scale of attack is given in the R.A.F. estimate by target:

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<u>Target</u>	<u>Bombers and Dive-bombers</u>	<u>Tons of Bombs</u>
Ta Kali	460	840
Halfar	440	750
Luqa	470	800
Kalafrana	110	200
Dockyard	1580	3150
Elsewhere	540	980

The enemy air offensive against Malta did not follow the fixed priorities set by Kesselring:

/Phase I:

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*The War in the
Mediterranean
by F/H. Kesselring A.H.B.6
Trans. No. VII/106*

- Phase I: neutralisation of A.A. defences.
" II: mass attacks against airfields and aircraft.
" III: attacks against naval forces, dockyards and
installations at La Valletta until completely
destroyed.

*Memorandum on the
Malta Situation
Issued by the Italian
Air Staff.
A.H.B.6 Trans. No.
VII/57*

In point of fact, the enemy failed to adhere to any fixed list of scientifically devised priorities and, as the Italian Air Staff stated in a Memorandum on the subject, written at the conclusion of the offensive, "the three phases corresponding to the various categories of objectives, were non-existent in practice." (see later).

In April, the dockyard area received by far the heaviest weight of bombs, 3150 tons compared with 2590 tons dropped on the four air bases of Ta Kali, ^{Hal Far} ~~Buqana~~, Luqa and Kalafrana. A total of 1580 sorties was flown against the dockyard area, compared with 1480 sorties against the four air bases. There was also a marked dispersal of enemy air effort on other targets, almost wholly non-military in character, and which, in the weight of bombs dropped and sorties flown, was higher than for any single airfield.

It is a matter for interesting speculation what the result would have been had the enemy concentrated the full weight of their attack, to the exclusion of all other objectives, however tempting, on first of all the three main air bases at Malta and then the A.A. positions. Had this system been followed and the air and A.A. defences of the island neutralised at an early date in the offensive, the air reinforcement of Malta could have been made virtually impossible.

Comparative British and Enemy Air Strengths and Losses, April, 1942.

On 17th April, the strength of R.A.F. aircraft on Malta amounted to 86 of which 16 were Cat. "A" (Operationally serviceable or under inspection in units). Of these serviceable aircraft only 1 was a Spitfire and 12 were Hurricanes. In spite of the Spitfire reinforcements received

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R.A.F. Strengths
in Middle East
Command. VB39/1.
A.H.B./

through Operation "Calendar" and the Hurricanes sent by the Middle East, the average fighter serviceability throughout the month was no more than 6 and, at times, the whole of Malta's fighter force was grounded.

Particulars of the State of Aircraft at Malta, on 17th April, are as follows:

Malta Weekly State 17th April, 1942

<u>Type</u>	<u>Cat. a</u>	<u>Cat. B</u>	<u>Cat.C.</u>	<u>Total</u>
<u>Fighters</u>				
Spitfire	1	9	9	19
Hurricane	12	27	18	57
Beaufighter	2	2	-	4
<u>G.R.</u>				
Maryland	1	2	-	3
<u>Bombers</u>				
Blenheim IV	-	2	-	2
Wellington	-	1	-	1
	16	43	27	86

Note: Cat. A: Operationally serviceable or under inspection in units.

Cat. B: Serviceable within 14 days.

Cat. C: Will not pass into Cat. B for 14 days or more.

The above figures exclude the Fleet Air Arm aircraft.

A. H. B. 6

~~A. H. B. Trans. No. 411357.~~

Opposing this force, the Luftwaffe Order of Battle for Sicily showed a strength of 410 aircraft (179 fighters, ~~and~~ 204 ²⁷ ~~recce.~~ bombers). The total strength of Luftflotte 2 in April was 730 aircraft, some 500 of which were serviceable. The precise strength of the Italian Air Force based on Sicily and Sardinia, in April, 1942, is not known, but the figures for May, 1942, show a total of 425 aircraft (excluding Coastal aircraft) of which 224 were fighters and 201 bombers. The combined Axis air strength available for use against Malta, therefore, amounted to approximately 800 aircraft, divided almost equally

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into bombers and fighters.

Detailed Orders of Battle for the Axis Air Force, in April and May, 1942, are as follows:

Luftwaffe on Sicily - 18th April, 1942

<u>Type</u>	<u>Strength</u>	<u>Serviceable</u>	<u>Location</u>
Long-range recce.	27	22	Trapani and Gerbini
S.E. Fighters	137	111	Comiso, Gela and San Pietro
Night Fighters	21	7	Catania
T.E. Fighters	21	9	Trapani
Bombers	172	120	Catania, Gerbini and Comiso,
Dive Bombers	32	28	San Pietro
Total	410	297	

Italian Air Force May, 1942

<u>On Sicily</u>	<u>Strength</u>	<u>Serviceable</u>
Fighters	164	86
Bombers	133	78
Coastal	64	47
	361	211

<u>On Sardinia</u>		
Fighters	60	50
Bombers	68	38
Coastal	41	30
	169	118

Grand Total Axis Aircraft based on Sicily and Sardinia and including Italian Coastal aircraft;

Strength 940 Serviceable 626
As has been noted, the
 The R.A.F.'s losses in combat, in April, 1942, totalled 20 aircraft, 11 of them Spitfires (5 pilots safe), 8 Hurricanes (3 pilots safe) and 1 Beaufighter (crew safe). A further 44 were destroyed on the ground and 16 aircraft (6 Beauforts, 3 Hudsons, 4 Wellingtons, 1 Blenheim, 1 Maryland and 1 P.R.V. Spitfire) some of them Middle East aircraft, were either lost in transit, on operations from Malta or crashed on landing or

H.Q. Mediterranean
 O.R.B. and H.Q.
 Middle East Daily
 Opsums.

A.H.B./IJ/31/1.

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take-off. The month's total losses were 80 aircraft.

The operational losses of the Luftwaffe based on Sicily amounted to 63 aircraft, during April, 1942 (25 Me.109s, 21 Ju.88s, 9 Ju.87s, 6 Me.110s, 1 Do.24 and 1 Do.172). Of these 63 aircraft, 18 were classified as being "not due to enemy action", leaving a balance of 45 as having been shot down. Of these, 16 were described as having been shot down by enemy fighters, 13 by A.A. gunfire and the balance "not known".

The R.A.F. claimed ⁵² enemy aircraft destroyed (20 Ju.88s, 10 Ju.87s, 2 Br.20s, 18 Me.109s, 1 Do.214 and 1 unidentified) and the A.A. claimed 101 (61 Ju.88s, 24 Ju.87s, and 16 Me.109s). It is interesting to note that the A.A. claims, alone, were twice the enemy's total losses.

In spite of the considerable numerical superiority enjoyed by the enemy forces based on Sicily and Sardinia, which amounted to 17 to ^{one} in fighters and rising, on occasion, to 50 to one or even more, the enemy's operational losses totalled 63 aircraft compared with the R.A.F.'s loss of 80. The comparative loss of fighters is even more striking. While the R.A.F. lost 20 fighters in combat during the month, the enemy's own losses over or in the vicinity of the island amounted to 18. It was the cumulative effect of the intensive bombing, the lack of Spitfire reinforcements and the general shortage of spares and supplies which gave the enemy their high level of air superiority over Malta.

Analysis of the Attacks on the Airfields and the Dockyard Area April

Broadly speaking, the three main airfields at Malta, Luqa, ~~Malta~~ ^{Malta} and Ta Kali sustained much the same scale of attack throughout the month.

- (1) Luqa: During the ^{night} ~~night~~ 31st March and 1st April, a Hudson crashed on landing from Gibraltar, killing the crew of four sergeants. The next day, Ju.88s dive-bombed the airfield, cratering the runway,

/damaging

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R.A.F. Station
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 Daily Ints Sums.
 A.H.B./HJS/113/5/15

damaging aircraft and M.T. and injuring some airmen. More airmen were injured when a billet was bombed during the night 3/4 April and a transit Wellington was damaged. The following night three Wellingtons collided on the flare-path and were destroyed, together with serious casualties to the crews. On 6th April, a Beaufort crashed, killing all the ^{Crew} ~~crew~~, and enemy bombers damaged the Signals Equipment Section, the cookhouse, the N.A.A.F.I., some transport, a Beaufighter, 5 Hurricanes and a PRU Spitfire. On the following day, the Armoury, Main Stores and Ration Stores, the N.A.A.F.I. and Airmen's Mess were destroyed. A block containing the tyre section, instrument and cameras, together with three other blocks, were demolished. The Transit Flight Offices and Sick Quarters were damaged, together with two aircraft. // Further damage was caused on the 9th and 10th when five aircraft were destroyed or damaged and a Hudson crashed, all six members of the crew being either killed or seriously injured. In the course of heavy attacks on 11th April, nine aircraft were destroyed and four damaged. The runway and dispersal areas were cratered on 12th April by 5 Ju.88s, when three Wellingtons were burnt out, further damage being done to billets, the Guard Room, Canteen, Dining Hall and Kitchen the next day. On 14th April, the runway was cratered, the camp warning system put out of action and a Beaufort which had just landed was shot up by Me.109s, killing the pilot and wounding the rest of the crew.

Further cratering of the runway was caused on 18th April, five aircraft being destroyed and others damaged. The airfield's precious motor-roller was also badly damaged. Another motor-roller which had

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been brought in was damaged on 19th April and the Transit Flight Offices and Works and Buildings Offices, together with four billets, were wrecked and the main runways cratered. Petrol bombs were dropped on the same day, setting fire to the grass on the runway. A bomb which fortunately failed to explode, fell close to Luqa's own bomb-store and Me.109s, machine-gunning the airfield, destroyed two Spitfires.

On 21st April, the main runway was again badly cratered, two Wellingtons written off and other aircraft damaged. The Station's latrines and ablutions were also demolished. Workshops and Equipment Stores suffered further damage on 22nd April and four aircraft were burnt out. Two more aircraft were destroyed and others damaged in the course of a dive-bombing attack on 23rd April. Billets were bombed and personnel killed and wounded and two aircraft destroyed and others damaged the next day. During 25th April, the R.A.F. Officers' Quarters and the Army Quarters were demolished and five Army personnel were killed and five R.A.F. badly injured. A section of the Arimen's Quarters was also destroyed.

On 27th April, three aircraft were destroyed and others damaged, together with buildings. One of the most concentrated series of attacks was on 27th April when the Officers' Mess, the Sergeants' Quarters, the Electrical Section were demolished and further severe damage was done to the Sick Quarters and Fighter Flight Offices. On 29th April, dive-bombers destroyed the Telephone Exchange and more severe damage was done to other buildings. A number of aircraft were destroyed and damaged on the following day, when No. 69 Wireless Section office was demolished.

(ii) Hol Fat
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The first of the month's attacks began on 1st April with four raids made by a total of 68 bombers. Two aircraft were destroyed, ten damaged, personnel were injured and the airfield was extensively cratered. As a result, ~~Halber~~ ^{Hol Fat} was rendered unserviceable and the aircraft were transferred temporarily to Ta Kali. On the following day, a further 22 craters were made on the airfield and more aircraft and buildings were damaged. On 3rd April there was more extensive cratering, the Officers' Quarters were damaged, the paraffin store set alight, one soldier killed and two injured and a Hurricane destroyed and another severely damaged.

The airfield was again badly cratered on 4th and 5th April and the next day the Officers' Mess was severely damaged. Further heavy raids continued, with the main effect of cratering the runways, until 10th April when the Sergeants' Mess was severely damaged. On the next day one Hurricane was burnt out and five damaged. In the course of a series of dive-bombing raids on 12th April, a number of buildings were badly damaged, a firepump destroyed, a 'bus fire tender, two lorries and a car were also severely damaged. In the course of raids by thirty-odd bombers on 19th April, damage was caused to barrack blocks, the N.A.A.F.I. and cookhouse. On the following day, 18 Ju.88s damaged aircraft and barrack blocks.

Sporadic raids continued until 26th April, cratering the runways and destroying or damaging a number of aircraft. The Sergeants' Mess was practically demolished, together with the Stores and N.A.A.F.I.

/Further

Further damage to buildings and aircraft was caused in the course of raids on 28, 29 and 30 April. On the latter date a Flight Sergeant was killed and a number of airmen injured. During this intensive air bombardment, apart from those times when the airfield was actually unserviceable, fighters operated from ^{Ha/Far} ~~Ha/Far~~, while from time to time Swordfish and Albacores went out on shipping strikes.

(iii) Ta Kali:

The month opened with air-raid alarms throughout the day and the ominous forecast, "Wind south. No cloud." The heavy bombing at Hal Far on ^{the} 1st April rendered the airfield there unserviceable and for a long time their fighters operated from Ta Kali. Large numbers of soldiers were busy working on the airfield at Ta Kali repairing the surface and constructing pens for aircraft. At the same time, fighter activity from the airfield was considerable and small formations of between two and five Spitfires were challenging enemy formations many times their own numbers. On the morning of 2nd April, two Spitfires were 'jumped' by a large formation of Me.109s and shot down, with the loss of one pilot. A similar thing happened in the afternoon when two more Spitfires were shot down and one pilot lost.

On 3rd April, some sixty bombs were dropped on the airfield, rendering the greater part of it unserviceable for six hours. One Spitfire was destroyed, three damaged and a Blenheim and a Beaufighter damaged. By 6th April, almost all the buildings had been destroyed, in a series of heavy raids, and personnel were kept busy salvaging valuable equipment and spares in between the waves of attacking aircraft. In spite of these conditions, the Hurricanes and Spitfires still managed to operate. One pilot, Flight Lieutenant Heppell had the

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unnerving experience of being blown out of his aircraft on two successive days. The first time, on 8~~th~~ April, his aircraft was probably hit by a Bofors shell. The second time, he had just succeeded in damaging a Ju. 88 when he was again blown out of his aircraft at 8,000 feet.

Throughout this period of intensive bombing, valuable assistance was rendered by the D.L.I. in making the airfield serviceable again. "Aerodrome serviceable on strip", says an entry in No. 249 Squadron O.R.B. for 13~~th~~ April. "Extensive repairs. Army working party doing great work, working all night over 300 strong, showing great gallantry during raids."

By 15~~th~~ April, owing to adverse weather conditions and poor visibility, the raids had abated temporarily and an opportunity was afforded for the salvaging of equipment and stores from the wrecked camp. Most of the airmen, together with H.Q. offices, were moved into tents. The Maltese labourers employed by A.M.W.D. refused to work on the airfield and airmen were kept working very long hours. By 18~~th~~ April, the wind had again veered round from the east to the south and the weather had become fine and clear. In spite of the heavy raids that followed on this break in the weather, extensive preparations were made for the reception of the incoming Spitfires from Operation "Calendar". The Army, Police and Ground Crews, under the supervision of the Pilots, all helped in the building of aircraft pens and making repairs to the runways.

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On 20th April, the day that the Spitfires arrived at Malta, many air raids were made on the camp and, in the course of engagements, claims were made of eight enemy fighters and bombers destroyed. Some fifty Ju.88s dropped 200 bombs on the airfield on 21st April. The runways were extensively cratered and four Spitfires were destroyed on the ground and five damaged. Claims were made of ten enemy aircraft destroyed. Rifle brigades were formed and the airmen were encouraged to fire their rifles at low-flying aircraft from their slit trenches. "Morale of airmen much improved," says an entry in the Station O.R.B.

On 23rd April, the enemy bombing continued and more damage was done to buildings on the airfield and also aircraft. "Cut in rations," says another entry in the Ta Kali O.R.B. "Difficult to feed the men adequately already." Men were brought in from Kalafrana to help in the salvage of material and equipment from the bombed buildings. The dive-bombing and machine-gunning of the airfield and gun positions was extensive and only the most urgent work could be done on repairing the craters and pens. The dust was described as "very trying and getting worse" and the men were suffering from trouble with their feet, owing to the lack of boots and shoes. Attacks on the camp continued unabated until the end of the month when preparations were in hand for the reception of further Spitfire reinforcements, a complaint being made by the Station Admin' Staff that there had been too much secrecy about the previous arrival of Spitfires, so that it was impossible to give the Ground Staff adequate warning. On the last day of the month, small-arms fire scored an encouraging success when a Me.109, which was trying to intercept Spitfires as they landed, was shot down.

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(iv) Kalafrana;

R.A.F. Station
Kalafrana O.R.B.

The Seaplane and Air/Sea Rescue Base at Kalafrana did not escape the attention of the enemy. On 3rd April, the north slipway and a hangar were hit. On 7th April, the Torpedo Depot, M/T Section and north and south slipways were hit and the Officers' Mess severely damaged. The C.O.'s house and Officers' Married Quarters were also damaged. On 8th April, the only two Air/Sea Rescue aircraft, a Swordfish and a Walrus, were destroyed when the hangar received a direct hit. On 18th April, the Stores Hangar was set on fire and the Sunderland hangar hit. Two days later, there were hits on the Test Bench Station Sick Quarters, the north slipway and the Dental Centre. On 26th April there were serious casualties when one officer and three ORs were killed and one officer and eight ORs injured. In addition, there were two civilians killed and thirteen injured.

During the month, marine craft rescued four pilots, one of them a German. A high-speed launch was attacked by Me.109s. These were driven off by Spitfires but not before serious casualties had been inflicted on the crew of the launch.

Malta's Urgent Need for Further Spitfire Reinforcements.

The inability of Malta's fighter force to protect the "Fullsize" convoy and the loss of the four merchant vessels at the end of their hazardous and costly voyage came as a bitter blow to all concerned. On 27th March, the Governor of Malta sent a personal signal to the C.A.S. urging a considerable increase in the numbers of Spitfires to reinforce the fighter defence of the island.

Convoy to Malta
A.H. 4/IIJ1/183/262.

"Malta," he wrote, "can only continue to be useful if we are able to protect the ships and aircraft which operate from here. Moreover, Malta can only be held if we protect ships unloading vital supplies and thus ensure replenishment of our stocks. Our experiences of the last few days have made it clear that, with our present resources, in view of the great enemy strength in Sicily, we cannot do this. The situation thus disclosed is extremely serious and must at all costs be remedied."

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The C.A.S. told the Governor, in his reply, that he fully realised Malta's urgent need for more high-performance fighters and everything possible was being done to help. The ability to do so from the West depended on the availability of the force which had other vital commitments. In addition to the second half of "Picket", 32 more Spitfires were being prepared for shipment to Gibraltar. Apart from these operations, Malta's fighter force would have to be maintained from Egypt whence ten cannon Hurricanes had been sent and a further ten were on their way. (1)

C.O.S. Decision not to Send a Convoy to Malta until June.

In the meantime, the failure of Operation "Fullsize" had accentuated Malta's sufficiently serious supply situation and Governor of Malta sent a reassessment of the position to the Chiefs of Staff. Bread and 'pasta', he told them, would last until July, fodder until the end of June, stocks of aviation spirit until the middle of August, benzine until the middle of June, ~~gasoline~~ ^{Kerosene} early July, most stocks of coal would be used up by the end of June, meat by the same time, H.A.A. ammunition by the end of June and Light A.A. by the end of July. All Army and A.A. equipment, naval, R.A.F. and hospital equipment was extremely short and the R.A.F.'s own stocks of bombs and ammunition were low, the estimates including all stocks salvaged from the Breconshire and Pampas.

On his copy of this telegram, the Prime Minister minuted:

What are the plans for the April Convoy? We certainly have not got 'large quantities of transport aircraft', but what can be done with additional large submarines or fast ships of the Abdiel class type? What a pity we did not get hold of the 'Surcouf' (2) and keep her on this job. How much can a submarine carry? What about sending in vitamins and other concentrates?

W.S.C. 3.4. '42

/At

(1) The annihilation of No. 229 Squadron is alluded to in an earlier Section of the Narrative.

(2) The Free French submarine 'Surcouf' was the largest in the world with a surface displacement of 2,880 tons. A suggestion had been made in April, 1941, that she should be used for carrying stores to Malta, but her great size and slow diving ability ruled this out. After the declaration of war on Japan, it was decided to send her to the Pacific to reinforce the French Forces. However, she was rammed and sunk by the American merchant ship, Thompson Lykes in the Caribbean on 19th February, 1942, seven days after she had left Bermuda.

V.C.A.S. Defence
of Malta.
AHB/ID9/27(a)

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At the 106th Meeting of the Chiefs of Staff held on the day after the Prime Minister's Minute, the First Sea Lord, Sir Dudley Pound said that due to the air situation at Malta, he had decided that no attempt should be made to run in a convoy during April. Plans would, however, be made to send a convoy during May from each end of the Mediterranean and suggested that all the Commanders-in-Chief concerned should be informed of these proposed arrangements. The C.A.S. agreed that it would be uneconomical to run a convoy during April. By May, however, some of the enemy air forces in Sicily might be withdrawn ⁽¹⁾ and Malta's fighter defences should be considerably stronger. As soon as he knew the capacity of the American aircraft-carrier, he would be able to give a firm date as to when that number of aircraft would be available. ⁽²⁾

17 At a further meeting of the Chiefs of Staff, on 7th April, and in reply to the Prime Minister's Minute, Sir Dudley Pound said that one submarine had already taken supplies from Gibraltar to Malta and that further similar arrangements were being made. Lack of fuel at Malta made it impossible to use fast ships for running in supplies. Sir Charles Portal stated that, owing to the lack of Spitfire spares in Malta, it would be necessary to send one Whitley a week which might also carry small amounts of light supplies, such as urgently-needed medical requirements. A total of fifty Spitfires would be ready for launching on to the American aircraft-carrier by 12th April and the loading should have been completed by that evening.

It was eventually decided, at a Chiefs of Staff Meeting held on 18th April, not to attempt an east bound convoy from Gibraltar to Malta in May, as :

- (a) Owing to the general naval situation, no risks could be run of having capital ships or aircraft carriers damaged.

/(b)

(1) This was a case of 'intelligent anticipation' as the news of the switch of German aircraft from Sicily to Russia and North Africa was not known until April.

(2) The Eagle was due for repairs and it had been suggested that the American aircraft-carrier Wasp should be used. Her capacity was in the region of 50 aircraft, a number being slung from the hangar roof.

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- (b) The strength of the enemy air forces in Sicily was such that this would involve risk of damage to the capital ships and at least one aircraft carrier.
- (c) By abandoning the west to east convoy, heavy ship reinforcements could reach the Indian Ocean at least three weeks earlier.

By 23rd April, however, the position in the Mediterranean had deteriorated to such an extent, due mainly to the enemy's concentrated air attacks on Malta, that the Chiefs of Staff informed the Governor of Malta and the Commanders-in-Chief Middle East that the "the passage of a convoy to Malta in May, whether from the west or the east, presents insurmountable difficulties."

The reasons for the decision not to send an eastbound convoy were restated, as above. The escape of the March convoy was described as "providential" and was attributed largely to the weather. "To attempt a westbound convoy," the message continued, "under present conditions, without capital ships and aircraft-carrier escort, is to court almost certain disaster. The necessary capital ships and aircraft carriers, or carriers, cannot at present be made available." Plans were in hand for a further big batch of Spitfires to be flown in, ^{U.S.} in May, from the aircraft carrier Wasp, in addition to the consignment from the Eagle. Arrangements were also being made to send in A.A. ammunition by fast minesweeper and possibly submarine, from the west.

"You must hold out," the signal concluded, with the above slight relief until mid-June. In the early days of June we shall know what has happened to General Auchinleck's offensive. If he has got Martuba or Benghazi, the chances of a Malta convoy getting through from the east, without capital ships, will be greatly improved. We shall also know how much of the German Air Force has been drawn away from the Mediterranean to the South Russian front. We can also judge the situation in the Indian Ocean as it then appears, and the decision can be taken whether or not Admiral Somerville should proceed with all three aircraft carriers and Warspite to escort the convoy through the Mediterranean. It is hoped that this convoy will consist of at least 12-15 knot supply ships."

/Operation

Operation "Calendar" ("Newman"): Reinforcement of Malta with Spitfires from U.S. Aircraft Carrier Wasp - April, 1942

Mention has already been made of the fact that repairs were necessary on the aircraft carrier Eagle. These were due to defects in her steering-gear which meant that she had to be laid up for a month at a time when the air attacks on Malta were at their heaviest. An application was accordingly made, by the Prime Minister to the President of the United States for the loan of the carrier Wasp which could take at least fifty aircraft.

A. M. File
CS14123
Operation
"Calendar".

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"Unless it were necessary for her to fuel," the message read, "Wasp could proceed through the Straits at night, without calling at Gibraltar until on the return journey, as the Spitfires would be embarked on the Clyde."

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Thus, instead of not being able to give Malta any further Spitfires during April, a powerful Spitfire force could be flown into Malta at a strike and give us a chance of inflicting a very severe and possibly decisive check on the enemy."

The use of the Wasp was agreed by the President of the United States and embarkation of Spitfires on the aircraft carrier began on 10th April, when she arrived at King George V Dock. The Fighter Command pilots of Nos. 601 and 603 Squadrons arrived two days later and were embarked that evening. The airfield at Abbotsinch, which is very low-lying, was frequently unserviceable at time when the incoming Spitfires were due to arrive, and it was only by the use of the airfield at Renfrew and with the assistance of Mr. Nixon, the American Manager of Lockheeds, who set his men to construct platforms, mounted on Queen Marys, for the conveyance of the Spitfires by road from the airfield to the dockside, that the aircraft were loaded on time.

Altogether, 47 Spitfires were loaded on the Wasp, 5 of them slung from the hangar roof. Considerable confusion arose over the question of camouflage. A number of the aircraft arrived with desert camouflage which was changed, at Abbotsinch,

/for

Appendix "L" to
Maintenance Command
O.R.B.

for a type of sea camouflage used by the A.S.U.s. However, a squadron leader who was with the party discovered that this camouflage was different from the one laid down by Air Ministry. By that time, it was too late to alter the camouflage on shore. The necessary equipment for 'doping' the aircraft was accordingly rushed on board the Wasp early on the morning of 13th April, just before she sailed from the Clyde.

Appendix "A" to
No. 50 Wing O.R.B.

Before the aircraft were embarked on the Wasp, they were found to be deficient in a number of ^{items} ~~tools~~, particularly tools and clocks. These had been most probably stolen from the aircraft when, because of the prevailing bad weather and the distance involved in ferrying them to Scotland, the aircraft had been forced to land two or three times and for periods varying between three and twenty-four hours.

"The War at Sea"
Vol. 3.

A.M. File
C.S. 14123.

Operation "Calendar" proved an unqualified success. The Wasp was accompanied by the battle cruiser Renown and escorts which comprised Force ~~W~~. She did not call at Gibraltar, but passed through the Straits in the dark. The flying operations began at 05.30 hours on 20th April and 58 aircraft, including the carrier's own fighters, were flown off the Wasp in 61 minutes, from a position 037 degrees 30' North 003 degrees 30' east.

At about one third of the distance between Pantellaria^e and Malta, orders were received over the R/T, in good English, to proceed on a bearing towards Pantellaria^e. As by that time Malta was already in sight, these instructions were ignored, as they obviously emanated from the enemy.

Out of the 47 Spitfire V.C. aircraft which left the Wasp 46 arrived safely at Malta. One, piloted by a Sergeant Walcott, did not arrive. The Officer Commanding No. 603 Squadron saw him leave his formation, but at the time thought he was doing so to join the following formation. Apparently, this pilot had previously landed in the Irish Free State, but had not been

/interned

67 interned and in the course of conversation, on the voyage, he had stated ~~stated~~ that Malta would never see him.

As with the ships of Operation "Fullsize" the real test of Operation "Calendar" was apparent when the Spitfire had actually landed on Malta. Within 90 minutes of the arrival of the first of the Spitfires, on 20th April, the enemy launched a series of very heavy and destructive raids on Ta Kali and Luqa which received 98 tons of bombs and 48 tons respectively. By 23rd April, the weight of bombs dropped on Ta Kali, in the three days, had risen to 377 tons and 122 on Luqa.

"Both places a complete shambles," the A.O.C. Malta signalled the A.O.C. Middle East, "in spite of soldiers working day and night. Have made every effort to get Spitfires off the ground..... All Spitfires in pens widely dispersed, some with complete cover from blast, other with pens and blast walls. In spite of this, nine destroyed on ground direct hits, twenty-nine damaged splintered rocks. Owing to heavy fighter escorts our battle casualties eight Spitfires destroyed and 75% remainder damaged in combat. In addition usual defects which affect serviceability, landing and take-offs fraught with danger owing to bomb-holes and debris. Army filling holes night and day. Shortage rollers and mechanised equipment. All big bomb holes one hundred tons to fill. Dispersal tracks often blocked. Airmen work all day and in shifts throughout night. Eight Wellingtons very well dispersed over wide area and in pens. Dive-bombers make for them...Cannot do more to protect Wellingtons or Spitfires. In Battle of Britain, one squadron twelve fighters used sixty fighters each fourteen days with all resources of Britain on hand. Here everything liable to attack. No security. German intention appears to be air blockade into submission. Their aim now is to destroy harbour facilities so that when convoy arrives it will be difficult to unload it. Also to destroy aerodromes and all equipment for handling aircraft. To hold this island must have abundance of Spitfires and hope to get them into air before next raid which was ninety minutes on this occasion."

It was three hours before the newly-arrived Spitfires were in action, partly due to excessive secrecy at Malta which prevented the Administrative Staff from making adequate preparations for the reception of the aircraft. ⁽¹⁾ Also, in spite of /the

(1) Extensive ground organisation enabled the Spitfires received during the next operation ('Oppidan') to be operational within 35 minutes.

A.O.C.-in-C.
Correspondence with
Prime Minister, etc.
Part IV
A.H.B./IIJ1/183/271(D)

the most explicit instructions from Air Ministry, the aircrafts' cannons had not been air-tested before leaving the U.K. and there was trouble with faulty ammunition.

Heavy Losses Sustained by No. 148 Squadron (Wellingtons)

In April, the A.O.C.-in-C. Middle East paid Malta a visit and was thus able personally to witness the intensity of the enemy air attacks. In his book, "Briefed to Attack", Air Marshal Lloyd describes the visit.

There was a raid at Takali, as soon as Tedder arrived there, and from the verandah of the Officers' Mess he was able to get an excellent view of the enemy tactics and the encircling patrols of 109s as it closed in on the aerodrome below us to dive on every sign of movement..... The visit to Luqa, however, was better timed as a few minutes before Tedder had arrived there, the Axis had dropped a few more hundred tons of bombs, making it a shambles. Pilots, observers, radio-operators, air gunners and airmen and soldiers were busy moving the stone and filling the holes (all of them as happy as sandboys).

At the time of this visit, Malta's serviceable fighter force had been reduced to four Hurricanes, one Spitfire, one Beaufighter. "Such a force," the A.O.C.-in-C. Middle East signalled to the C.A.S. on 22nd April, "useless against scale of attack then being made."

Before going to Malta, the A.O.C.-in-C. had decided that an attempt must be made to counter-attack enemy airfields, once the Spitfires had made it possible to renew operations.

Found Lloyd had similar plan, he wrote to the C.A.S. "Enemy fighters limited to three aerodromes in South Sicily and they have got careless. Sent eight Wellingtons with double crews yesterday to operate two or three sorties per night against fighter aerodromes initially. Two more to-night with some maintenance personnel."

Events soon proved, however, that Malta was in no position, as yet, to operate Wellingtons successfully. During the night 20/21 April, eight Wellingtons of No. 148 Squadron took off from A.L.G. 107, with fourteen crews, spaced in such a manner as to arrive at Malta in two groups of four, with intervals of fifteen minutes between each

/aircraft

A.O.C.-in-C.
Correspondence with
Prime Minister, etc.
Part IV
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No. 148 Squadron
O.R.B.

aircraft and thirty minutes between the two groups. They landed safely at Luqa and were moved to the dispersal area. Soon after this had been effected, heavy raids were launched against Luqa in the course of which two of the newly-arrived Wellingtons were destroyed and one damaged. It had been planned to operate double sorties against Comiso airfield that night, using the crews which had been carried as passengers, but the disorganisation due to the enemy attacks prevented bombing-up until 23.30 hours and it was thus only possible to complete one operation by each of five aircraft. The weather over the target ^{was} ~~was~~ very bad and the results of the bombing were disappointing.

Daily Int. Sums.
A.A.B./11J5/113/5/15.

The following day, 22~~nd~~ April, four more Wellingtons were damaged by enemy raids and delay in the preparation of the aircraft for operations that night was also caused. Comiso was again the target. In all, seven sorties were flown, two of the aircraft managing to do three trips ^{in spite of} ~~due to~~ the bombing. All aircraft found the targets, sticks of bombs being dropped close to hangars and across the airfield. Some thirty heavy guns, together with light A.A., went into action against the raiding Wellingtons.

Two Wellingtons which had been left in reserve at A.L.G. 106 arrived safely at Malta during the night 22/23 April. However, intensive attacks by enemy bombers on Luqa on 23~~rd~~ April destroyed another Wellington, leaving only five available for operations. That night eight sorties were flown against Comiso, three by one aircraft, two by another aircraft and one each by the remaining three. A.A. opposition was intense and although bombs were dropped in the ^{target} ~~target~~ area, no results were observed. Two of the Wellingtons failed to return and with them were lost two very experienced crews. Another Wellington was destroyed

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on the ground at Luqa on the following day, 24th April, and others damaged, leaving only one aircraft serviceable and available for operations. This aircraft was detailed, but owing to the very heavy opposition over the target, it was decided not to send one aircraft alone. The operation was therefore cancelled. That same night, two of the Squadron's N.C.O's were killed by concussion in an air-raid shelter. A further operation against a battleship at Messina which was planned for 25th April also had to be cancelled, as one of the two aircraft detailed became unserviceable after damage due to enemy action had been repaired.

On 26 April, the detachment was recalled to the Middle East and the two remaining aircraft, one of them repaired after bomb damage, flew back to base. Six more relief aircraft arrived at Malta during the night 26/27 April and these returned to Middle East. Crews and passengers were detailed to take these aircraft over as they landed, some of them being inspected, refuelled and turned round within 48 minutes of their arrival at Malta.

Out of the ten aircraft originally sent to Malta on detachment ^{from} ~~to~~ the Middle East, eight had been destroyed within five days, the crews of two aircraft lost on operations and two N.C.Os killed in an air raid. On the same day, 26 April, the Royal Navy's 10th Submarine Flotilla left for Alexandria. Thus, in the face of the sustained and intensive air offensive, mainly launched by Luftflotte 2, the use of Malta as an offensive base had been proved impracticable.

Operation "Hercules": The German Plan for the Invasion of Malta

The Italian plan for the projected invasion of Malta, Operation "G.3", was taken over by the Germans and given the somewhat grandiloquent title of Operation "Hercules". Examination of the plan, which is reproduced as an Appendix, gives immediately an impression of Teutonic thoroughness. After the successful completion of Operation "Theseus" (the occupation of Cyrenaica) which, at the time this plan

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Kesselring's
plan for the
invasion of
Malta
Trans. A.H.B. 6

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was circulated by Kesselring was envisaged as being completed by about the middle of June, there was to be a pause of nine days. During this interval, units would be moved to new bases and rested and re-fitted. Reconnaissance of Malta would be renewed and operations would be continued against the island on a small scale in order partly to hamper any reconstruction work. There would then follow, on 29 June until 17 July, an all-out assault on the island's air defences and on installations, particularly in or near the proposed landing ² zones. D-Day chosen for the invasion of Malta was to be the 18th July, 1942.

In the preparatory phase, units of X Fliegerkorps and Fliegerfuhrer II Afrika were to join XI Fliegerkorps in Sicily. In order to camouflage the movement of XI Fliegerkorps formations, which comprised three paratroop regiments, rumours were to be spread about of drafts being sent from France to the Russian front. Already, at the time the plan was being prepared and finally approved, May 1942, some seven transport Gruppen comprising 4/500 aircraft were being fitted out for these special operations. Training with the airborne and paratroop units would be completed in the WM Flieger Division area in France. ^{7th} ~~Führer~~ Flieger ⁷ ~~WM~~ was to be in command of all the air transport forces.

It was planned that the preparatory phase would be devoted mainly to intensive reconnaissance and also ~~the~~ air operations designed to harass Malta's defending air force and interfere with the construction of military installations. After that, the preliminary phase would follow and last for twenty days, during which time every effort would be made to obtain command of the air over Malta by an all-out bomber and fighter effort. At the same time, in the course of these operations, final and low-level reconnaissance of the island's defence installations would be carried out.

At the end of the first week of this preliminary phase, systematic attacks were to be launched against these defence installations. All ^{A.A.} emplacements, particularly those around the airfields - were to be eliminated by dive-bombing and low-level attacks. At the same time,

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tentative attacks would be made against coastal batteries and ^fports in the north and east of the island to find out how easily they could be put out of action. In the third week, attacks would be concentrated wholly on the elimination of the defence installations adjacent to the airfields and landing sectors. The main objective of these preliminary operations would be to neutralise Malta as an air base by the eve of the invasion, and reduce air, ground and coastal defences to a minimum.

The final stages in the reduction of Malta's defences ^{were} ~~was~~ to take place on the day when the actual assault was launched, when all defences which continued to offer opposition would be obliterated by pinpoint attacks.

Between 08.00 hours and 09.00 hours on D-Day a full-scale attack would be launched against defence installations in the landing areas and against the airfields. Troop transports were to take off for the first landings to be effected at Zero Hour (13.30 hours) and these attacks were to be maintained until the first transport aircraft could be seen over the south coast. During the actual landings, all emplacements would be pinned down by continuous air attack.

Further waves of paratroops were to be dropped by dusk, together with the necessary supplies and heavy ^{armament} ~~ammunition~~. Bombers would patrol the area and prevent any reinforcements from being brought up and act as close-range artillery to assist in the capture of strongpoints. To facilitate this the bomber formations were to be allotted for close support to individual regiments.

Ibid.

At dusk, the airborne troops in gliders were to land in the area between Kalafrana and Fort Benghaisa. They were to capture the Fort and the coastal area under cover of smoke screen and establish a line of defence towards the west along the road from Fort Benghaisa to Kalafrana Bay. Dummies were also to be dropped by parachute during a series of nuisance raids against the coast line in the Bay of Marsa Scirocco.

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The invasion convoy was to sail not later than the time when the Ju. 52's took off. The battle groups would land not later than 24.00 hours, the assault parties to go ashore first, followed by their tanks and guns and, finally, by the infantry.

The seaborne landing party for Kalafrana would take place at night. A quarter of an hour before this, naval units would lay a smokescreen under cover of which the Siebel ferries, with their 88 m.m. guns, would sail into Marsa Scirocco Bay. This major landing near Kalafrana would be under the command of Admiral Weichold.

The main task on the day of the invasion would be to capture the airfields at Hal Far and Krendi. The fleet would remain drawn up broadly to the south-west of the island. Possible tasks for the fleet would be to isolate Valetta, pin down shore batteries on the east coast by gun fire and support feint landings and diversionary attacks north of the Victoria Lines which bisect the north-west part of the island. After the initial invasion, the activity of the G.A.F. would depend entirely on the tactical situation.

Ibid.

On 21 April, when the bombing of Malta was at its most intense, a Spitfire of No. 69 Squadron piloted by Sergeant Colquhoun, made a photographic reconnaissance of the enemy airfields at Catania, Gerbini, Gela, Biscari and Comiso, all in the eastern and south-eastern parts of Sicily. When photographic interpretation was undertaken it was remarked that close to Gerbini in the Cataniaⁿ plain a rectangular area some 1,500 yards by 400 yards had been marked out by a plough. By the 24th, further reconnaissance revealed that the strip had been cut and levelled and it was apparent that some kind of important and novel satellite to the

No. 69 Sqn. bomber airfield was being constructed. At first it was thought that the & A.H.Q. Malta O.R.Bs. Germans were making arrangements for an even more concentrated bombardment

of Malta. A close watch by aircraft of No. 69 Squadron was maintained in spite of the heavy bombing of their airfield and by the end of the month two more strips were revealed. By 10 May, the work of all three

/strips

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strips had been completed, huts erected, and underground cables laid. It was then obvious that instead of bombers the strips had been built to accommodate gliders which were designed to play an important part in a projected invasion of Malta.

The glider strips were ^{sited} sighted in the Catanian plain not more than a hundred miles from Malta. They were also conveniently close to a railway station on the direct line from Messina, where the ferry was situated, over which glider components and troops could pass. However, in spite of these preparations, no gliders appeared on the strips and soon it was obvious that the invasion of Malta had been called off in

A.H.B. Narr. favour of Operation "Theseus".

"Photographic
Reconnaissance"

Admiral Raeder, the Commander-in-Chief of the German invasion, had urged Hitler in March 1942 to agree to an operation for the capture of Malta. He realised that in spite of the effectiveness of the raids on Malta this was no substitute for invasion. He saw clearly that if for any reason the Luftwaffe attacks were reduced, then - as actually did happen - the island's defences could be quickly restored. At no time was Hitler enthusiastic about Operation "Hercules" and at this particular time he did not wish to spare men for the operation drawn from either the Russian front or from Cyrenaica. Admiral Raeder's views were supported by Kesselring and the Italians. Eventually, however, the German plan for the capture of Malta received Hitler's consent and preparations were begun.

At the end of April 1942, Mussolini went to see Hitler at the Berghof to discuss the new plan. The time-table agreed was, first, Operation "Theseus" for the capture of Cyrenaica at the end of May or the beginning of June, to be followed by Operation "Hercules" for the capture of Malta in mid-July. Hitler agreed to the participation of Germany with a parachute division with three reinforced parachute regiments, assault pioneers, and armoured units, to be composed largely of captured Russian tanks. In spite of these heavy commitments for Operation "Hercules", Luftflotte 2 would not be kept in the Mediterranean until after the capture of Malta, but part would be transferred to the

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west. Kesselring was of the opinion - mistaken as it so happened - that these transfers could be made without risk of the Royal Air Force regaining air supremacy in the Mediterranean. It was just this faulty appraisal of the military situation in the Mediterranean that gave Malta a much-needed respite in which to rebuild her shattered air defences.

These important decisions were finally embodied in a formal directive by Keitel on 4 May 1942. Hitler gave the permission for considerably stronger forces to be used for Operation "Hercules". These included the whole of the German 7th Airborne Division under General Student, the necessary force of transport aircraft equipped for paratroops, a battalion of engineers, and some 30 tanks. The latter included the captured heavy Russian tanks already mentioned, a number of them being as much as 52 tons. How these heavy tanks were to be transported to Malta and landed there was not specified.

Fuhrer Di-
rectives
1942-45
F11/67(B)

A.H.A. (11 J. / 67 (B))

Operation "Theseus" for the capture of Cyrenaica was launched on 26 May. The intention was to destroy the British armoured force in Cyrenaica, capture Tobruk and advance to the Egyptian frontier. Then perhaps the most important part of the overall plan, the offensive in North Africa, was to be broken off while Operation "Hercules" was launched against Malta. Once Malta had been captured, the offensive in North Africa would be resumed, with the occupation of the Nile Delta and an advance to the Suez Canal.

Tobruk fell on 21 June. Flushed with this remarkable success and the huge store of booty captured, Rommel signalled to the German Supreme Command:

The first objective of the Panzer Army in Africa, that of defeating the enemy in the field and capturing Tobruk, has been achieved The morale and condition of the troops, the quantity of stores captured and the present weakness of the enemy makes it possible for us to thrust onwards into the heart of Egypt. Therefore request that the Duce be prevailed upon to remove the present restriction on movement and that all troops under my command be placed at my disposal to continue the offensive.

/The Duce

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Axis Naval
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1943 R.242.

The Duce had his misgivings owing to the revival of Malta as an offensive base against the Axis lines of communication across the Mediterranean. On 24 June the Comando Supremo^e postponed the invasion of Malta until the beginning of September.

On 15 June 1942, there was a conference between Hitler and the Commander-in-Chief Navy at the Berghof in which Operation "Hercules" was discussed. The Minutes of this meeting read as follows:

The Führer recognises how important it is to capture Malta. However he does not believe that this can be done while the offensive on the eastern front is in progress and especially not with Italian troops. During that time the air force cannot spare any transport planes. Once Tobruk is taken, most shipments will be routed to Tobruk via Crete. On the other hand, the British efforts to get convoys through to Malta from the east and from the west testify to the plight of the island.

These convoys by the way give us an opportunity to inflict much damage on the enemy. Once Malta has been bled white by the continuous air raids and the total blockade, we could risk the attack.

*double
here* In this statement Hitler's lack of enthusiasm for the project is apparent.

The Panzer Army crossed the Egyptian frontier on 24 June in pursuit of the Eighth Army which had managed to escape the planned destruction in Cyrenaica. Under the personal leadership of General Auchinleck, the Eighth Army managed to stabilise a line at El Alamein in early July. The attempt to reduce Malta by air attack in the same month failed, as did Rommel's last offensive in Egypt, ^{at} ~~at~~ Alam el Halfa in late August early September, which latter date, as has already been noted, had been set as the deadline for ^{the} ~~an~~ invasion of Malta. Rommel's defeat at Alam el Halfa was followed by the victory at El Alamein and the Allied landings in French North-West Africa. During this time the Axis forces were wholly on the defensive and were never adequate even for current operations, so that the plan for the invasion of Malta ultimately went by default.

Führer Confer-
ences on Naval
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In point of fact it is doubtful whether, after the heavy losses sustained by the German airborne forces at Crete, the invasion of Malta could ever have been successfully mounted. Hitler himself always showed remarkably little enthusiasm for the project. Only during the darkest days of April 1942 could Operation "Hercules" have stood any real chance of success and of course at that time it was still only in the planning stage. Once the air and sea blockade of Malta had been broken and the island's air defences strengthened, there was virtually no chance that the operation could succeed. In ^a ~~the~~ sense, Malta's best ally in this respect was Rommel whose mind was always set on an overwhelming military victory in North Africa and who regarded anything else as a diversion. With this idea fixed firmly in his mind he would never permit the correct orders of priorities - Malta first and then the final devastating offensive in North Africa - to be followed. All the time throughout the period of Axis operations in North Africa the island base was on his flank, athwart his lines of communication, preventing the Panzer Army ² ~~from~~ consolidating ^{its} ~~its~~ successes in North Africa and so ending the campaign with an overwhelming victory ^{over} ~~for~~ the Eighth Army.

Operation "Hercules", therefore, although still-born, like Operation "Sea Lion", is one of the invasion projects that if pursued to a logical conclusion and given the full weight of German military resources, might well have changed the whole course of the War. It was to our advantage that both Hitler and Rommel failed to see the war in the Mediterranean in terms of a struggle for air bases and control of sea communications, but primarily as a problem of a Continental power gaining yet another great land victory, without the need for difficult and unpredictable operations such as would have been involved in an invasion.

The British island base of Malta had several periods of acute weakness due initially to lack of suitable fighter aircraft and then to a grave shortage of supplies, particularly food, petrol and ammunition, which reached their most serious form during the spring blitz of 1942. Happily these phases of military weakness never coincided with the Axis powers' ability - or even willingness - to launch an invasion.

(Award)

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Award of George Cross to Malta, 15th April, 1942

On 27th March, the Vice-Chief of Air Staff submitted the following Minute to the C.A.S.:

V.C.A.S. Defence
of Malta.
A.H.B./ID7/27(A)

Malta is having a tough time. A Message of encouragement from H.M. or, failing that, from the C.O.S., would do much to hearten them. Will you, if you agree, raise at the next C.O.S. Meeting?

The C.A.S. agreed to this proposal which was brought up at the 98th Meeting of the Chiefs of Staff, held on Saturday 28th March, 1942. Sir Charles Portal suggested to the Meeting that "in view of the magnificent resistance of Malta, the Prime Minister be asked to suggest that His Majesty the King should send a message to the garrison and people of Malta." This was agreed.

As a result, a message was received by the Governor of Malta, on 15th April, from the Secretary of State for the Colonies:

I have it in command from the King to convey to you the following message: "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."

George R.I."

The Quality of the Fighter Pilots sent from U.K. to Malta

The enemy's continued attempt to neutralise Malta's defences by concentrated air attack, during the Spring of 1942, was a severe testing-time for pilots. Almost immediately on their arrival, after a nerve-racking flight over hundreds of miles of open sea from an aircraft carrier, they were flung into some of the bitterest air fighting of the war, not merely against great odds, but in direct combat with experienced enemy fighter formations of Luftflotte 2 which boasted some of the Luftwaffe's best pilots.

The R.A.F. War Diaries mention, with terse understatement, the almost daily occurrences when formations of two or four fighters were airborne against enemy mass formations

/of

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of enemy fighters and bombers. In these engagements, the R.A.F. pilots not only managed to avoid, for the most part, disproportionately heavy losses, but inflicted heavy wastage on the enemy formations. It stands as a tribute to the quality of the pilots and the high level of their training, that under these conditions, there was no weakening of morale and while there were machines to fly, they flew them.

Referring to an assurance from the C.A.S. on 6th April that he hoped to send the pilots and aircraft of two complete Spitfire squadrons of Fighter Command, the A.O.C.-in-C., Middle East Replied;

I hope a large percentage of these pilots will be picked men.... There is no doubt that Spitfire pilots sent here and Malta so far nearly all also rans. This inevitable unless special precautions taken to prevent milking of squadrons before despatch. Much of value of Spitfires already sent to Malta wasted owing to poor quality of pilots. I feel that Malta calls for the best. Given that, I believe they would cut up the Hun.

The A.O.C. Malta was loyal to his pilots and signalled to the A.O.C.-in-C. Middle East, on 7th April:

Cannot agree that I have had also-rans. Pilots sent here are excellent. Am most grateful for their selection. They were selected and sent against wishes of squadrons station and Group Commanders by Fighter Command. We want the very best. Fighter Command have done us really well. None but the best could have lived and achieved so much in so short a time against such terrific odds.

In turn, the A.O.C.-in-C. reported the gist of this message to the C.A.S., ^{thus} being forced, in fact, to retract his earlier statement. However, by 25th April, the A.O.C. Malta was complaining to the A.O.C.-in-C. Middle East that the pilots from Operation "Calendar" were not up to standard. Out of 23 pilots of No. 601 Squadron, 7 had had no operational experience and a further 12 had had under 25 hours' flying on Spitfires. In No. 603 Squadron, 9 had never fired their guns in action and 13 had had under 25 hours on Spitfires. The Officer Commanding No. 603 Squadron reported that 17 of his most experienced

/pilots

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A.O.C. 47 Malta.
A.H.B./II 51/183/160 (B)

← pilots had been posted away within two months before leaving the United Kingdom. In fact the "milking" of the ^{earliest} squadrons referred to by the A.O.C.-in-C. Middle East had been practised extensively.

"Only fully-operational pilots must come here," the A.O.C. Malta asserted, with justification. "The C.-in-C. Fighter Commander proved to be the only stumbling block," an officer sent by the A.O.C. Malta to the U.K. in order to improve the flow of men and machines to Malta remarked, "Quite evident had no intention of sending experienced pilots abroad if he could help it, nor anybody else with experience in other branches."

In spite of this, Malta's fighter pilots put up a superb performance in the face of great odds and difficulties which, in some ways, were greater than at the time of the most bitter air fighting in the Battle of Britain. Malta's fighter force had no defence in depth and could only operate from three bases which were frequently made unserviceable from the concentrated bombing. The accounts already given of conditions at ^{Mal Far} ~~Hal Far~~, Luqa and Ta Kali give an idea of the almost intolerable stresses under which air and ground crews were working.

8/ To defeat the enemy, says an entry in H.Q. Malta O.R.B., we must maintain our present state of readiness. It is very hard on the men as they cannot leave their pens from 05.30 each morning until 20.30 hours. They are fed in their pens. We must accept these long hours. The men do so cheerfully."

Practically all the airfield installations, such as offices, messes and living quarters had been demolished, food was short, rest periods were interrupted both by night and day by alerts and bombing. Shortage of petrol meant that personnel, including aircrew, had long tiring walks to and from their billets and were denied adequate relaxation. All

/ranks

← ~~all~~ ranks had to help in the salvaging of equipment and the endless task of airfield repair. The efficient maintenance of aircraft, under these conditions would have been thought well-nigh impossible. Yet it was achieved.

Perhaps the best tribute to the quality of the Malta pilots (and it was more the operational experience of the pilots which was under dispute and not their quality) is given by Field Marshal Kesselring. When enumerating the difficulties experienced by Luftlotte 2 in finally neutralising the island by air attack, he wrote:

The War in the
Mediterranean
Part by F/M
Kesselring. AH56
Trans. No. VII/104

The British fighter units (at Malta) deserve admiring recognition for their bravery, their manoeuvrability in action and especially in their perfectly executed tactics of diving from a great height (10 - 1200 metres) through the close flying formation of bombers..... In Malta, the Luftwaffe had met a worthy opponent.

The End of Malta's Ordeal - 10th May, 1942

H.Q. Mediterranean 7
O.R.B.

A slackening of the tempo of bombing and the replacement of German machines by Italian was noted as early as 27~~th~~ April by observers on Malta and this is borne out by an analysis of the records of the Luftlotte 2 units based on Sicily. By the end of April, 1942, four Luftwaffe units, comprising 90 aircraft had left Sicily. The largest move was by II/JG3 and I/JG53 with 74 Me. 109 Fs which left San Pietro and Gela respectively for Russia, via Germany, between 25 - 30 April. Unit 9/2G26 with Me.110s left Trapani for Maleme, Crete, on 20th April, while bomber unit No. 2/NJG2 (Ju.88s) moved from Catania to Benina, North Africa, on 23rd April. By the end of May, a further seven Luftwaffe units, comprising 153 aircraft (34 Me.109s, 57 Ju.88s, 27 Ju.87s and 35 Me.110s) had left Sicily for North Africa and Crete.

A.H.B.6

Between 7 and 8 April, Field Marshal Kesselring, as C.-in-C South, had paid a visit to Sicily and North Africa and had reported to the Duce, as a result, on 12~~th~~ April, that the "planned air attacks had eliminated Malta as a naval base. The airfields and installations had been heavily damaged, but

"High Level
Reports and
Directives."
A.H.B.6 Trans.
No. VII/80

the complete elimination of Malta as an air base could not be expected." The Duce, thereupon, decided that the preparations for the attack on Malta (Operation "Hercules") should be speeded up to enable the operation to begin at the end of May. Kesselring himself supported the attack planned by Rommel which aimed at the destruction of the Eighth Army's armoured forces at Tobruk (Operation "Theseus") and which was eventually launched on 26th May.

By 21st April, Hitler had ordered that the plan for the invasion of Malta should be supported by both the German army and air force. Orders were given to the Luftwaffe to provide two parachute battalions. The Army were to prepare special pioneer forces, totalling approximately one battalion. Further instructions were given, at the end of April, which definitely linked Rommel's offensive in North Africa with the invasion of Malta.

The Panzer Army, says the Directive from Army H.Q. to the Italian G.H.Q. in North Africa, is to attack as soon as possible after the capture of Malta. If the operations against Malta should extend beyond 1st June, it may be necessary for the Army to attack without waiting for the capture of the island.

"The War in the
Mediterranean"
Part I by F/M.
Kesselring.
A.H.B.6 Trans. No.
VII/104.

By 10th May, Kesselring considered that he was in a position to report "our task completed", a review of the situation showing that:

- (a) Malta had been neutralised as a supporting base for the British Navy and as a port of call for shipping.
- (b) All the serviceable ships had been destroyed or put out of action.
- (c) British air activity from Malta had been severely restricted.
- (d) Rommel's supply routes to Malta were safe.
- (e) The blockade against supplies to the island had been maintained.
- (f) The most important military installations had been destroyed.

/Malta's

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Memorandum on the
Malta Situation
A.H.B.6 Trans.
VII/57.

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Malta's main ordeal from air attack, in the so-called "Spring 'blitz' of 1942", was thus called off. It had lasted approximately five months, from 21st December, 1941, when the newly-arrived units of Luftlotte 2 began the assault, until the date given by Kesselring, 10th May, 1942. During the intensified phase of the enemy offensive, from 20th March until 28th April, the enemy air forces dropped 6557 tons of bombs and flew 11,819 sorties against the island (5,807 by bombers, 5667 by fighters and 345 by reconnaissance aircraft). It is a tribute to Malta's depleted fighter force that for every bomber sortie flown, the enemy had to fly one fighter sortie for protection.

The number of Luftwaffe sorties flown against Malta during the months January to April reached the extraordinary total of 19,000, half of this total (9,600 sorties) being flown during April. The precise figures were:

Number of German Sorties Flown Against Malta January - April, 1942

	<u>Jan</u>	<u>Feb.</u>	<u>March</u>	<u>April</u>	<u>Total</u>
Bomber sorties	591	568	1425	4591	7175
Fighter Sorties	1145	1606	3041	4410	10202
Recce. sorties	237	323	461	598	1619
Totals	1973	2497	4927	9599	189967

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An indication of the disparity between the German and Italian effort against Malta, during this period, is revealed by the fact that, between 20th March to 10th May, the Italians flew a total of only 865 sorties against the island and dropped 128 tons of bombs. After the end of the main air offensive, on 10th May, and the transfer of ^{most of the} ~~the main~~ German units from Sicily to Russia and North Africa, it is interesting to find that the Italians considered that an average of 30 sorties a day (including those used in day and night operations) and in co-operation with the remaining German units, would be adequate "to keep up the neutralisation of the island."

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The Italian Air Staff, nevertheless, were astute when, in their appraisal of the situation vis-à-vis Malta, on 10th May, they made the statement that:

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From an offensive point of view, the neutralisation of Malta was almost complete. An absence of ships, serviceable submarines and multi-engined aircraft was noticed.

From a defensive point of view, the neutralisation was limited and temporary, judging from reports by Luftlotte 2 and the Sicilian Air Force governing A.A. fire and searchlights.

It was impossible to stop air reinforcements, as the take-offs took place from aircraft-carriers.

The three phases, corresponding to the various categories of objectives, were non-existent in practice.

Contrary to the statements made by Luftlotte 2 in their orders of the day, the main aims of the operational plan were not realised, or only partly so.

The main conclusion arrived at in this paper was that "the neutralisation of Malta is partial and temporary". This was soon to be driven home by events.

The fact that "the three phases corresponding to the various categories of objectives were non-existent in practice" ^{has} ~~had~~ already been noted when discussing the relative expenditure of effort, by the Luftwaffe, on the various targets. In spite of the policy laid down, Luftlotte 2, in its air offensive against Malta, failed to keep to any scientific system of target priorities. Due to the consequent dispersal of effort, the power of the enemy offensive always fell just short of the island's recuperative ability. Airfields were put out of action and then a respite followed, with a diversion of the air effort to other targets, giving time for the airfields to be put back into commission again. In this way, the Luftwaffe never, except for very short periods, prevented the R.A.F. from being able to hit back.

Furthermore, conditions were never sufficiently bad to prevent the air reinforcement of Malta by aircraft carrier. At the very time that Kesselring had announced that Malta had been effectively neutralised, the most ambitious of all operations for the reinforcement of Malta with Spitfires (Operations "Oppidan" and "Hansford") were already under way. The combination of the strengthening of Malta's fighter force with

76 (1) Spitfires in May and the move of Luftflotte 2 units to other fronts, altered the whole strategical air position in the Central Mediterranean, and the power of the R.A.F.'s defensive, in the air, became immediately superior to the offensive pressure which the Axis air forces were able to sustain against the island. In fact, Kesselring's statement, on 10 May, "our task completed", could hardly have been worse timed, and in it lay the seeds of the Panzer Army's failure at El Alamein in early July, 1942, and again in early September .

Summary and Conclusions:

The second and the most serious of all the German air assaults on Malta began on 21 December, 1941, and lasted until 10 May, 1942. The air attacks were sustained primarily by units of Luftflotte 2, under Field Marshal Kesselring, as Commander-in-Chief, South, helped on occasion by units of Fliegerfuehrer Afrika, Fliegerkorps X and the Italian Air Force. The period of the most intensive bombing of the island occurred between 20 March and 28 April when 11,819 sorties were flown and 6,500 tons of bombs were dropped.

In January, 1942, the opposing air forces comprised 694 enemy aircraft (257 German together with 257 Italian on Sicily and 180 on Sardinia) and 130 R.A.F. aircraft on Malta. By April, 1942, the enemy strength in front-line aircraft had risen to 940 (410 German and 361 Italian, on Sicily, and 169 Italian, on Sardinia) with a R.A.F. strength on Malta of 86.

Until 7 March, 1942, when the first Spitfires arrived at Malta (Operation "Spotter"), the island's fighter defence depended wholly on the obsolescent Hurricane. The German squadrons were armed with Me.109Fs. Between 12 November, 1941 and 7 March, 1942, no S.E. fighter reinforcements reached the island.

Field Marshal Kesselring planned the neutralisation of Malta by air assault in three main phases:

/Phase I:

- (1) In May, 1942, 76 Spitfires arrived safely at Malta, 60 from the aircraft carriers Wasp and Eagle, on 9 May, and a further 16 from the Eagle on 18 May. (q.v.)
- (2) The enemy blockade of Malta was also broken on 10 May by the arrival of the fast minelayer Welshman. (q.v.)

Phase I: elimination of the R.A.F. fighters by a surprise attack.

Phase II: concentrated attacks on airfields.

Phase III: Neutralisation of Malta's A.A. defences.

These operational phases were not adhered to. By the end of April, however, Malta no longer existed as an offensive air and naval base. The Wellingtons left for Egypt on 21 March and the 10th Submarine Flotilla was recalled to Alexandria on 26 April.

The enemy sorties flown against the island between January and April amounted to 18,996 (7,175 bomber, 10,202 fighter and 1,619 reconnaissance).

Although the worst of the bombing attacks was yet to come, the arrival of the first Spitfire reinforcements, on 7 March, marked the turning-point in the battle for air supremacy over the island. The decision to re-arm the Hurricane squadrons with Spitfires was taken as a result of a visit to the island by Group Captain B.E. Embry, in January 1942. Air Ministry then laid down the scale of fighter defence for the island as 5 Spitfire V squadrons and 1 Hurricane IIC, for night-fighter defence. The first squadron to operate Spitfires as fighters from Malta was No. 249 Squadron, on 10 March, 1942. Intensive bombing made the airfield repeatedly unserviceable, but due largely to help from the Army, they were soon brought into a state of repair again.

At the height of the enemy air attacks in April, the island's total serviceability in fighters averaged no more than 6 aircraft. In spite of all the efforts of the ground staff to maintain serviceability, squadrons were reduced to a point where they could only put up ^{two} ~~five~~ aircraft at a time so that they were hopelessly outnumbered. As a result of these tactics, however, even at the height of the 'blitz', the enemy were unable to launch unescorted bomber raids against the island. In spite of the intensity of the offensive, the

/reinforcement

reinforcement of Malta with Spitfires flown from aircraft carriers and Hurricanes flown from North Africa was never prevented.

By the third week in April, units of ^fLuftlotte 2 were being switched from Sicily to Russia and North Africa. By 10th May, Field Marshal Kesselring considered that he was in a position to report "our object attained". The task of maintaining the offensive against Malta was left primarily to the Italians. This coincided with the arrival of further Spitfires from the aircraft carriers Wasp and Eagle. In two operations, on 9th and 18th May, Malta's fighter defence was reinforced with 76 Spitfires, and the strength of the defence immediately became superior to the enemy's offensive. On 10th May, the day that Field Marshal Kesselring made his pronouncement, the blockade of Malta was broken by the fast minelayer "Welshman".

Although the enemy achieved their primary objective, the neutralisation of Malta as an offensive air and naval base, by the intensive air attacks of the Spring of 1942, they never succeeded wholly in neutralising the island's air and A.A. defences.

The measure of the enemy's failure in this respect is that they were unable to prevent the fighter reinforcement of the island from aircraft carriers. This was due to a basic weakness in planning. Air attack might effectively neutralise the island for the time-being, but only military occupation could prevent a revival of Malta's offensive potential.

Invasion of Malta was an integral part of enemy operations in North Africa, in order to protect the Panzer Army's lines of communication, and it should have ante-dated any further major offensive by Rommel who, however, tended to dissociate his own military plans for operations in the Desert from their essential strategic implications.

S E C R E TPART VIMALTA'S REVIVAL MAY TO OCTOBER 1942CHAPTER 14The R.A.F. Gains Air Superiority Over MaltaHitler's Decision to Launch Operation "Theseus"

As a result of the intensive air assault against Malta in the spring of 1942 the enemy attained their immediate objective. This was the temporary neutralisation of Malta as a British Air and Naval Base for use against their seaborne lines of communication with North Africa. The figures which show the effect on the enemy supply position in North Africa are most striking. Stores shipped to North Africa in April 1942 totalled 150,389 tons compared with 173,723 tons for the preceding three months. Out of this April tonnage the Panzer Army received 55,883 tons whereas between the three months January to March 1942 the total had only been 62,311 tons. The enemy supply position to North Africa was never to be so favourable again.

"La Marina
Italiana Nella
Seconda Guerra"
Dati Statistici

At the series of important meetings between Hitler and Mussolini at the Berghof in April 1942, far-reaching decisions were taken on enemy operations in Libya and against Malta. These were influenced directly by the opinion expressed by Kesselring that after the move of Luftflotte 2 from Sicily, Malta could be kept down by continuous harassing raids. Kesselring was also in favour of the launching of an attack by Rommel in North Africa. It was finally decided that Operation "Theseus", the offensive for the capture of Tobruk, would be launched at the end of May or the beginning of June. This would be followed by the invasion of Malta, Operation "Hercules", in mid-July. Hitler agreed to the German participation in Operation "Hercules" with the use of a parachute division with three reinforced parachute brigades, assault pioneers and an armoured unit composed of captured Russian tanks.

Fuehrer
Conference 1942
Ref.A.H.B./IIR/
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A.H.B.6.

According to Enno Von Rintelen, who was military attaché at Rome at this time, there was a further meeting between Hitler and Mussolini at the end of April when plans for the summer of 1942 were again discussed. Cavallero's view was that the conquest of Malta must be regarded as the first and most vital requirement for the further conduct of the war in Africa. Hitler was averse to the whole idea of an invasion of Malta. After Crete he was highly sceptical of the value of airborne landings. He discounted the fact that Malta's power to resist had been weakened through the bombing and the shortage of supplies. Hitler considered that one of the greatest tasks would be that of supplying Malta after its capture which would cause a constant drain on the German resources. He expressed the view that by remaining on Malta the British enabled the Germans to continue to inflict severe losses on British naval and merchant shipping carrying supplies to the island. He only agreed to the planning of Operation "Hercules" "with the greatest reluctance".

Kesselring, however, supported Rommel's viewpoint and said that before the invasion of Malta was undertaken the Panzer Army must defeat the British Army so that it would no longer be able to launch an offensive aimed at relieving pressure on the island. Furthermore, the Luftwaffe was not strong enough to operate effectively in several battle areas at once. This view was supported by Keitel and Jodl, and Cavallero eventually gave way and agreed that Operation "Theseus" should be launched at the end of May and if possible Tobruk should be captured, but ^{the advance} ~~it~~ should then be halted at the Egyptian frontier so that Operation "Hercules" could be carried out, at the latest during the full-moon period in July. The plan was eventually approved by both Hitler and Mussolini.

/Kesselring's

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Kesselring's basic mistake was to think that the diversion to Germany, Russia and North Africa of German aircraft from Sicily would not affect the enemy's ability to protect their own lines of communication from the depredations of British Air and Naval forces based on Malta. The German Naval representative who attended these talks at the Berghof was himself sceptical. "Kesselring", he wrote, on 1 May, "who took part in the discussions was of the opinion that these transfers could be made without risk of British regaining supremacy. Well, we shall see. He ought to know."

Already the Luftwaffe was beginning to show signs of acute strain. The spring offensive in Russia and another in Cyrenaica and the need to bolster morale in Germany by retaliatory raids on Britain all made their various demands on an increasingly inadequate German Air Force. One of the first results of this abnormal strain was soon to be felt in North Africa.

Operation "Theseus", the major offensive launched by Rommel on 26 May, was the direct result of the Panzer Army's vastly improved supply position which in turn derived from the success of Luftflotte 2's assault on Malta. The fuel position in May was especially favourable, 23,595 tons having arrived in April compared with 22,282 tons for the whole of the first quarter of 1942. In April, for the first time since the Germans had taken an active part in the war in the Mediterranean, there had been no enemy shipping lost from attacks by British aircraft. However, the position began to deteriorate with the arrival of British fighter reinforcements at Malta and the diversion of Luftflotte 2 to other tasks. Operation "Aida", the plan for an advance by the Panzer Army to the Red Sea, after the capture of Tobruk, was to founder eventually on this very fact.

/Operations

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Operations "Oppidan" and "Hansford": the Reinforcement of Malta
with ⁷⁶ ~~60~~ Spitfire Mark VBs - ¹⁸ 9 May, 1942.

Operations "Oppidan" and "Hansford" were Air Ministry's most ambitious project to date for the reinforcement of Malta's fighter defence, in which it was planned to fly off a total of 62 Spitfires from the aircraft carriers Wasp and Eagle. It was *the first and most important part of* the successful completion of these two operations, on 9 May, 1942, at a time when Kesselring was making his assurances about the neutralisation of Malta by Luftflotte 2, which played such an important part in breaking the ascendancy which the enemy air forces had obtained over the island in the previous month.

Air Ministry's original proposal was for 47 Spitfires to be flown off the Wasp and a further full complement of 36 from the Eagle, in a single operation. However, the A.O.C. Malta's

Operations "Oppidan" and "Hansford". A.M. Files
C.S. 14432 and
13999.

view was that this would be excessive, owing to the possibility that some airfields might be unserviceable, due to enemy action.

Furthermore, Malta's real requirements were for a steady stream of replacement aircraft for those damaged beyond the island's power of repair, as no reserves could, at that time, be held on the ground in safety. Operation "Hansford" was therefore split into two parts, 17 aircraft being flown off the Eagle on 9 May, together with the Wasp's complement of 47, and a further 16 (15 of them remaining from Operation "Picket") took place on 18 May. (1)

reinforcing Operations
A.H.B./IJ1/68,
H.Q. Med. O.R.B.

Out of the 64 aircraft flown off the Wasp and Eagle on 9 May, 60 arrived safely at Malta and were operational within

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- (1) Six Albacores were also flown off, but all were forced to return, due to excessive oil temperature and low pressure.

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35 minutes. (1) ^{Ex} ~~Extensive~~ preparations were made for ^{their} ~~the~~ reception. ~~of the aircraft.~~ On arrival, each aircraft was met and directed by a runner to a dispersal pen. Each pen had a supply of tinned petrol, oil, glycol ^{and} ammunition, together with armourers, fitters, electricians and two soldiers to assist. The necessary servicing, arming and refuelling were then done, and within 35 minutes of touching down the aircraft were ready to be "scrambled". Each pen had an experienced Malta pilot ready to take over the machine once it was serviceable. The crews stayed in the pens all day, being fed there, in order to be ready to deal with each aircraft immediately it landed again.

One important factor in the success of the turn-round of these aircraft was the motor transport lent to the R.A.F. for the purpose, by the Army. Also, in order to report serviceability and bring aircraft to instant readiness, a complex signal organisation was needed, owing to the great distances between the aircraft pens on the dispersal points and the airfield control. In this, the Army were of great assistance, as they loaned W/T sets, despatch riders and personnel and equipment for visual signals.

H.Q. Med. O.R.B.

Defence of Malta.

~~V.C.A. 1-107/27(8)~~

V.C.A.S. R.H.B./137/27(8).

The arrival of the first delivery on 9 May coincided with a raid, but the very fact that a previous raid had not been directed against the airfields appeared to indicate that the enemy were not expecting the Spitfires. The situation was quickly appreciated by the enemy, however, and for the rest of the day continuous raids took place in which over 50 bombers and numerous fighters were employed. The R.A.F. fighters were very active and the Spitfires flew 125 sorties, a further 9 being flown by Hurricanes. Even in these raids, the enemy did not

/concentrate

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- (1) Two Spitfires turned back, one ran short of fuel just before reaching the island, and a fourth was reported "missing".

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concentrate on the primary target, and out of some 64 tons of bombs dropped only one half was on the airfields. The R.A.F. claimed 4 Me. 109s and 3 Cant. 1007s destroyed for the loss of 2

Spitfires. According to German records, they lost only 1 Me.109 on 9 May. (1)

Halfar O.R.B.

For a time, during the morning of 9 May, the Hal Far airfield at Halfar was unserviceable due to the cratering caused by the enemy bombers. Three Spitfires were damaged on the ground.

Arrival of the Welshman with Urgent Stores for Malta - 10 May, 1942.

One of the plans to help break the blockade of Malta was to send the Welshman, a fast minelayer, to the island with urgently needed stores, including A.A. ammunition and smoke-generators.

For some time past the A.A. guns had been ^{down} ~~driven~~ to a daily ration of 15 rounds. The question of the use of smoke over Grand

DONC Folder Supplies
to Malta ~~18/5/42~~
A.H.B./IK/24/125

Harbour had been a vexed one for some time between the A.O.C. and the Vice-^{Admiral} ~~Marshal~~ Malta, the latter being of the opinion that in order effectively to screen the harbour the amount of labour and materials necessary would be "prodigious". The Vice-^{Admiral} ~~Marshal~~ agreed, however, that if sufficient supplies of smoke could be got to Malta, every possible effort would be made to give the harbour adequate smoke-protection and the decision to send smoke-generators to the island was made.

Ibid. and "The War
at Sea" Vol. 3.

The arrival of the Welshman was timed in order that the heavy reinforcement of Spitfires from Operation "Oppidan" would be able to afford her fighter protection. She left the United Kingdom on 1 May and Gibraltar on the night of 7-8 May. During 9 May she was twice examined by the enemy reconnaissance aircraft (Ju. 88s) but, having assumed the disguise of a French destroyer of the Leopard class and flying the French flag, she was allowed to

/proceed

A.H.B.

- (1) It is interesting to note, however, that over the 8th, 9th and 10th May, Luftwaffe units based on Sicily lost 18 aircraft in operations against Malta (7 Me.109s, 6 Ju. 88s and 5 Ju. 87s).

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proceed on her way.⁽¹⁾ She arrived early on the morning of 10 May at Malta.

"The War at Sea"
Vol. 3.

H.Q. Middle East
Daily Opsums.
A.H.B./IJ5/31/1

A.L.B.6

Cargo unloading began at 06.30 hours and was finished by 13.30 hours, an hour being lost due to enemy raiders, in which 30 bombers attacked the Grand Harbour. In the afternoon, three more raids took place by Ju. 87s, ^{Ju.} ~~and~~ 88s and Cant. Z 1007s, escorted by Me. 109s and ^{Me.} ~~Ma.~~ 202s. Over 70 tons of bombs were dropped, all but two tons being concentrated on the dockyard area. This time the enemy raiders were thoroughly mastered. For the loss of 3 Spitfires the Luftwaffe lost 12 aircraft (3 Me.109Fs, 5 Ju. 88s and 4 Ju. ^{87s} ~~87s~~). Italian losses are not known.⁽²⁾ According to the German records, all but one of the bombers were shot down by fighters. The 3 Me.109Fs were 'unknown' but under the circumstances they probably fell victim to the Spitfires. Some of the bombs fell near the Welshman but damage was negligible.

Defence of Malta
A.H.B./ID7/27(B)

"To-day", said a signal from the Vice-Admiral Malta to the C.-in-C. Mediterranean and the Admiralty, "three raids have been concentrated on H.M.S. Welshman, but the Axis has been met by three factors to which they are unaccustomed - smoke, the heaviest barrage ever concentrated in Malta over one place and a wealth of fighters. Conditions have been ideal for smoke cover and for each raid a screen generally reported on as giving 100 per cent cover of French Creek has been developed ... For the first time since Axis offensive started, we have had sufficient fighters to meet each raid with equal if not superior numbers."

In a D.O. letter to the V.C.A.S. on 13 May, the A.O.C.

Malta wrote:

D.O. File
A.H.B./IJ5/113/9/5.

The 60 Spitfires which arrived on 9th were well-timed to cover the Welshman when she arrived at dawn on the 10th. There is not the slightest doubt that the Spitfires saved the Welshman. She made good her escape on the night of the 10th ... If we can manage to put another 60 Spitfires into Malta before the convoy arrives, there is not the slightest doubt that we will give the Hun the biggest thrashing he has ever had in his life. I am quite convinced on this point.

/At

(1) Due to imperfect briefing at Gibraltar the Welshman was reported by a transit B.A.F.C. aircraft, position, course and speed being given. This may have initiated this reconnaissance by Ju. 88 aircraft.

(2) We claimed 2 Me.109s, 2 Ju.88s, 7 Ju.87s, 1 Cant.1007 and 1 Macchi 202, destroyed.

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At long last we have persuaded the Navy to try smoke over the Harbour. It has been an uphill task and even now they are not fully satisfied about it. The point, however, is that as Air Defence Commander I am quite satisfied that any smoke-screen is all to the good and is an aid to hiding the target and so putting off the enemy bombers.

We have a few Hurricanes here. It is a very hectic existence for them and, in my opinion, the Hurricane has no longer a place in the fighter defence of this island ...

The Army have been magnificent in the help they have given us to operate our Spitfires. In fact, we would long have been out of business had it not been for the Army.

Appointment of Lord Gort as Governor and Commander-in-Chief

Malta 7 May, 1942.

On 7 May, 1942, General Lord Gort, V.C., was appointed Governor and Commander-in-Chief, Malta, in succession to Lieut.-General Sir William Dobbie. The precise terms of his appointment, about which there was to be considerable discussion, were laid down in a message from the Prime Minister:

1. You are appointed Governor and Commander-in-Chief, Malta.
2. Malta is henceforth included in the sphere of the Minister of State.
3. In your capacity as Governor, you will deal direct with the Secretary of State for the Colonies in all matters relating to civil administration.
4. In your capacity as Commander-in-Chief, you will be supreme Commander in the Island. Where, in your judgment, the safety of the Island is endangered, you will exercise this authority in any manner which appears to you to be necessary. In general, however, you will
 - (a) be guided by the policy laid down by the Middle East Defence Committee,
 - (b) refer to the Middle East Defence Committee any specific questions of importance, if time permits.
5. In the event of an invasion, you will command all sea, land and air forces located in or operating from Malta.
6. Subject to the above, Service Commanders in Malta will remain under the command of their respective Commanders-in-Chief in the Middle East. They will, however, keep you fully informed of all important signals exchanged with their respective Commanders-in-Chief.

Defence of Malta.
A.H.B./ID7/27(B)

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On 11 May, the Chiefs of Staff held a Meeting at which a complaint voiced by Lord Gort on the terms of his appointment was considered.

I cannot feel happy, he wrote on 10 May, 1942, that local Commanders are empowered to communicate with and receive instructions except on purely administrative questions, otherwise than through the Supreme Commander in Malta, who receives his guidance on policy from Middle East Defence Committee.

After the matter had been discussed at a meeting of the Middle East Defence Committee, in which it was stressed that the Governor of Malta was given adequate powers, as Supreme Commander, under Clause 4 of the Prime Minister's message, and further protests from Lord Gort, the following amended Directive was sent to the Governor of Malta by the Prime Minister.

15. 5.42.

ibid.

Following personal and secret from Prime Minister to Lord Gort.

1. With effect from the receipt of this telegram you are appointed Supreme Commander of the Fighting Services and Civil Administration in Malta, until further notice.
2. The present system of administration of the Fighting Services in Malta through Commanders-in-Chief Middle East and Mediterranean Fleet will continue.
3. This telegram super^scedes, where necessary, the Directive contained in my telegram No. 230 of May 7.

The above-mentioned telegram was the original Directive sent to Lord Gort by the Prime Minister.

The Prime Minister later (18/7) assured the Governor and Commander-in-Chief, Malta:

single
space { It is a great comfort to me to feel that you are
in full control of this vital island fortress. You
may be sure we shall do everything to help you.

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One of the results of Lord Gort's appointment as Supreme Commander Malta - a title which was very frankly criticised at Air Ministry and at H.Q. Middle East - was that he was likely to take over matters of air policy and even actual air operations from the A.O.C. Malta. The A.O.C.-in-C. Middle East was immediately aware of this implication and signalled Air Ministry on 17 May:

A.O.C.-in-C.
Personal Malta
A.H.B./ILJ1/
183/160(C)

I am proposing to carry on dealing with Lloyd as if I were still responsible for air operations and air policy in Malta, ~~and~~ I can see no alternative unless and until Gort is provided with an Air Staff. I have no indication that it is his intention to ask for this.

though
Even the A.O.C.-in-C, was not aware that the Governor of Malta might be asking for an Air Staff, ~~this~~ *this* was a very shrewd appreciation of the situation, for on the following day the C.A.S. signalled H.Q. Middle East that Lord Gort had actually asked for a Group Captain "to serve as an Air Staff Officer on his personal co-ordinating staff" and asked H.Q. Middle East to provide one. The A.O.C.-in-C. Middle East then wrote to the A.O.C. Malta telling him of the fact that Lord Gort had asked for a Group Captain with fighter background and Staff experience to serve as his Air Staff Officer. He pointed out that apart from any difficulties he himself might be experiencing in finding a suitable officer, he felt that "the appointment(of) such an officer might put you (the A.O.C. Malta) in an impossible position".

The next development was a signal from the C.A.S. to Tedder on 19 May in which a similar reaction was expressed.

do / cannot /
Governor has Naval Staff Captain as Chief of Staff and wishes Air Staff Officer of similar rank. Feel this is wrong and have said so. Good Squadron Leader is required perhaps with fighter experience. Group Captain appointment is absurd and might ~~be~~ *be* mischief. Cannot conceive what he can do. ~~Would waste good officer of type required.~~
Governor has idea he will dictate policy and mentioned long distance planning, whatever that may mean. We must go carefully and refuse Group Captain on grounds that one cannot be spared. Group Captain a very dangerous appointment and my position might be made very difficult.

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The A.O.C.-in-C. replied to the request in a personal signal to the C.A.S. and Lord Gort on 19 May. He explained that with intensive operations impending he could not spare a Group Captain with the required qualifications.

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"Apart from the immediate difficulty" he went on to say, "I urge most strongly that the Governor should rely exclusively on the A.O.C. and his staff for all advice and planning on air matters. Any other course is liable to lead to confusion and create difficulties for the A.O.C. If you agree, I recommend appointment to Governor's staff of a Squadron Leader with fighter experience. I can provide."

At the same time, the A.O.C.-in-C. sent a personal signal to the C.A.S. in which he deplored the suggestion. The A.O.C. Malta felt that if the request were agreed to his own position would be most difficult. "The fate of Malta" he concluded "at present depends primarily on Lloyd's efforts and it will be a calamity if anything is done which makes his task more difficult."

Ibid. ~~and~~
A compromise was reached when, on 27 May, the Governor accepted the suggestion that a Wing Commander nominated by the A.O.C. Malta, should be appointed to serve on the Governor's staff as Air Liaison Officer.⁽¹⁾ It was also agreed that the appointment should last for six months as it was not desirable to keep good officers away from operations for too long. Any future appointments of Air Liaison Officers to serve on the Governor's staff would be made personally by the A.O.C. Malta, and not by Air Ministry. In that way the A.O.C. Malta would be quite certain of his selection. There would be no question of his loyalty and he would have been in the Command and "know something about its work and Stations and will therefore not be entirely new to the job or to our problems".

Collapse of Enemy Assault

The main switch of Luftlotte 2 units from Sicily took place in the second half of May and was completed by 26 May. In April

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(1) Wing Commander Masterman.

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A.H.B.6.

four units comprising 90 fighters and bombers were moved from Sicily. During May, seven more units left Sicily; the fighters and dive bombers for North Africa and the twin-engine/bombers for Crete and Greece. These comprised a further 153 aircraft of which only 42 per cent were serviceable after their intensive period of operations against Malta. This low serviceability was undoubtedly a serious factor in the failure of the Luftwaffe to support Rommel adequately during the advance from Tobruk ^{to} and El Alamein.

lower
case

// LUFTWAFFE UNITS WHICH LEFT SICILY IN APRIL AND MAY 1942

				<u>Strength at time</u>	
<u>Unit</u>	<u>From</u>	<u>To</u>	<u>Date</u>	<u>Strength</u>	<u>Serv.</u>
II/JG 3	San Pietro	Me.109F	Russia 25-30 April	37	26
I/JG 53	Gela	Me.109F	(via Germany) Russia "	37	27
2/NJG 2	Catania	Ju. 88	(via Germany) Benina, 23 April	7	1
9/ZG 26	Trapani	Me.110	N. Africa. Maleme, 20-30 April	9	3
Crete.					
(on 31 May 1942)					
III/JG 53	Comiso	Me.109	Martuba, 21-26 May	24	11
10/JG 53	"	Me.109	N. Africa. Derna, "	10	6
			N. Africa.		
I/NJG 2 (less 2nd St.)	Catania	Ju. 88	Heraklion, 16-24 May	25	9
			Crete.		
Stab III/ZG 26) 8/ZG 26)	Trapani	Me.110	Berca, N. approx. (4 4		
			Africa. 20 May. (31 8		
Stab KG 54)	Catania	Ju. 88	Eleusis, 16-24 May	(3 1	
I/KG 64)		Ju. 88	Greece. (29 12		
III/St. G.3	San Pietro	Ju. 87	Berco, approx. 27 13		
			N. Africa. 24 May		

Stab and I/IG 54 and I/NJG 2 were moved from Fliegerkorps II to Fliegerkorps X to meet the impending threat by British forces to Panzer Army Afrika.

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This move left the G.A.F. on Sicily with the total strength of

← 144 aircraft of which 83 were serviceable, 58 bombers (34 serviceable), 46 S.E. fighters (30 serviceable), 9 T.E. fighters (6 serviceable) and 31 Long Range Recce. (13 serviceable).

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A.H.B.6.

The arrival of the Spitfire reinforcements in May had a marked effect on German aircraft losses. For instance, on 10 May, the day after the arrival of the 60 Spitfires from Operation "Oppidan", the enemy lost 12 aircraft over Malta (9 bombers and 3 fighters). By the end of May, the G.A.F. on Sicily had sustained operational losses totalling 46 aircraft, approximately one-third of their whole strength; of these, 35 were lost in action against Malta. The Italian aircraft losses amounted to 12. An indication of the increased Italian participation in the air attack against Malta in May 1942 is revealed by the fact that in the preceding month their losses had totalled only two aircraft. After the arrival of the Spitfires, formations of 2 - 4 Spitfires were replaced by sweeps of over 30, and fighters flew 134 sorties on the day the Spitfires arrived.

The estimated weight of bombs dropped on Malta during May 1942 was less than 10 per cent of the April figure. The heaviest attacks were made during the first fortnight of May and were concentrated mainly against the airfields and dockyard area.

Ta Kali	70 tons
Hal Far	127 "
Luqa	128 "
Kalafrana	5 "
Dockyards	106 "
Elsewhere	82 "

518 tons

R.A.F. fighter losses in combat were heavy during May, as the following table shows:-

<u>Month</u>	<u>Spitfires</u>	<u>Hurricanes</u>	<u>Pilots Lost</u>
January	-	8	3
February	-	7	6
March	2	10	9
April	11	8	11
May	23	2	14
	<u>36</u>	<u>35</u>	<u>43</u>

H.Q. Med.O.R.B.

/Although

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Although the bomb tonnage was so much less in May, the damage inflicted was still quite serious. At Kalafrana, the seaplane base, bombs set on fire an oil light^{et} and a petrol lighter, severely damaged the workshops, causing damage to airframes and engines, and destroyed the Instrument Repair Section. Casualties were six killed and three seriously injured. At Luqa bombs were dropped on 18 days during the month, and ^{4 aircraft} ~~42~~ were destroyed and 7 damaged. A number of personnel, both Army and R.A.F., were killed or injured. Serious damage was caused on 8 May when, in the course of a particularly heavy raid by some 50 bombers, the banks of a reservoir were breached and water flowed freely through the camp. For over a time, as a result, it became necessary to ration water most stringently.

Kalafrana O.R.B.

H.Q. Luqa O.R.B.

Hal Far was bombed 18 times during the first three weeks of the month. After that there was a respite from bombing attacks. In the course of these raids 1 aircraft was destroyed and 12 damaged, and 1 airman was killed and 17 other personnel, Navy, Army and Air Force, were injured. The airfield was rendered temporarily unserviceable on a number of occasions.

Hal Far O.R.B.

At ^{Ta Kali} ~~Takoradi~~ the enemy concentrated the majority of their attacks in the vicinity of the caves and shelters. On one occasion fuel stored in a cave was ignited and the fire burned for 24 hours. The bombing caused a number of deaths and also damage to aircraft. As with Hal Far, there was a most noticeable lull after the third week. Successive sweeps of Spitfires would return to base without having seen a single enemy aircraft.

Takoradi O.R.B.

There is no doubt that during this period the Royal Air Force enjoyed a spell of unchallenged air superiority above the island. The view of the Air Officer Commanding Malta was that this was achieved "from about May 10".

The

← The Revival of Malta as an Offensive Air Base -
May 1942

H.Q. Malta O.R.B.

The easing off of enemy air attacks on Malta in May and the reinforcement with Spitfires soon led to a resumption of the offensive air operations from the island. A Detachment of No. 104 Squadron Wellingtons arrived at Malta on 24 May and began offensive operations immediately. By the end of the month they had flown 36 sorties, and attacks were carried out against targets at Messina, Augusta and Catania airfields, and also against a convoy. A total of 49 tons of bombs and 960 x 4 lb incendiaries were dropped on Malta during the month. No aircraft were lost on these operations but one Wellington crashed on its return and was written off, four members of the crew being killed.

Special Wellingtons carried out fourteen reconnaissances. Twelve convoys were sighted and attacks made on six of them. Fleet Air Arm Swordfish and Albacores between them made 34 sorties and attacked two convoys. Although these combined totals of eight shipping strikes are not in themselves impressive, they reveal that Malta was again beginning to assert itself as an offensive air base, a development which was soon to have its effect on the military situation in North Africa. This resumption of the air offensive from Malta soon prevented the enemy from using the shortest sea routes to the east and west of the island because of the threat from the air.

The only success, but in itself an important one, scored by aircraft against the enemy's supply lines at this time was the sinking of the 6,836-ton Italian ship Gino Allegri. She was south-bound, some 80 miles from Benghazi, when she was located by a single Wellington VIII of No. 221 Squadron (Detachment) on the night 30/31 May, the Gino Allegri being escorted by a destroyer. Five 500-lb bombs were dropped with one second delay from 4,000 feet but according to the pilot only a "near miss" was scored and accordingly no claim was registered.

H.Q. M.E. Table
of Operations
A.H.B./IIJ1/31/1

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Nave Perdut^e

A.H.B.6

Three Albacores and two Swordfish were then despatched to attack the merchant vessel but she could not be located. It is now revealed by enemy documents that in point of fact the ship had been sunk. According to these enemy sources there were only 22 survivors^{out} out of 302. Her cargo totalled 1,773 tons, of which 1,000 tons was ammunition. The balance consisted of tanks, M.T., motor-cycles and provisions. ~~Outdoors~~ there were also 2,500 maps especially requested by the Panzer Army and presumably needed for Operation "Theseus". In addition to the crew, there were a number of Service personnel on board who were travelling to North Africa as replacements. (1)

The total enemy merchant tonnage lost in the Mediterranean during May 1942 amounted to 15,679 tons.

Navi Perdut^{u72}
Dati Statistici

The effect of Malta's renaissance as an offensive air base was soon reflected in the figures of stores shipped to North Africa. Whereas during April 1942 151,578 tons were despatched and 150,389 tons arrived, in May the total dropped to 93,188 tons of which 86,439 tons reached their destination. In April, the German forces in North Africa received 55,883 tons of stores, of which 23,595 tons were fuel. In May, only 31,427 tons of stores arrived safely for them and the fuel receipts had dropped by nearly two-thirds to 8,163 tons.

This sharp fall in the quantity of stores shipped to North Africa, during May 1942, meant that the enemy were unable to build up adequate reserves. Had not such vast dumps of all kinds of stores fallen into the hands of the Panzer Army at Tobruk, on 21 June, there is little doubt that Rommel would have been forced to halt his advance at the Egyptian frontier, as had been originally planned. On the other hand, shortage of certain stores^{and equipment}, - particularly ammunition, fuel, tanks and M.T. - was one of the factors in the failure of Rommel to press forward his victorious advance to Delta in the early days of July 1942. Shortage of

(1) The Admiralty claim that the Gino Allegri was sunk by the submarine Proteus. /aviation

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aviation and M.T. fuel also hampered the advance of the Luftwaffe and helped to prevent them giving adequate support to the Panzer Army in the later stages of the British retreat. This was ^{helped} contributed by the fact that the Royal Air Force had thoroughly cleared airfields of stocks of aviation spirit before moving back to new bases.

The Prime Minister Presses for an Offensive in North Africa
in Order to Help Malta

Throughout May, the Defence Minister and the Chiefs of Staff urged the Commander-in-Chief Middle East to begin an offensive during that month with the intention of not only ^{of} re-capturing Cyrenaica but to help break the blockade of Malta. This interchange of telegrams took place only a short time prior to Rommel's offensive and so from that point of view it is largely academic. However, it does reveal the importance which the preservation of Malta as an offensive base had assumed in the minds of the Defence Minister and Chiefs of Staff at this time.

Middle East
Strategy and
Defence Policy
Part II.

AMB./UA/9/22(A)

On 6 May, the Commander-in-Chief Middle East sent "an appreciation of the possibilities of launching an offensive in the Western Desert" to the Chiefs of Staff. After a lengthy discussion of comparative tank strengths, General Auchinleck stated that it was not considered that an offensive would be justified before 15 June. "To start earlier" he wrote "would incur risk of only partial successes and tank losses, and might in the worst case lead to a serious reverse, the consequences of which, in present circumstances, are likely, in our opinion, to be extremely dangerous". On the same ^{day}, 6 May, the Minister of State (The Rt. Hon. R. G. Casey) sent a signal to the Prime Minister. He had presided at the Middle East Defence Committee Meeting at which the decision not to launch the offensive before 15 June had been taken. He pointed out that there were "many intangible
/factors

Ibid.

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factors affecting the problem in addition to the mere counting of tanks on either side", but that General Auchinleck felt that superiority in armour was such a vital factor as to outweigh all other considerations. According to the latest Intelligence available to the Commander-in-Chief Middle East, the enemy had managed to ship sufficient tank reinforcements to North Africa to bring their armoured divisions up to strength. "In these circumstances", the Minister of State continued, "while fully aware to the advantage to Malta of getting Cyrenaica, he (the C.-in-C.) is clearly convinced that it would be at serious risk to launch his offensive before the date now given by Commanders-in-Chief. Auchinleck does not go so far as to say that the attack in mid-May would necessarily mean disaster, but he clearly does believe that at the best it would be an extremely hazardous enterprise, while at the worst failure might endanger the subsequent safety of Egypt."

These two signals from the Commander-in-Chief Middle East and the Secretary of State were considered by the Chiefs of Staff at a meeting of the War Cabinet on 8 May when the Prime Minister, in a personal telegram to General Auchinleck, said:

1. The Chiefs of Staff, the Defence Committee and the War Cabinet have all earnestly considered your telegram No. CC/36 in relation to the whole war situation, having particular regard to Malta, the loss of which would be a disaster of first magnitude to the British Empire and probably fatal in the long run to the defence of the Nile Valley.
2. We are agreed that in spite of the risks you mention in para. 9 you would be right to attack the enemy and fight a major battle if possible during May, and the sooner the better. We are fully prepared to take full responsibility for general directions leaving you with the necessary latitude for their execution. In this you will no doubt have regard to the fact that the enemy may himself be planning to attack you early in June and is trying to be ready for then. (1)

The reply from the Middle East was the result of a meeting of the Middle East Defence Committee (24th), held on 9 May, at
/which

(1) The enemy offensive was launched on 26 May.

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Ibid.

07 which the Minister of State (the Rt. Hon. R. ^{4.} Casey), the Commander-in-Chief Middle East ~~Air~~ Forces (General Sir Claude J. E. Auchinleck), the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief Middle East (Air Marshal Sir Arthur W. Tedder) and the Commander-in-Chief Mediterranean (Admiral Sir Henry Pridham-Wippell) were present. At this meeting, General Auchinleck circulated a draft telegram "designed to stress again certain of the major considerations affecting the launching of an offensive and to correct certain of the impressions which the War Cabinet appeared to have gained."

The telegram as finally despatched showed little sign that the true significance of Malta, in the overall strategic position in the Mediterranean, was appreciated by the Commanders-in-Chief Middle East, particularly from an air point of view. ^{in their} ~~another~~ ^{evaluation} ~~evaluation~~ as grave mistakes were made ^{about} by the British Commanders-in-Chief over Malta as were made by Kesselring and, strangely enough, the date (9 May) was ^{almost} identical with the one chosen by the enemy's C.-in-C. for his rash statement vis-a-vis Malta "our task completed". With the reinforcement of Malta with 60 Spitfires and the developments soon to take place in North Africa, with the launching of Operation "Theseus", it was not so much the task of the armed forces in North Africa to come to the aid of Malta, but rather the reverse.

Ibid.

✓ We realise. the Commanders-in-Chief wrote, "its (Malta's) importance but do not repeat not in the light of the most recent information in our possession consider that its fall (much though this would be deplored) would necessarily be fatal to security of Egypt for an ~~every~~ long period, if at all, provided our supply lines through the Indian Ocean remain uninterrupted. In its present neutralised state, Malta has very little influence on the enemy maintenance situation in North Africa, though it is containing large enemy air forces."

The signal went on to recapitulate the reasons why it would be wiser to postpone the British offensive. Bearing in mind Rommel's successes which followed so rapidly on his offensive from Gazala, on 26 May, it is interesting to read this truly surprising statement with which the signal ends:

/You

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You mention the possibility of an enemy offensive against us early in June. There are certain though not repeat not very definite indications of this from the information at our disposal, and we are naturally watching it closely and continually. We would point out that if the enemy could be induced to attack us with the forces now at his disposal, in our existing strong positions in reserve behind them, it might very well be the best thing that could happen. We are not repeat not afraid of this eventuality and hope that if it materialises, we can so damage his armoured forces as to give us a good chance of passing to the counter offensive, and possibly thereby achieving our object, which is to destroy his forces, and particularly his armoured forces in Cyrenaica before he can withdraw them westwards and so continue to threaten Egypt.

This message from the Commanders-in-Chief Middle East, particularly the comments on Malta, gave rise to a sharp reaction at Air Ministry. It was pointed out that as an air staging post, alone, Malta was indispensable. Between 1 ~~Jan~~^{January} and 30 April, over 300 aircraft had reached the Middle East^{in this way}. Without Malta, it would be necessary to crate the machines and send them by sea, placing an additional strain on shipping resources and the Takoradi route. Malta contained 300 to 400⁽¹⁾ first-line enemy aircraft which might otherwise have been used elsewhere and this force had suffered heavy wastage which the enemy could ill afford. Lastly, there was Malta's importance as an offensive base, and it was pointed out that once the air assault on Malta had been lifted the island should regain its value as an offensive base. "CC.42 is bound to raise the question of the replacement of General Auchinleck", the D. of Plans wrote to the V.C.A.S.

The Prime Minister's views were set out in a personal telegram from him to General Auchinleck on 10 May.

The Chiefs of Staff, the Defence Committee and the War Cabinet have again considered the whole position. We are determined that Malta shall not be allowed to fall without a battle being fought by your whole Army for its retention. The starving out of this fortress would involve the surrender of over 30,000 men, Army and Air Force, together with several hundred guns. ~~This position~~^{This position} would give the enemy a clear and sure bridge to Africa with all the consequences following from that. Its loss would sever the air route upon which both you and India must depend for a substantial part of your aircraft reinforcements.

/Besides

(1) At the peak of the enemy air assault on Malta the figure was in the region of 900 aircraft, 400 of them German. /400

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Ibid.

Accept
Besides this, it would compromise any offensive against Italy and future plans such as 'Acrobat' and 'Gymnast'. Compared with the certainty of these disasters, we consider the risks you have set out to the safety of Europe are definitely less, and we accept them The very latest date for engaging the enemy which we could approve is one which provides a distraction in time to help the passage of the June dark-period convoy.

The allusion to the June convoy to Malta in the last sentence of the quoted extract from the Prime Minister's telegram aroused immediate misgivings in the mind of the Commander-in-Chief Middle East. In his reply on 19 May, he said he assumed that this was not meant to imply that all that was required was "an operation to provide a distraction to help the Malta convoy", but that the primary objective of an offensive in Libya was still to be the destruction of the enemy forces and the occupation of Cyrenaica as a step toward the eventual expulsion of the enemy from Libya.

Ibid.

inception
Assuming, he went on to say, "that a major offensive is to be carried out but that its inception must be so timed as to provide distraction to help the Malta convoy, the actual moment of the launching of the offensive will be governed by three considerations - First, the sailing date of the convoy; Second, enemy action between now and then; Third, the relative air strength of the enemy and ourselves"

Finally, he added, in a cautious mood which was markedly absent from the despatch from the Commanders-in-Chief Middle East of 9 May:

There are strong signs that the enemy intends to attack is in the immediate future. If he does attack, our future action must be governed by the results of the battle and cannot be forecast now.

The Prime Minister replied on 20 May:

Your interpretation is absolutely correct. We feel that the time has come for a trial of strength in Cyrenaica and that the survival of Malta is involved.

Bearing in mind the result of Rommel's offensive from Gazala on 26 May, it is interesting to note that in this telegram the Prime Minister added succinctly, "There are no safe battles".

/G. H. G.

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Hurricanes "^aMore ^a Hindrance than ^a Help" - A.O.C. Malta

By the spring of 1942 the Hurricane had proved to be so completely inferior to the Me.109F that on 17 May the A.O.C. Malta signalled both the Air Ministry and H.Q. Middle East:

A.H.B./ID1/27(V,

Do not repeat not require any more Hurricanes here. They are outclassed in the fighting and are more of a hindrance than a help. We are always far outnumbered in the air and we must make up for this with good equipment.

We do not repeat not require any more Hurricanes.

Air Ministry expressed some surprise at this blunt statement:

Do you really mean that Hurricanes together with the Spitfires are of no help to you even if we send in additional maintenance personnel by air and by convoy? If you don't want them there are many others who would be very glad of them. Will you think again and inform us?

A.H.B./IIJ5/
101/4(C)

The A.O.C. Malta re-stated his views in a signal dated 18/5. "There were", he pointed out, "174 fighters within 80 miles of Malta all superior in performance to the Hurricanes. The R.A.F. fighters had the advantage of being over their own ground, but there was "too much sea about the place" and rescue was extremely hazardous by day." When the Hurricanes were operating, Spitfires had to be detailed to look after them which detracted from Malta's fighter effort. "Under these conditions" he continued "and with inferior equipment, the day of the fighter Hurricane at Malta has gone." It is asking too much from my pilots, however gallant they may be."

H.Q. Middle East replied, "We agree with you that the Hurricane is now obsolete as a fighter in Malta and here, too, incidentally." There was, however, certain work such as intruder patrols over enemy airfields from Malta for which the Hurricane was useful and for which they could continue to be used, until more Beaufighters were available.

The Shuttle Service from U.K. (No. 24 Squadron)

Although by mid-1942 Spitfire reinforcements were being received at Malta, with the assistance of the Royal Navy, in a steady stream, the Command at Malta ¹⁹⁴³ were being faced all the time

/with

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Spitfire Reinforcing Operations "Tilden"/"Style" and
"Maintop"/"Salient": June 1942.

Reinforcing
Ops. A.H.B./
IIJ1/68.

In June 1942, two more reinforcing operations were carried out by H.M.S. Eagle in which Malta received a total of 59 Spitfires.

The first of these was Operation "Tilden"/"Style" involving 31 Spitfires of which 27 reached Malta safely, on 3 June. The second one was Operation "Maintop"/"Salient" carried out on 9 June, when all 32 aircraft flown off the Eagle attained their objective.

Operation
~~Ops. A.H.B.~~
"Tilden" and
"Style" A.H.B./
IIK/24/123

On 20 May, the ^{S.S.} ~~£.£.~~ Empire Conrad left the Clyde carrying 32 cased Spitfires and 95 cases of spares, together with R.A.F. personnel. (1) Owing to the urgency of the commitment, the Spitfires' guns for this Operation, known as "Tilden" and "Style", were not air tested. This could only have been done if the date of sailing of the Empire Conrad had been delayed. Among the pilots sent for this operation, there were two who were night fighter-Hurricane pilots who had never flown a Spitfire. These pilots were returned to U.K. as being "quite useless for the operation". The majority of the remainder were "very inexperienced."

Between 0615 and 0834 hours on 3 June, 31 Spitfires were flown off the aircraft carrier Eagle in the approximate position 037° 47' N. and 002° 46' E. Some time after the Spitfires had left the Eagle, enemy aircraft were observed. Off Pantellaria, the last two flights of Spitfires were attacked by enemy Me.109s. Two ~~more~~ Spitfires were definitely shot down by the enemy aircraft and two others were probably shot down also, as they never reached Malta. A further Spitfire sustained damage in landing. Thus, of the 31 Spitfires flown off the carrier Eagle in Operation "Tilden" and "Style", 27 reached their destination.

Operation
"Tilden"
S.14557

/Operation

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- (1) Also included 196 cases for R.A.F. Gibraltar and four cased Fulmars. Personnel embarked were 13 officers and 12 sergeants, together with a maintenance party. Additional pilots were flown out for the operation.

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"Maintop" and
"Salient" A.H.B./
IHK/24/126

Operation
"Maintop/
Salient" R.A.F./e
CS. 14749

Operation "Maintop/Salient" which was a repetition of "Tilden" took place six days later. It had been decided to reinforce Malta with as many Spitfires as possible before the Eagle was required for the June convoy. A force of 32 Spitfires was embarked at the Clyde on the ^{S.S.} ~~S.S.~~ Hopetarn ⁽¹⁾. The Spitfires were flown off the Eagle between 0600 and 0730 on 9 June, in the position 037° 18' N. and 002° 30' E. Although ~~shadowed~~, the aircraft were not attacked, and all of the Spitfires reached Malta, one, however, crash land^{ed}ing on arrival. || At 1240 hours on 9 June, H.M.S. Partridge was detached from Force 'H' (which had already been reported to the enemy by a U-boat two hours earlier), to help with a surrendered U-boat. This proved to be the Italian submarine Veniero ⁽²⁾ which had been attacked, at night only, off the Balearic Islands by a Catalina of No. 240 Squadron which was co-operating in Operation "Salient". The Veniero surfaced and surrendered to the Catalina and then sank, leaving only two survivors struggling in the water. The Catalina attempted to rescue, but in trying to land on the sea was damaged and had to return to base.

Aircraft Reinforcements to Malta in preparation for the June Convoy.

Plans for the June convoy to Malta ("Harpoon" and "Vigorous") which was to sail simultaneously in two parts from both ends of the Mediterranean in the dark period about the middle of the month involved a considerable strengthening of Malta's offensive, as well as defensive, air strength. ^{the} Two aircraft reinforcing operations on 3 and 9 June, in which a total of 59 Spitfires had been flown to Malta off the Eagle had been carried out primarily with the idea of strengthening Malta in preparation for this June convoy.

/The

(1) The Hopetarn carried, in addition to the cased Spitfires, 214 boxes S.A.A., together with various other items for Operation "Maintop". The R.A.F. personnel consisted of 13 officers and 21 sergeants. There was also a maintenance party of one officer, two Warrant Officers, six Sergeants and 79 O.Rs.

(2) The Italian 'Nave Perduta' states that this was in fact the ZAFFIRO SECRET (591 tons), but this is not borne out by the location in which the submarine was sunk.

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with an urgent demand for spare parts. There were obvious limits to the process of "cannibalisation" from crashed aircraft. The difficulties and uncertainties of getting supplies by sea were so great that the alternative of flying the spare parts in by air to the beleaguered island had to be undertaken.

A.V.M. H.P.Lloyd
D.O.File A.H.B./
IIJ5/113/9/5 and
No. 24 Sqdn.
J.R.B.

The squadron involved in this shuttle service between U.K. and Malta was No. 24, based at Hendon. Beginning on 17 April, they flew not only Spitfire spares but other urgently needed stores, together with passengers, to the island. Some idea of the scale of the operations involved is revealed by the fact that by June and within a month, five No. 24 Squadron aircraft had completed over 500 hours on this shuttle service carrying 140 passengers and 35,000 pounds of freight in and out of Malta. The six pilots employed on the run averaged 130 flying hours a month. The squadron experienced considerable difficulty in obtaining replacement aircraft, as Coastal Command had priority in Hudson aircraft. In a letter dated 5th June, the O.C. No. 24 Squadron paid a tribute to "the magnificent ^{ground} ~~base~~ organisation at Malta for the splendid way in which they have turned our aircraft round". On 13 June, the A.O.C., shortly before he relinquished his command at Malta, (1) sent a letter of appreciation to the Officer Commanding No. 24 Squadron, Wing Commander P. W. M. Wright:

very / ^{very} "I am most grateful to you", he wrote, "for running your ~~ever~~ efficient shuttle service. Without your help we would have been in a very bad way on this island. As a result of your help we are now in very good shape. You will be pleased to know that you have been responsible for carrying our only Spitfire spares, so that we owe you a tremendous debt of gratitude in putting us back on top of the world Flying crews have been magnificent (I don't know how you scrounged them). We have not had the slightest bother with any of them and no crashery. This is indeed a very fine performance."

/Spitfire

(1) On 15 July.

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A.H.Q. Malta
O.R.B.

The detachment of No. 104 Squadron (Wellington IIs), which had arrived at Malta on 24 May, left on 11 June to make room for other aircraft. During their stay, this detachment dropped 152 tons of bombs in 104 sorties. They attacked targets in Naples, ~~Genoa~~ ^{Genoa}, Cagliari, Augusta, and Messina Harbours and the enemy airfields around Catania, in the eastern part of Sicily.

Squadron
O.R.Bs.

On 11 June, three days before the convoy, 11 Beaufighters of No. 235 Squadron arrived, and a further detachment of three Beaufighters arrived on 15 June. Their main duty was to provide escort and high diver ^{5th} for the Beauforts of No. 217 Squadron, nine of which arrived on 10 June and six more by 12 June. ^{(1) The A.S.C.} ~~ALB~~ ^{ALB} Malta

A.H.Q. Malta
O.R.B.

complained that the general state of the armament maintenance of the Beaufighters was "very poor" and they were hard pressed to make the aircraft fit for operations in the time available. There were also complaints that the Beaufort squadron was newly formed - and the personnel did not know each other. The equipment was in such confusion that it all had to be removed and sorted out. Only by calling on the Dockyard and other local resources could nine aircraft be made serviceable by 13 June, the eve of the convoy operation.

Six Wellington Vs of No. 38 Squadron arrived from the Middle East. There were also six Baltimores which arrived from the Middle East East, four on 3 June, 1 on 12 June and 1 on 13 June. Generally speaking, it was found that the Baltimore crews were inexperienced and there was also much trouble with their wireless equipment.

In addition to these special reinforcements ^{for} ~~to~~ the June convoy operation, Malta held three P.R.U. Spitfires and four Wellington VIIIs. The Royal Naval Air Squadron based at Malta had four torpedo and ^{No.} three A.S.V. aircraft. The ¹⁴³⁵ (Malta) Flight had five night Beaufighters. The daily average Spitfire serviceability at that time was 95.

/The

(1) This squadron was en route for ~~Malta~~ ^{Calicut} but temporarily retained in Malta for the period of the convoy.

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The total number of aircraft in Malta for the June convoy operation amounted to 165 (serviceable), made up as follows:-

	U5	
	Wellington MB	10
	" Vs	6
	" VIIIs	4
(day)	Beaufighters (Day)	14
(night)	" (Night)	5
	Beauforts	15
	Baltimores	6
	P.R.U. Spitfires	3
	Spitfires	95
	R.N.A.S. Squadron aircraft	7
		<hr/>
		165 serviceable aircraft

According to the A.O.C. Malta, it would have been quite impossible to have maintained all these aircraft at immediate readiness, and for a very quick turn-round, but for the help obtained from the Army. All work was stopped at the Command Repair Shops to provide a nucleus of skilled tradesmen in pens for each aircraft, where a complete maintenance crew was always at readiness. (1)

/the

(1) Help provided by the Army was as follows:-

<u>Parties</u>	<u>Officers</u>	<u>Men</u>	<u>Vehicles</u>
Work on aircraft			
in pens	12	332	
Bomb-hole filling	21	500	
Ammunition belt filling	1	43	
Transport for bomb-hole filling		198 (drivers)	114 trucks
Despatch riders		19 (drivers)	16 m/cycles
Communications		12 (signal-men)	6 R/T sets
Towing aircraft and for moving wreckage		28 crew	14 Bren carriers
do.		6 crew	2 tanks
		<hr/>	<hr/>
		34	1,138
		<hr/>	<hr/>
			146 vehicles and A.F.Vs.;
			6 R/T sets

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The June Convoys to Malta (Operations "Harpoon" and "Vigorous") -
14 to 17 June 1942

(i) Salient Points

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Middle East
Strategy and
Defence Policy
Pt. II

A.H.B./IIA/9/22(A)

The June convoy to Malta has been covered ~~very~~ fully elsewhere ⁽¹⁾ and it has been considered adequate, in this narrative, to outline a number of the main points about the operation which affected Malta most closely. As has been seen, the Prime Minister had stated on 10 May, "We (the Chiefs of Staff, the Defence Committee and the War Cabinet) are determined that Malta shall not be allowed to fall without a battle being fought by your whole Army for its retention The very latest date for engaging the enemy which we could approve is one which provides a distraction in time to help the passage of the June dark-period convoy." In the meantime, Rommel had forestalled the British offensive by launching Operation "Theseus", on 26 May.

Admiralty Battle
Summary No. 32
A.H.B./IIK/18/25

The convoy, known by the collective code-name of "Julius" was divided into two parts - Operation "Harpoon", a convoy from the west, and Operation "Vigorous", another convoy from the east. "Harpoon" involved the attempted passage ^{to Malta} of a convoy of six ships from the United Kingdom, through the Strait of Gibraltar, and "Vigorous", a convoy of 11 ships, from Egypt. The two convoys were to reach Malta on consecutive days, thus dividing the attention of the enemy during the passage. Only two merchant vessels of the western convoy, the Troilus (7,500 tons) and the Orari (10,500 tons), together with the special service minelayer Welshman, arrived. ⁽²⁾ The eastern convoy was forced to give up the attempt and return to Alexandria.

Ibid.

/The

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- (1) A.H.B. Narratives "The R.A.F. in Maritime War", Vol. VI.
"The Middle East Campaign", Vol. III
Also "Royal Air Force 1939 - 1945", Vol. II, H.M.S.O. 1954.
 - (2) The Welshman was carrying another cargo of ammunition and special stores. She travelled ahead of the convoy.

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The arrival of these ships from "Harpoon", at a time of great crisis in the Mediterranean, was one of the turning points in the war in that theatre. Not only had the blockade of Malta for which the Axis Air Force had been fighting for so long, and at such heavy cost, been broken. It enabled the R.A.F. to beat off, and finally defeat, the Luftwaffe's third concentrated air offensive against the island, in July. A high proportion of the enemy air strength, which should have been concentrated against the 8th Army, as they retreated from Gazala towards El Alamein, presenting a series of unparalleled air targets, was diverted against the convoy. Finally, it permitted Malta to resume her rôle of an offensive air and naval base. This led to a remarkable diminution in the enemy's supplies, at a time when, with his offensive in full swing, Rommel was in the greatest need of a steady stream of supplies and reinforcements in order to allow the Panzer Army to exploit the success of his offensive in the Western Desert and the fulfilment of his long term plans (Operation "Aida") for the occupation of Egypt and a drive to the Suez Canal.

Admiral Weichold who, as a naval man had a very shrewd idea of the bearing that the war of supplies was having on the fortunes of the Panzer Army, in North Africa, wrote:

*Admiral Weichold
'Axis Naval Policy
and Operations in
the Mediterranean'
R 242*

The cargos brought by the two supply ships enabled Malta to keep going a few more months. In this respect, the western part of the British operation had been a success, despite the losses incurred.

Another unexpected but important result of the operation was that the Italian fleet burned 15,000 tons of fuel. According to Weichold this, together with other factors, contributed to a serious decline in the delivery of supplies to North Africa during June. Only 1,850 tons of fuel oil were supplied to the German Army and Air Force, while other supplies were limited because of the shortage of fuel for naval escort to the convoys.

/Nevertheless,

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25.

A.H.Q. Malta
O.R.B.

Nevertheless, although the enemy success was to that extent incomplete, the cost to the British was very high. At the price of 36 aircraft (14 German and 22 Italian), an Italian cruiser ^{sunk} ~~sunk~~, a battleship damaged, the British lost six M/Vs., a cruiser and five destroyers, while a cruiser, three destroyers, a mine sweeper, the special service ship Centurion, a corvette and two M/Vs. were damaged. Malta lost eight aircraft (five Spitfires, one Beau-fighter, one Baltimore and one Albacore).

A.H.B.6.

The help afforded indirectly to the British land forces by the diversion of a major proportion of the enemy air effort from the battle was considerable and is considered ~~in a separate~~ ^{in a separate} Section. Briefly, during 14 June, when the First South African Division was retreating from Gazala and Rommel was making a determined effort to cut them off, enemy documents reveal that few air operations were possible over the battle area because of the preparations which were being made for attacks on the convoys. Throughout 13, 14 and 15 June, the enemy's main bomber force of Ju.88 aircraft, based on Sicily, were using Derna as an advanced landing ground for operations against the convoy from Alexandria. In addition, Ju.87 dive bombers were switched from North Africa to Sicily, in order to help in the attacks against the convoys.

The effect of these diversions is not easy to assess. The actual losses of the G.A.F. were of no great moment compared with the dislocation of flying routine imposed by the moves. Moreover, as a background ^{to} ~~of~~ this period of intensive air operations against the convoys, was the inevitable drop in efficiency of the units concerned through unserviceability. In this way, the contribution to the successful withdrawal of the ^{Eighth} ~~8th~~ Army from Gazala and El Alamein must have been ^{much} ~~greater~~ ^{greater} than ~~the~~ actual period of the convoy operations. Taking into account the prodigal use of

/the

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the G.A.F. by Rommel, in the reduction of ^{Bir}~~Bir~~ Hakeim and Tobruk, ^{and the} the ~~additional~~ strain of the switching of units' additional losses and the drop in serviceability consequent on the concentrated attacks ~~against the convoys,~~ ~~on the convoys,~~ there followed the serious result that the advance by the Panzer Army into Egypt was made almost wholly without air support. Not until early July was the G.A.F. able to participate again to any extent in the land battle. Moreover, the progressive weakening of the G.A.F. in North Africa may be said to date from this period.

Although considerable diversions of W.D.A.F. aircraft were made in support of the convoys (Nos. 252 and 272 Squadrons, together with aircraft on detachment from No. 227 Squadron, were withdrawn on 1 and 3 June and a Kittyhawk Squadron of No. 250 Squadron on 10 June), the effect on the R.A.F. air striking force was nothing like so grave. Essentially the effect was planned in a way that would not affect too seriously the basic struggle of an air force whose main function was to provide the ^{Egyptian}~~British~~ Army with air support. (1) Also, a great part of the burden of providing the convoy with air protection devolved on the forces of A.H.Q. Malta, A.H.Q. Levant and A.H.Q. Egypt. A.H.Q. Western Desert's responsibilities were narrowed down to the period from 0745 on 14 June to mid-day on 15 June. (2)

The main duties undertaken by Malta based aircraft, in support of the convoy were:

- (a) air searches for the Italian fleet;
- (b) bombing of enemy air bases;
- (c) shipping strikes against the Italian Navy;
- (d) fighter protection, as soon as convoy came within range.

/ (ii)

A.H.Q. IIJ1/183/160 (C)

- (1) A total of 165 serviceable aircraft, including 95 Spitfires, were held for the operation.
- (2) Operation "Harpoon" was in any case geographically out of the question. As it so happened, because of the threat by the Italian Fleet to Operation "Vigorous", and the shortage of ammunition with which to ~~face~~ ~~these~~ further air attacks, the convoy turned back in the early hours of 15 June, and fighter patrols by A.H.Q. Western Desert were extended until nightfall, on that day.

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(ii) Reconnaissance by No. 69 Squadron

From 11 June onwards, P.R.U. Spitfires of No. 69 Squadron carried out extensive reconnaissance of Taranto, Messina, Augusta and Naples, in order to detect any ~~deployment~~^{movement} of the Italian Fleet. On some days, Taranto was covered three times. The first news that the Italian Fleet had left Taranto was obtained by a P.R.U. Spitfire on 14 June. At 1835 hours that evening, a Baltimore which had been sent to cover the southern exits to the Gulf of Taranto reported sighting the Fleet some 70 miles south of Taranto and bound on a southward course. Unfortunately, owing to a wireless failure, no report of this movement was obtained until the aircraft landed. In view of the Spitfire and Baltimore reports, Wellington VIIIs were sent off at nightfall to carry out patrols in the Ionian Sea.

No. 69 Sqdn.
O.R.B.

A.H.Q. Malta
O.R.B.

A Wellington VIII led out the striking force of Wellingtons against the Italian Fleet which was subsequently found, shadowed and attacked. At the same time (the night 14/15 June), A.S.V. Swordfish carried out continuous patrols of the exits from the Straits of Messina to attack two Italian cruisers should they attempt to break through into the Ionian Sea. Baltimore searches and shadowing were also made throughout 15 June, but owing to wireless failures and aircraft losses - two of the Baltimores failed to return from ~~the~~^{these} patrols - contact with the Italian Fleet was maintained only intermittently.

(iii) Convoy from the West (Operation "Harpoon")

Operation "Harpoon", a convoy of six ships (Troilus 7,500 tons, Burdwan 6,000 tons, Chant (U.S.) 5,500 tons, Orari 10,500 tons, Tanibar (Dutch) 3,000 tons, Kentucky (U.S.) 5,500 tons), left Gibraltar at 0800 hours on 12 June, together with a naval escort. (1)

/From

- (1) Force 'W' one battleship, two aircraft carriers, three cruisers and eight destroyers.
Force 'X' one anti-aircraft ship, nine destroyers and four minesweepers.
Force 'W' turned back on reaching ~~this~~^{the Suez} Channel, at the entrance to the Sicily-Tunis Narrows, while the convoy went on with Force 'X' to Malta.

the Suez /
Channel

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No. 32.
A.H.B./IHK/
18/25

"Dragadin" C H E
H A FAPU Ia
MARINA"

Dragadin
'our ha fute
in Marina?

From Gibraltar, the convoy was escorted as far as the Sicilian Narrows by the aircraft carriers Eagle and Argus. The duties of air escort were then (at 2100 hours on 14 June) taken over by fighters operating from Malta. // On the 13 June, the convoy was shadowed continuously by German and Italian aircraft and reported by a submarine. Some delay occurred on 13 June, as the oiler for refuelling the escort was several miles off her rendezvous and oiling was not finished until late that night. The convoy was probably again reported by enemy submarine and at dawn the next day shadowing aircraft appeared once more. Air attacks from Sardinia-based aircraft began at 1030 hours on 14 June. (1)

The Dutch ship Taninbar was sunk in the course of an attack by a force of 28 Savaria aircraft ~~and~~ and the cruiser Liverpool was also hit, her speed being reduced to three or four knots and she was accordingly ordered back to Gibraltar. The damaged ship served the useful purpose of drawing off the remainder of the Italian air attacks, (2) and it was not until 1320 hours that the air attacks on the convoy were resumed, this time by Ju.88 aircraft which, however, were unable to inflict any damage. Further attacks that evening (at 1300 and 1320 hours) were also fruitless. The latter was the last encounter before the force divided at the Narrows.

Malta Report
H.A./O.R.B. Repts.
on Operation
"Julius"

At 2100 hours, four Beaufighters arrived to relieve the ~~naval~~ ~~naval~~ airmen who had lost seven aircraft out of the 22 carried. This patrol was carried out at a distance of between 200 to 220 miles from base. The Beaufighters remained with the convoy until it was too dark to see enemy aircraft in the air. There were 17 Beaufighters (12 coastal and 5 night) available for operations.

/They

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- (1) According to enemy sources, they employed a total of 232 aircraft (40 German bombers, 50 Italian torpedo aircraft, 61 Italian bombers and 81 Italian fighters).
- (2) By 26 Italian bombers and 8 torpedo-carrying aircraft.

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They were committed to the protection of not only "Harpoon" but also "Vigorous", coming in from the east. It was therefore necessary to husband the Beaufighter resources very carefully.

Whilst the first patrol of Beaufighters was over the convoy and the five remaining merchant ships were formed in single line ahead, for the passage of the Sicilian Narrows, eight Ju.88s made an attack on the ships. They approached out of the dusk ahead and had the convoy clear against the western sky. The presence of the Beaufighters, however, proved a considerable protection. The enemy bombers were prevented from scoring any successes against the convoy and the Beaufighters shot one of them down. Flying hours by the Beaufighters, on 14 June, amounted to 20 hours 10 minutes.

The next phase of the struggle began with the appearance of two Italian cruisers (the ^{7a} 7a Divisione consisting of the Eugenio di Savoia and Montecucoli) and five destroyers (Ascarelli, Oriani, Premuda, Vivaldi and Malocello) at daybreak on 15 June. For this it is necessary to go back a little. As has already been seen, the P.R.U. Spitfires were making frequent daily reconnaissances in order to ascertain the movements of the Italian Fleet. On 11 June, the Italians' main force had been found in ^dTranto, with the exception of two cruisers and four destroyers in Cagliari and one cruiser and five destroyers in Naples. On the night 13/14 June, a British submarine reported that the naval forces from Cagliari were at sea. An attack by Fleet Air Arm Swordfish from Malta was not possible as the enemy ships were at extreme range and the aircraft could not have completed the task in time. A Wellington strike of four aircraft was accordingly sent out, but unfortunately the Wellington V carrying the flares for the strike crashed on take off. Illumination of the targets was inadequate and the Wellingtons returned to base.

/The

Admiralty Battle
Summary No. 32
A.H.B./IHK/18/25

of
Bragadin ~~Montecucoli~~
'Che Ha Fatto
La Marina?'

A.H.Q. Malta
O.R.B.

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The dawn Beaufighters, sent out to cover the convoy on the morning 15 June, sighted the enemy force consisting of two cruisers and four destroyers at 0620 hours,⁽¹⁾ fifteen miles on the port beam of the British Force. This was the first news of the enemy's presence obtained by Captain Hardy, the British Naval Commander. The ^vfive merchant ships were ordered to seek shelter in Tunisian waters, while the Bedouin led out the Fleet-class destroyers to the attack.

Official Italian
Account

Twenty minutes after being first sighted by the Beaufighters, the Italian cruiser^s opened fire. The British destroyers with their 4.7-inch and 4-inch guns were completely out-gunned by the enemy 6-inch cruisers. The Bedouin and Partridge were soon hit and disabled but the other three destroyers pressed on most gallantly. The Ithuriel managed to hit the Italian destroyer Vivaldi and temporarily immobilized her. A request was immediately made by Force 'X' for an air strike from Malta against the enemy Naval force. Unfortunately, all Wellington Vs and all Beauforts, except two, had just landed from a strike on the main enemy battle Fleet, in the Ionian Sea in aid of the Operation "Vigorous", and were not available. The only striking force left, therefore, was the two remaining Beauforts with, as the A.O.C. himself describes, "the least experienced crews in the squadron", and Albacores of the R.N.A. Squadron.

1 .Q. Malta
O.R.B.

Strikes were given high and low cover by Spitfires. The attacks - three in number - were very gallantly carried out in daylight in an area where enemy fighters were active. The two Beauforts of No. 217 Squadron attacked at 1036 hours, claiming a hit on a cruiser. At much the same time (1029 hours) four Albacores also claimed hits on a cruiser. A further strike was

/carried

(1) There were actually five destroyers. This was the ^{7^a}~~2^a~~ Divisione already mentioned, commanded by Admiral Da Zara which had left Palermo at 2130 hours on 14 June, with orders to attack the convoy at first light 15 June. /14

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Bragadin "Che
Ha Fatto la Marina"

carried out by three Albacores that afternoon, at 1710 hours. According to enemy reports these attacks were made against the two cruisers, the Eugenio di Savoia and the Montecuocoli and the destroyer Vivaldi which was already ablaze as a result of the hits scored by the Ithuriel. Unfortunately, none of these strikes had any success. Nevertheless, they had an important moral effect on the enemy and hastened their return to base. The fire in the Vivaldi was put out and, "although endangered by the spirited attacks by Malta-based aircraft", she managed to reach Pantelleria ^{towed} ~~rescued~~ by the Premuda and helped by the Mlocello.

A.H.B./IIK/18/25

In the meantime, at 705 hours (15 June) the convoy, deprived of the support of the A.A. ship Cairo and the destroyers and without any air protection, was attacked by Ju.87 dive bombers which sank the Chant and disabled the Kentucky.

A.H.Q. Malta O.R.B.

The fact that it was necessary to conserve the Beaufighters for Operation "Vigorous", and the "Harpoon" convoy was running behind schedule, imposed a heavy burden on the long range Spitfires. It had been planned to use the Spitfires at 110 miles from base. As the convoy was still 140 miles from Malta at 0800 hours, it was decided to use the Spitfires at that range. Unfortunately, the Spitfires did not arrive on the scene until after the attack by the Ju.87s, when the Chant was sunk. At 1040 a few German bombers - probably diversionary - approached the convoy and were driven off. In so doing, however, the Spitfires, which shot one bomber down, exhausted their fuel and ammunition. When another attack developed at 1120 hours the relief flight had not arrived. The attacking aircraft disabled the Burdwan, although the relieving Spitfires arrived in the midst of the attacks and shot down two of the bombers. In order to preserve what remained of the convoy, the damaged Kentucky

Ibid. and Admiral
Battle Summary
No.32. A.H.B./
IIK/18/25.

/and

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and Burdwan were abandoned. It was intended to sink them by gun fire from our own destroyers but, in fact, they were eventually sunk by Italian aircraft. Further casualties to the escort vessels were caused by mines as the two surviving ships of the convoy entered harbour on the night 15/16 June. As has already been mentioned, out of the six ships of the convoy "Harpoon", only two, the Troilus, of 7,500 tons, and the Orari, of 10,500 tons, arrived at Malta on 16 June.

A.H.Q. Malta
O.R.B.

The Spitfires flew 286 hours on 15 June and 35 hours 50 minutes on 16 June, in support of Operation "Harpoon". Six of these aircraft were lost but five of the pilots were saved. One of the difficulties encountered during the protection of the convoy was that on the occasions when the Cairo was drawn off to help cover the convoy from the enemy warships, the aircraft were deprived of fighter direction.

The main result of the arrival of the Troilus and Orari (18,000 tons shipping, excluding the Welshman) was that Malta was again in a position to go over to the offensive. Furthermore, the island was now able to last out until late September. According to the Governor, by cutting down the consumption of high octane petrol 50,000 gallons a week, supplies would last until October and still leave a reserve of 100,000 gallons for operations to bring in a convoy.

A.O.C./47/3 "Malta"
A.H.B./IIJ1/183/
160(C)

(iv) Operation "Vigorous"

Complementary to Operation "Harpoon" was Operation "Vigorous", the east to west convoy from Alexandria. Led by Rear-Admiral Philip Vian, who had been in control of the March convoy, it consisted of seven cruisers, one anti-aircraft ship and 26 destroyers, as the main escort for 11 merchant ships.⁽¹⁾ There was also the former battleship Centurion which was unarmed, except against air attack, and masquerading as a capital ship.⁽²⁾
/In

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- (1) The Bhutan (6,000 tons) and Aagtekirk (7,000 tons) were sunk.
(2) Launched 31 years earlier and had been used pre-war as a wireless-controlled target ship.

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In the absence of capital ships, the convoy depended for its defence against its chief danger, the Italian Navy, mainly on submarines and aircraft. Admiral Harwood and Air Marshal Tedder, A.H.Q. Malta O.R.B. accordingly, set up a Combined Operations Room at Alexandria, in the Operation "Julius" H.Q. of No. 201 (Naval Co-operation) Group.

Although Operation "Vigorous" failed in its primary objective, which was to get the merchant vessels through to Malta, from the air point of view there were two most interesting results. First, there was the damage inflicted on the enemy Fleet (Trento damaged by aircraft and finally sunk by submarine and Littorio damaged by bomb and aircraft torpedo). Secondly, there was the effect that German air operations against the convoy, from bases in North Africa and Crete, had on the land battle.

The air striking force available at Malta (for both "Harpoon" and "Vigorous") composed two squadrons of torpedo-carrying aircraft (Beauforts, Albacores and Wellingtons). In the Western Desert there was a further squadron of Beauforts and the so-called "Halpro" Force of Liberators based near the Suez Canal.

No. 217 Squadron
O.R.B.

The first successful strike was made by nine Beauforts of No. 217 Squadron Detachment based at Malta, at 0616 hours on 15 June. The Italian Fleet was located steering in two groups, one of which, sailing to the westward, included the 3rd Cruiser Division (Gorizia and Trento - both 8-in. cruisers). The Beauforts attacked just when the enemy ships were passing over the British submarine line. According to the Italian account, in spite of a heavy barrage, four or five of the pilots flew in low and launched their torpedoes when at a distance of no more than 200 metres from their objectives.⁽¹⁾ They disabled the

/stern-

(1) The formation was led by Wing Commander Davis. The actual hit on the Trento was probably scored by Flying Officer Aldridge.

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sternmost cruiser, the Trento of 10,000 tons, which thereupon turned away and steamed slowly westward in the company of two destroyers. The Beauforts then attacked the battleships which managed to avoid the torpedoes by making large alterations of course.

Lieutenant Maydon of Submarine P.35 who missed a chance himself of attacking the battleships by their sudden turning away, logged the following highly dramatic description of the scene at the time of the Beauforts' attack:

*attacks
attacks*
P.35 was in the unenviable position of being in the centre of a fantastic circus of wildly careering capital ships, cruisers, and destroyers ... *all* tracer-shell ~~bursts~~ and anti-aircraft bursts. At one period there was not a quadrant of the compass unoccupied by enemy vessels weaving continuously to and fro. It was only possible to count the big ships: destroyers seemed to be everywhere. It was essential to remain at periscope depth, for an opportunity to fire might come at any moment; one was in fact tempted to stand with periscope and gaze in utter amazement.

The Captain of Submarine P.31 reported three hours after the Trento had been hit that she was still "burning gloriously" with her crew gathered on the quarter deck and two destroyers laying a smoke screen around her, while the Captain of P.34 reported her as being "definitely out of action and incapable of movement". At 1006 hours, Lieutenant Maydon, of P.35, who had been on the scene when the Beauforts had scored their successes, hit the Trento with two torpedoes and she sank within a few minutes with the loss of 406 officers and men. Of the survivors, 167 were wounded.

"Ufficio Storico
Delta Marina
Militare"

In the meantime, at 0916 hours, the Egypt-based Liberators after a remarkable flight in which they had successfully made a rendezvous over the Italian Fleet with five torpedo Beauforts of No. 39 Squadron⁽¹⁾, from the Western Desert, bombed the enemy ships. The Liberators attacked in three groups of three aircraft

/from

- (1) 12 aircraft of No. 39 Squadron had set out. They were intercepted by Me.109s which shot down two of them. Five were forced to drop out owing to damage or excessive petrol consumption, four of which returned safely to Egypt, the fifth being lost en route to Malta. The five remaining aircraft completed their mission and flew on to Malta.

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from the direction of the sun. There were nine near-misses on the Italian Admiral^{'s} flagship the Littorio and one bomb hit the Littorio, causing damage to a gun turret, killing one and injuring 12 others, and causing serious damage to an aircraft which was ready to be catapulted off. Subsequently this aircraft had to be jettisoned overboard. The Vittorio Veneto also suffered many near misses, but without sustaining any damage. The Beauforts attacked while the Liberators were still in the vicinity. Although the enemy ships helped the attacking aircraft by altering the course 90° when they were bows on to the aircraft, all the torpedos^e missed their objective. This may be related to the fact that two of the attacking aircraft released their torpedos^e at a distance of 2,000 metres, and three others from 4,000 metres.⁽¹⁾ In the case of the successful Beaufort attack by No. 217 Squadron on the Trento, it will be remembered that the attacking aircraft launched its torpedo when at a distance of only 200 metres.

After the bombing of the Littorio by the Liberators at 0816 hours on 15 June, the Italian Fleet continued on a south-easterly course until 1500 hours, when they were recalled to base at Taranto. From that time until 0040 hours on the 16th, the Italian Fleet was free from any form of attack.⁽²⁾ At 2030 hours, five Wellington IC aircraft of No. 38 Squadron left Malta on a torpedo strike against the Italian ships, in co-operation with A.S.V. aircraft.^{thirty four} 35 minutes before the attack was actually launched a telephone message was received by the Italian Super-marina from the Marina^M Messina that ~~the~~ eight aircraft had left Malta.

- (1) The torpedos launched from 4,000 metres (roughly 2½ miles) could not have reached their target.
- (2) After a particularly intensive series of air attacks lasting two hours by German Crete-based bombers in which, according to Admiral Vian, "all known forms of attack were employed" and with his ammunition reserves seriously depleted, Admiral Harwood signalled at 2053 hours "Return to Alexandria with your whole Force".

A.H.Q. Malta O.R.B.

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Malta to attack the Italian Naval Force. Although both the time and the number of aircraft were incorrect, the message nevertheless enabled the Italians to be forewarned. At 0016 hours, the order was given by the Italian Admiral for a smoke screen to be laid, and by the time the Wellingtons had arrived at their target the smoke screen was found to be so effective - combined as it was with low cloud - that four out of the five aircraft took their torpedoes back to base.⁽¹⁾

One of the Wellingtons, however, piloted by Pilot Officer Hawes, after having been subjected to the fire of the two destroyers Versagliere and Alpino, found ^{what the} two Italians described as "a smoke free corridor". This enabled the pilot to locate the battleship Littorio against which target he dropped two torpedoes at 0040 hours. The pilot claimed "probable hit on a battleship" but in point of fact a hit had been scored forward No. 38 Sqn. O.R.B. on the Littorio. Although the aircraft had left the vicinity, the Italians continued throwing up a smoke screen until well after

*Italian official
Account*

2 o'clock the next morning. The damage to the Littorio was found to be serious. The Italian Supermarina was warned that there was a likelihood of her foundering and she was kept in dock for several months. In this abortive operation "Vigorous" a British cruiser, three destroyers and two merchant ships had been lost and three cruisers, the special service ship Centurion, a corvette and two merchantman damaged. At no time were the British and Italian Fleets in conflict, the only casualties to the enemy ^{Fleet} being inflicted by aircraft and submarine.

Admiral Harwood expressed the view that "events proved with painful clarity that our air striking force had nothing like the weight required to stop a vast and powerful enemy force, and it in no way compensated for our lack of heavy ships". With the /Air

(1) According to the enemy report, the Italians were very surprised that no attack materialised from these aircraft, as the strong diffused light of the flares appeared to light up their ships with remarkable efficiency.

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Air Striking Force should be included the British Submarine Force which, apart from sinking the ^{which} Trento, had already been crippled by air attack, had had a singular lack of success. Whether the presence of capital ships as escort to the convoy would have enabled the M/Vs of Operation "Vigorous" to reach Malta is open to question. Even if the Royal Navy had been willing to hazard heavy ships in the narrow waters of Bomb Alley dominated by enemy shore-based bombers from Crete and North Africa, there is every likelihood that targets of such magnitude would have suffered severely from air attacks.

Thus the enemy occupation of Crete and the air bases on this "Cyrenaican Hump" had made an east to west convoy to Malta virtually impracticable. In point of fact, no further attempt was made to run a convoy from Alexandria through to Malta until, with the advance of the 8th Army, the ^b Martuba and Derna ~~airfields~~ ^{s/Hale} airfield was occupied - an integral part of the planning for the battle of El Alamein - and Operation "Stone Age" took place in the middle of November, 1942.

(v) The Effect of Operation "Vigorous" on Land Operations in North Africa (14 - 15 June 1942)

By 14 June, when the enemy had started their concentrated air attacks on both "Harpoon" and "Vigorous", the retreat of the Eighth Army from their positions at Gazala had already begun. Bir Hacheim had fallen on 10 June, and as a result of the tank battles of 12 and 13 June, a high proportion of the tank strength of the Eighth Army had been destroyed. On 14 June, General Ritchie ordered 13 Corps to withdraw the 1st South African and the 50th Divisions from Gazala. In addition, in view of the serious situation on land, the Western Desert Air Force began to prepare to carry out the first phase of their withdrawal plan although they still continued to provide maximum cover to the retreating Eighth Army Units. On the same day (14 June), the
/enemy

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enemy forces began a determined attempt to reach the coast road and cut off the South Africans.

As these Eighth Army formations began their retreat, the targets presented to the Axis air forces were unparalleled. The situation promised an outstanding contribution to the land battle, by concentrated air attack which might, in effect, turn the well-ordered retreat of the Eighth Army into a rout. The Panzer Army H.Q. was receiving reports of concentrations of hundreds of Eighth Army vehicles, while the vehicles and A.F.Vs of the South African Division, packed nose-to-tail along the coast road, must have presented ideal targets for strong formations of enemy bombers. Yet, according to Eighth Army reports, the withdrawal of the South Africans proceeded smoothly and, in spite of some air attacks, they managed to reach the frontier almost intact.

Enemy reports provide concrete evidence about this lost opportunity on the part of the enemy air forces in North Africa. On 14 June, although reconnaissance aircraft reported concentrations of between 4 and 500 vehicles, only two bomber raids were carried out against land targets. The remainder of the enemy bomber effort was directed against the British convoy to Malta.

In view of the importance of this convoy, the Panzer Army was informed by General von Waldau, Fliegerfuhrer Afrika, on the morning of 14 June, that the furnishing of air support to the Afrika Korps 'would have to wait'. A number of Italian formations and a few Me.110s would be spared for the disruption of enemy movements west of Acroma'. Altogether, on 14 June, a total of ¹⁷⁶ ~~186~~ German aircraft (89 Ju.87s, 38 Ju.88s and 49 Me.109s) were diverted from the rewarding land targets presented by the retreating Eighth Army, against British shipping. In addition, 25 of these Ju.88s had to land on Crete, on the completion of their mission, and so their services were temporarily lost to the land battle. One group, at 18,40 hours, failed to locate the convoy,

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because their assigned leader plane had been damaged in the course of a British attack on the airfield a quarter of an hour before setting off.

There was a comparable situation on the following day (15 June) when air support to the Panzer Army was limited to fighter operations, reconnaissance missions and only one attack by dive-bombers. 'Intensive enemy movement towards the east', the ^eFliegerfuhrer Afrika War Diary for that day records, 'can be checked only by fighter-bomber forces'. Altogether 66 Ju. 87s attacked British shipping on 15 June, in three attack waves (10.55 20 Ju.87s, 14.35 33 Ju.87s, and 18.30 13 Ju.87s). The last mission proved abortive. The number of Me.109s used as escort are not known. There were no Ju. 88 sorties flown against the convoy from North Africa on that day, undoubtedly due to the fact that these aircraft had been temporarily diverted to Crete on 14 June, on completion of their strikes against the convoy.

Altogether, therefore, on 14 and 15 June, a total of 143 bomber sorties, which could have been flown in support of the Panzer Army, against the most vulnerable targets presented by Eighth Army formations, during a period of great crisis, were diverted to shipping targets.

From the enemy Commander's point of view, the direction of so high a proportion of his tactical air strength to targets which were essentially strategic in scope, and which could have had no immediate effect on the fortunes of the land battle, must have appeared intensely frustrating. The diversion could hardly have been worse timed, and, indeed, it was to lead to extensive repercussions. An opportunity to turn the British retreat into a rout had been missed. It was also to have a marked effect on the efficiency of the G.A.F. for, apart from the aircraft losses incurred, and the disorganisation which resulted from the switch

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of the long-range bomber force, back to their bases in Crete, these intensive operations against the convoy had a marked effect on general serviceability. Taken in conjunction with other factors (the use of the bombers in intensive operations for the reduction of Bir ~~Hacheim~~^{Hacheim} and Tobruk, the orderly retreat of the Western Desert Air Force, which left airfields stripped of useful stores and equipment and yet managed to maintain a high level of operations), it meant that the Panzer Army was forced to advance into Egypt, without adequate air support.

The arrival of the two ships at Malta from the "Harpoon" convoy (together with "Welshman") enabled Malta to recommence offensive operations. On 24 June, the German Army General Staff were notified:

The Duce stated that difficulties after the collapse of the British Eighth Army lay less in the battle on the ground than in the transport situation at sea. Owing to Malta's active revival, supply of the Panzer Army in Africa has once more entered a crucial phase The neutralisation of Malta is the essential condition for the supply of the Panzer Army and will ensure pursuit as far as the Nile Delta.

Two days later, a discussion took place between Kesselring, Cavallero, Rommel and other enemy Commanders, and the Germany Army General Staff were informed:

The situation of the British Army demands that successes gained so far be exploited as far as possible. In spite of this, it must be taken into consideration that the supply position offers difficulties. The air base of Malta has resumed offensive operations. The Tripoli route must be temporarily abandoned and the route to harbours in Cyrenaica is also endangered. It is planned to neutralise Malta again, employing formations to be transferred from Germany. This, however, requires time, during which a critical period cannot be avoided.

The third Axis air 'blitz' was launched against Malta, in July. By ~~this~~^{that} time, the fighter defence of Malta had been strengthened to such a degree, by further reinforcements of aircraft flown in from aircraft carriers, that the Island's defensive potential was superior to the enemy's power of offensive, and the attacks had to be called off.

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A further interesting side-issue of the June convoy to Malta is provided by Admiral Weichold. It reveals how intricate and unexpected the effects of an apparently straightforward action can be, under conditions of modern warfare. In this operation, the Italian Fleet expended 15,000 tons of fuel and this left them with insufficient to maintain their extensive convoy protection commitments. This contributed to a further drop in the delivery of supplies to North Africa, at a time when extra quantities were urgently needed to make good the heavy drain on stocks caused by the intensive fighting in North Africa. In June, the stores which reached North Africa for the German forces there reached the lowest figure for the whole of 1942. Although some of this expenditure of stores and equipment was made good by the windfall obtained with the capture of Tobruk, this was no substitute for a controlled and successful supply programme, and in fact it merely helped to conceal the real extent of the supply crisis of the Panzer Army. Later, when fully revealed by the pressure of events, the shortage of supplies became one of the most important factors in ~~the~~ the failure of the Panzer Army, at El Alamein.

(vi) Low Level of Supplies Reaching the Enemy Forces in North Africa in June 1942

The rapid decline in the volume of supplies reaching the enemy forces in Libya between April 1942, when the air attacks on Malta were at their maximum, and June 1942, when the enemy were pre-occupied with the fighting in North Africa, is apparent in the following figures:-

	<u>For the</u> <u>German Forces</u>	<u>Total for</u> <u>Axis Forces</u>
La Marina	April 55,883 tons	150,389 tons
Nella Seconda	May 31,427 "	86,439 "
Guerra Mondiale	June 8,267 "	32,327 "
Dati Statistici.		

The figures for the ~~total~~ ^{tonnage} of fuel reaching the German forces are even more striking. In April they were 23,595 tons,

/May

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May 8,163 tons, and by June the total had dropped to 1,764 tons, the lowest total for twelve months.

Admiral ~~Weichhold~~'s statement, mentioned in the previous section, that the expenditure of fuel oil by the Italian fleet during "Harpoon" and "Vigorous" prevented them from fulfilling their convoy protection commitments, is supported by the fact that the total supplies despatched in June to North African ports was less than one half of that for May, and 1/3rd of that for April. Nevertheless, the sinkings of enemy shipping by aircraft showed the gratifying rise from nil in April, 6,836 tons in May, and 16,701 tons in June. For the Royal Navy, June 1942 was particularly unrewarding, sinkings totalling a mere 2,814 tons, one of the lowest totals for the whole period of active operations in the Mediterranean.

~~Royal Navy~~,
~~June~~

The June sinkings by aircraft reveal the typical way in which, now that Malta was again operating as an offensive air base, R.A.F. strategy was forcing the enemy on to the horns of a dilemma. If sailings were shifted eastwards, in order to be safe from attack by Malta based aircraft, they came within range of No. 201 (Naval Co-operation) Group's aircraft from Egypt. Out of the three ships sunk by aircraft in June, two totalling 8,957 tons were sunk from Egypt, and one of 7,744 tons from Malta.

	<u>Date</u>	<u>Name & Flag</u>	<u>Position</u>	<u>Tonnage</u>	<u>Remarks</u>
Enemy Shipping : ses in the Med. and R.A.F. Anti- shipping Ops. (Merchant) Vol.III.	June 4	<u>Reginaldo</u> <u>Giuliani</u> (Italian)	34.10 N. 2055 E.	6,837	Sunk at dawn by Egypt-based Beaufort.
	June 21	<u>Reichenfels</u> (German)	33.43 N. 1158 E.	7,744	Beauforts from Malta (No. 217 Squadron)
	June 29	<u>Savona</u> (Italian)	17 miles E. Tobruk	2,120	Sunk by No. 38 Squadron Wellingtons based on Egypt.

The sinking of the Reichenfels was achieved after a series of disappointing strikes from Malta whose lack of success appears to

/have

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have been due mainly to the inexperience of the crews in torpedo-dropping or else to error in navigation.

Nos.
217 and 235
Sqn. O.R.Bs.

On the morning of 21 June, a Baltimore of No.69 Squadron searching between Cape Bon and Kerkennah, sighted what he thought to be three merchant vessels without escort. A strike of eight Beauforts of No. 217 Squadron ⁽¹⁾ with an escort of six Beaufighters of No. 235 Squadron was immediately organised. The convoy, ~~actually~~ consisting of two M/Vs of 8,000 tons, both carrying heavy deck cargos including M.T., were located steaming line astern escorted by what is variously described as a flak ship and a destroyer, together with two Ju.88s and one S.M.79. While the Beaufighters engaged the air escort, the Beauforts attacked the two merchant ships with their torpedos, scoring hits on both of them and sinking what eventually proved to be the 7,744-ton German M/V Reichenfels. The flak experienced was intense and three of the Beauforts were shot down.

In the meantime, the Beaufighters which had engaged the air escort destroyed all three enemy aircraft. The pilot of one of the Beauforts (P.O. ^{Mc Cherry} ~~Mc Cherry~~) was hit in the face by a piece of shrapnel. In spite of his injuries and being weak from loss of blood, he managed to return and land safely at Malta with the help of his navigator. The Reichenfels had left ^{Naples} ~~Malta~~ at 2 a.m. on 20 June bound for Tripoli. Her cargo consisted of 200 M.T. (mainly trucks), 411 tons of ammunition, 319 tons of fuel, 198 tons of provisions, together with 506 tons of miscellaneous supplies.

A.H.B.6.

/Perhaps

(1) No. 217 Squadron was in transit to Ceylon and retained temporarily at Malta. ~~[This is the first offensive strike of a Beaufort based on Malta]~~ A Flight of Beauforts of No. 39 Squadron arrived at Malta from Middle East the next day, 22 June, under the command of Squadron Leader R.P. Gibbs.

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Perhaps, because she was a German ship of a relatively high tonnage for the Mediterranean, the loss of the Reichenfels was to have repercussions seemingly out of all proportion to the importance of the cargo she carried. As will be seen, the sinking of this ship was to result in yet another attempt within four months to neutralise Malta by air assault. Furthermore, when ~~they~~^{it} did take place, this July 'blitz' on Malta was to leave the Axis Air Force "off-balance" in the Mediterranean at a time when they were urgently needed to support Rommel's early attempts to breach the El Alamein positions.

Chapter 15

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CHAPTER 15

THE THIRD GERMAN AIR OFFENSIVE AGAINST MALTA - JULY 1942

The Enemy Decision to Launch a Third Air Offensive
Against Malta

The loss of the Reichenfels coming as it did on 21 June, the date of the capture of Tobruk, was a severe blow to the enemy Commander which must have tinged his delight over the victory at Tobruk and the tremendous booty obtained there with a feeling of apprehension over the security of his supply lines. April and early May had seen Malta completely dominated from the air, and, so it seemed, the even flow of supplies for the Panzer army in North Africa assured. By the third week in June, however, the R.A.F. from Malta and Egypt between them were making enemy convoy operations, again increasingly hazardous. In spite of the failure of Operation "Vigorous", the arrival at Malta of the Troilus (7,500 tons) and Orari (10,500 tons) from Operation "Harpoon", together with the Welshman, meant that Malta was again in a position to pursue an aggressive policy. Thus arose Rommel's dilemma that the greater his success on land, short of the complete destruction of the Eighth Army and the Western Desert Air Force, the more certain his own failure on the field of battle became from shortage of supplies, due mainly to the existence of Malta across his sea-borne lines of communication.

On 18 June, the German Army General Staff, Operations Division, were notified that the Italian Navy were unable to put to sea, owing to lack of oil. Only two cruisers and four destroyers were supplied with oil. "The air base of Malta is very active again" the despatch stated "Comando Supremo has asked C.-in-C. South (Kesselring) when he will be able to neutralise Malta again."

On 22 June a message from the German General Comando Supremo to OKW Operations Staff revealed the alarm felt over the loss of the Reichenfels on the previous day.

High Level
Reports and
Activities
A.H.R. Trans-
lation No.
VII/80.

/25 enemy

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25 enemy bombers and torpedo-carrying aircraft with fighter escort were used in the attacks on the German-Italian convoy, during which the Reichenfels was sunk. Our air escort consisted of two Italian fighters and three Ju. 88s, two of which were shot down. In view of the fact that enemy aircraft once more command the Central Mediterranean to this extent, Comando Supremo considers necessary quick transfer of air forces from Africa to Sicily, in order to increase the attacks on Malta again. In addition, all shipping movements west of Malta will be temporarily suspended and the eastern route more extensively used.

In spite of this warning that his supply lines had once again become insecure, owing to the revival of Malta as an offensive base, Rommel despatched the following glowing message to OKW Operations Staff on the same day (22 June).

(b.d.) The first objective of the Panzer Army in Africa, to defeat the enemy army in the field and take Tobruk, has been attained. Enemy units are still holding out at Sollum, Halfaya, and Sidi Omar. It is intended to destroy this enemy force also and so open the way into Egypt. The condition and morale of the troops, the present supply situation improved by booty, and the momentary weakness of the enemy will permit pursuit into the heart of Egypt.

Request the Duce to effect the suspension of former limitation on freedom of movement, and to put units at present subordinated to me at my disposal, so that the campaign may be continued.

17 As ⁶the ^qwill appreciate, this request involved a most serious reversal of Axis policy in the Mediterranean which hitherto had postulated the fact that no invasion of Egypt should or, indeed, could be attempted until Malta had been effectively neutralised by ~~the~~ ⁰⁷ invasion.

In this momentous exchange of signals which followed the fall of Tobruk on 21 June 1942, the confusion brought about by the enemy's wish to exploit their success on land, combined with anxiety for the security of their supply lines is fully apparent. On the morning of 24 June, in reply to Rommel's signal, a teleprinter message was received by the Duce from Hitler stating that "the historic moment had now come to conquer Egypt and must be exploited." At the same time, Kesselring and Bastico were putting pressure on the Duce for

/him

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him to fall in with Rommel's view and permit the pursuit of the Eighth Army into Egypt without waiting for the reduction of Malta by invasion. Then followed a message to Army General Staff, Operations Division, which reveals the acute confusion in the Duce's mind.

16-d. After acknowledging the letter, the Duce instructed me to give the Fuehrer, as his interim answer, that he is in complete agreement with the Fuehrer's opinion, and that the historic moment has now come to conquer Egypt and must be exploited. The Duce stated that difficulties after the collapse of the British Eighth Army lay less in the battle on the ground than in the transport situation at sea. Owing to Malta's active revival, supply of the Panzer Army in Africa has once more entered a critical stage. In his opinion it is absolutely essential to neutralise Malta, as it is not possible at the moment to commence the attack to conquer the island once and for all. It is necessary to reinforce the flying formations on Sicily for this purpose. Field Marshal Kesselring has ordered the transfer of one bomber and one fighter gruppe, and the Italian Air Force will transfer further formations from Italy to Sicily. In addition, he requested that the two bomber and one fighter gruppen from the Reich intended as reinforcements for Sicily for Operation "Hercules" be made available immediately. The neutralisation of Malta is the essential condition for the supply of the Panzer Army, and will ensure pursuit as far as the Nile Delta.

As preparations for Operation "Hercules" are being delayed owing to the continuation of the attack on Egypt, Commando Supremo has postponed this operation until the beginning of September.

By ^{accepting} ~~accepting~~, therefore, Rommel's request "to effect the suspension of former limitations on freedom of movement" and falling in with Hitler's dogmatic statement that "the historic moment has now come to conquer Egypt" the Duce resigned himself to the fact that Operation "Hercules" should be postponed until the autumn.

17 From 21 June, when the Reichenfels was sunk, the Axis forces in North Africa were to be plagued increasingly by supply shortages due directly to this decision ^{for} ~~(the decision to sink the Reichenfels)~~ which Hitler, Rommel and Kesselring - but perhaps Kesselring most of all, as he was the man on the spot responsible for the strategic ^{direction} ~~decisions~~ of air operations - were to blame.

/The

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The final decision to attempt the neutralisation of Malta again by concentrated air attack was taken on 26 June, at a meeting at Sidi Barrani between Rommel (now promoted Field Marshal), General Cavallero, Field Marshal Kesselring and Generals Bastico and Fougier. The directive came from Cavallero on the authority of the Comando Supremo.

16.d.
[and Directives
High Level Reports/
dealing with the
N. African Campaign
1942. A.H.B.6
Trans. No. VIII/80]

- (1) The situation of the British Eighth Army demands that success gained so far be exploited as far as possible.
- (ii) In spite of this it must be taken into consideration that the supply problem offers difficulties. The Air Base of Malta has resumed offensive operations. The Tripoli route must be temporarily abandoned, and the route to harbours in Cyrenaica is also endangered. It is planned to neutralise Malta again employing formations to be transferred from Germany.

Policy for the Use of Fuel Stocks in Malta

A.O.C.-in-C
Malta ILJ1/183/
160(C).

A.H.B.

Although with the arrival of the two ships totalling 18,000 tons from the "Harpoon" convoy Operation, in June, the supply position at Malta had improved, there was still insufficient aviation fuel to serve fully Malta's defensive and offensive requirements together with the essential supplies needed for transit aircraft. In late June the A.O.C. Malta pointed out the precariousness of the fuel position. To this Air Ministry replied on 2 July that the first priority in the expenditure of aviation fuel must be the fighter defence of the island, and cover for an incoming convoy. The second priority must be shared between transit aircraft and offensive operations. "In above settings you must decide upon your offensive policy. ~~and must not be~~ ^{opportunity must not be missed} of any offensive action that might be of real importance to the situation in the Middle East, such as attacks on convoys to North Africa and, should opportunity arise, on Italian naval forces. We cannot, however, afford anything that does not come under this heading such as attacks on Naples or aerodromes in Sicily."

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A.H.B.
Malta IIJ1/
3/160(D)

The A.O.C. Malta replied that his existing arrangement with the Governor was only to attack "really important South-bounders". It was then realised that if petrol was to last as long as the food stocks on Malta, further restrictions would rule out offensive operations altogether. The A.O.C. Malta on 3 July even went to the length of suggesting that Beauforts, Beaufighters and Wellington Vs should be sent back to the Middle East "as no object in holding when petrol must be kept within definite limits."

The next day, 4 July, the Governor of Malta joined in the discussions by requesting from the Middle East Defence Committee a definite policy for the use of petrol.

My instructions from His Majesty's Government are to prolong the resistance of Malta to the utmost limit and as far as I know that remains their intention. Conservation of Aviation Spirit is a very important factor in our defence measures. Our fighter efforts should last as long as food supplies, and we must keep a margin in hand to give any future convoys a reasonable chance of arrival and discharge should H.M. Government decide to try it.

The Middle East Defence Committee agreed, in their signal dated 6 July 1942 to Malta, that first priority should be to retain sufficient aviation spirit to maintain the fighter effort for as long as food and other supplies lasted out, and that a sufficient margin should be retained to give the next Malta convoy (Operation "Pedestal") a reasonable chance of arriving and discharging. They then went on to make the following important statement of policy:

ibid.
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This crisis is not yet over. It is still vital that we should concentrate every effort on destroying the enemy on land. We must therefore be able to take offensive action from Malta against important enemy convoys, the arrival of which might well have the most serious effect on the battle. Our policy regarding offensive operations from Malta, therefore, is to retain in the island a striking force of Beauforts, together with a force of Beaufighters to escort them, and to use them to attack such objectives as are likely, in our view, to affect the issue on land we shall only call on the striking force in Malta in case of vital need.

On 29 July, the Governor of Malta signalled the Chiefs of Staff expressing his "grave anxiety about the continued over expenditure of aviation spirit which still persists due to strikes and transit aircraft." He considered that "the continuation of

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strikes and heavy transit traffic entailed the very grave risks of closing Malta. I request therefore that I may be urgently and definitely informed of the choice made and in the meantime despite the instructions of the Middle East Defence Committee I have reluctantly given orders that no further long-range strikes are to be carried out pending your decision." A reply from the Chiefs of Staff was despatched on the following day in which an important policy pronouncement was laid down that in accordance with the Governor's request "strikes must be reduced to an absolute minimum, e.g. extremely good chances at close range." As a result of this, all despatches of aircraft from the U.K. which involved landing at Malta (other than Beauforts and a special consignment of eight Wellington VIIIs) were stopped. It was just at this time, when acute anxiety was being felt in Malta over stocks of aviation fuel on the island that the Luftwaffe began their third air offensive.

The July "Blitz" Against Malta

A.H.B.6

According to enemy records, the Luftwaffe launched its third series of concentrated air assaults against Malta on 4 July 1942. It would appear, however, from a scrutiny of enemy sortie reports, that the attacks began in strength on 1 July and lasted until 14 July. In the third week of the month, there was another "little blitz" which lasted a week, but the major attempt to subdue Malta by air attack may be said to have been defeated by 14 July.

This date, 14 July, is of interest as it marks the end of Air Vice-Marshal Hugh Fughe Lloyd's long and distinguished career as A.O.C. Malta.⁽¹⁾ His successor was Air Vice-Marshal K. R. Park, himself a distinguished air commander, who was later

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(1) Air Vice Marshal K. R. Park assumed command as A.O.C. Malta on 15 July 1942. A.V.M. Lloyd left Malta for Egypt the night of 15/16 July.

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to put into operation the policy of forward interception. This was only possible because of the increased fighter strength in Spitfires at Malta. The new policy saved bombs and crashing aircraft from falling on the island, but it is an exaggeration to claim, as has been done in some quarters, that this policy of forward interception "saved" Malta. The battle for Malta had been won before Air Vice-Marshal ~~Lloyd~~ Lloyd left the island. After the enemy had called off the Spring "blitz" of April 1942 and Rommel became deeply committed to his offensive, ~~in Malta~~, the existence of Malta as an air and naval base was never seriously threatened by concentrated air attack. The combined strength of the R.A.F. and A.A. defences was always superior to the weight of air attack that the enemy could bring to bear against the island.

The comparison between the R.A.F. air strength on Malta at the end of the Spring "blitz" in late April and at the beginning of the Summer "blitz" in July is most striking. At the end of April, the fighter defence of Malta had been reduced to a mere 14 serviceable S.E. fighters, only seven of them Spitfires. Within two months, however, the number of fighters had been quadrupled, there being at the end of June 59 serviceable S.E. fighters, all but one of them Spitfires.

A.H.Q. Malta
State of Aircraft at 30 June 1942

	Type	Squadron	Total Strength	Serviceable	Remarks
Mediterranean Cmd. State of Aircraft P.H.B./VB/9/4	<u>Fighters</u>				
	Spitfire	69	3	1	Reconnaissance
		185	18	12	-
		126)			
		249)	55	45	-
		603)			
	Hurricane	185	1	-	-
		229	12	1	-
	Beaufighter	69)	12	10	-
		89)			
		1435 N.E. Flight	5	2	-
	<u>Bombers</u>				
	Wellingtons	38	6	4	-
		221	4	4	-
		69	3	2	Reconnaissance
	Beaufort	217	17	13	India
			136	94	(Enemy

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Enemy Air Strengths - Based on Sicily 30 June 1942

A.H.B.6

<u>Fliegerkorps II</u>		<u>Italian Units</u> ⁽¹⁾	
	<u>Strength</u>	<u>Serviceable</u>	
Bombers	110	59	Bombers 133
S.E. Fighters	69	48	Fighters 164
L.R. Recce	10	4	
	<u>189</u>	<u>111</u>	<u>297</u>
			<u>164</u>

Enemy strength figures at the beginning of the "blitz" amounted to 243 bombers and 233 fighters (excluding recce aircraft). Thus, opposing 136 aircraft on Malta (89 of them S.E. fighters) the Axis had a force of 486 aircraft on Sicily (243 bombers and 243 fighters) ⁽²⁾ The R.A.F. position in fighters improved considerably later in the month on the completion of operations "Colima"/"Pinpoint" and "Knapsack"/"Insect" (q.v.).

Idem. The enemy concentrated their air attacks, for the most part, against airfields in an attempt to ground the island fighter defences and also to prevent the bombers and torpedo-carrying aircraft from operating against the supply ships for the Panzer Army. Out of an official enemy total of 695 tons of bombs and 2,300 incendiary bombs, by far the highest proportion was dropped on the airfields at Luqa and Ta Kali, where the most serious casualty ^{rate} ~~rate~~ in both aircraft and personnel was incurred. In the course of the month 749 enemy bombers attacked the island (581 German and 168 Italian) while the fighter escorts totalled 2,102 (1,056 German and 1,046 Italian). Altogether, 67 R.A.F. aircraft were either destroyed or damaged on the ground by air attack. Of these, 17 were totally destroyed (6 Spitfires, 6 Beauforts, 2 Beaufighters, 2 Wellingtons and 1 Hurricane) and 50 damaged (28 Spitfires, 13 Beauforts, 6 Beaufighters, 2 Baltimores and 1 Wellington). A further 36 Spitfires were shot down in combat /with

- (1) The nearest date for the Italian strength is the end of May 1942 but there was only slight variation in the Italian figures.
- (2) For the purpose of these figures reconnaissance aircraft are included.

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A.H.Q. Malta with the loss of half of their pilots. During the ^{time} day there were
O.R.B. Daily 128 alerts of which 57 were bombing raids, the remainder being
Int. Sums. fighter sweeps and reconnaissances. There were a further 54 alerts
A.H.B./IIJ 5/115/5/15. Ta Kali, Luqa, Kalafrana, Hal Far O.R.Bs. at night and Spitfires flew 1,780 day-time sorties.

Ta Kali
O.R.B.

One of the most destructive raids was on the night of 2 July, when three bombs fell on a tented camp-site at Boschetto Gardens, Ta Kali. Direct hits were scored on tents and nine airmen were killed and eleven injured. To add to the horror, incendiary bombs set fire to the trees in the gardens and as a result there was widespread damage to tentage and equipment. In that night raid, damage was also done to houses and six civilians were killed and ten injured. There were also two soldiers injured. On 4 July, there was a series of intensive raids. At Luqa the Signals Maintenance Section was destroyed and at Ta Kali a Beaufighter was burned out and eight people were killed and 26 injured.

On the 13th, which was the day before there was a "marked decrease" in the number of raids, three aircraft were destroyed and eight damaged, the majority at Luqa. There was a direct hit on a gun position which killed three soldiers and severely injured four more. Further casualties amounted to one airman killed and five airmen, one soldier and nine civilians injured. In a similar mischance, five soldiers were killed in the course of an air attack on 20 July.

In the resumed "blitz" on 23 July, which lasted until 27 July, three aircraft were destroyed and 22 damaged, an airman and a soldier being killed and six soldiers injured. This does not substantiate the claim that the inception of the policy of forward interception in July prevented damage on land. In point of fact, the policy of "forward interception over the sea did not take effect until 28 July.

On that day, the enemy bombers were forced to jettison their bombs before reaching the island when three out of eight Ju.88s, escorted by

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over 40 fighters, were shot down. Thereafter, the enemy carried out what are transparently described in their records as "feint attacks".

A.H.B. Malta
O.R.B.

As has been noted earlier, the total R.A.F. combat losses at Malta during the month of July 1942 totalled 36 (18 pilots safe). The Luftwaffe lost 37 aircraft over Malta (30 bombers and 7 fighters) and the Italians a further 28 aircraft (22 fighters and 6 bombers). The total Axis losses amounted to 65 (36 bombers and 29 fighters) against R.A.F. claims of 149 and an A.A. claim of eight.

The days of highest enemy losses were 6 July when four Ju.88s and one Me.109F were shot down, and 27 July when three Ju.88s and two Me.109Fs were shot down.

By the middle of the month, when the attacks tailed off, the enemy had been forced to employ an increasingly high proportion of fighters to bombers. Furthermore, instead of diving on their targets, the enemy bombers remained at their normal approach height of 16,000 feet.

Some of the enemy sortie figures during the "blitz" are most impressive. For instance, on 5 July, when only nine Ju.88s attacked the island, a total of 134 fighters (80 Me.109s and 54 Me.202s) carried out escort duties and fighter sweeps. On 6 July, a total of 180 sorties was flown (22 bomber and 158 fighter). Two days later 124 ~~102~~ fighters (82 Me.109s and 42 Me.202s) escorted a total of 32 bombers (30 Ju.88s and two Br.20s). On 9 July, 13 Ju.88s had as escort 120 fighters (80 Me.109s and 40 Me.202s). On 10 July, 19 Ju.88s were escorted by 102 fighters (52 Me.109s and 50 Me.202s). On 11 July, 35 Ju.88s bombed and had as an escort 124 fighters (73 Me.109s, 39 Me.202s and 12 R.E.2001). On 12 July, 123 sorties were flown (23 bomber and 100 fighter). On 13 July, when a special effort was made 48 bombers were escorted by 100 fighters. On the last day of this most important phase of the "blitz", 14 July, 12 ^{Ju.} ~~31~~ 88s were escorted by 42 fighters (32 Me.109s and 10 Me.202s). On no day after this did

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* NIS Page 424 is mis-indexed between pp 420-1.

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* The operations of our bomber formations covered a wide field, and the same squadrons were at times in action against Malta, giving the armies air support and ensuring the safety of our convoys. This led to a drop in our available strength and Malta was able once more to build up the establishment on her airfields.

This study was submitted to higher authority and a number of pencilled annotations were made. It is not surprising that the statement that "by 13 July our own air superiority was re-established." was ^{amended} ~~removed~~ ~~out of context~~ with a query ~~[unclear]~~

Vice-Admiral Weichold, who was the German Admiral in Rome from June 1940 until March 1943, and in command of the German Naval Forces in the Mediterranean at this time, had a much more shrewd appreciation of the importance of Malta than the German High Command. He points out in his "Axis Naval Policy and Operations in the Mediterranean 1939-May 1943" that once the plan to invade Malta had been abandoned, the only hope left was to try and neutralise the island by resuming the air offensive. However, the opportunities of the previous March and April, when it had been possible to employ the concentrated force of ² ~~Luftflotte 3~~ against the island, no longer existed. At the beginning of July, according to Weichold, the Luftwaffe had a strength of only 301 operational aircraft as against 418 on 4 April, at the height of the Spring "blitz".

Although reduced by about one quarter, the Luftwaffe's commitments were more extensive than ever. The centre of operations was shifted to the Eastern Mediterranean, where direct support had to be given to the ground forces, and reinforcements and supplies brought to them and raids carried out against British forces and targets in Egypt.

Moreover, as the Vice-Admiral pointed out, the Middle East Air Forces had been considerably strengthened.

16.1. But in spite of all this, at the beginning of July, Field Marshal Kesselring was still abiding by his assurance, given on 24 June, that the resumption of German air raids on Malta would restore Axis air superiority in the Central Mediterranean within a few days.

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With this aim in view, on 4 July, the German planes commenced their second air offensive against Malta. It soon became apparent, however, that daylight dive-bombing raids, even with the provision of strong fighter escort, were proving expensive, and that except for days when weather conditions were particularly good, high level bombing or fighter-bomber raids would have to take their place. These latter raids were less effective, and at this time failed to neutralise the island as a base.

Although the figure of 65 (37 German and 28 Italian) enemy aircraft shot down in daylight over Malta would not appear sufficiently prohibitive to justify the enemy calling off the "blitz", the situation became much clearer when taken as part of the general picture of German Air Forces losses at that time. For instance, the 37 German aircraft constituted about 20 per cent of the total Fliegerkorps II air strength concentrated against Malta, and about one half of the serviceable bombers. In North Africa the operational losses of the G.A.F. in July amounted to a further 163 aircraft. Since the beginning of 1942 the Luftwaffe had lost 293 aircraft against Malta and a further 706 in North Africa and over a thousand (1,054) aircrew in North Africa killed and missing. This total of approximately 1,000 German operational aircraft, it will be appreciated, was the equivalent of a whole Luftflotte.

Operations "Colima"/"Pinpoint" and "Knapsack"/"Insect" July 1942

During ^{July} 1942 a total of 59 Spitfire Vs were flown into Malta from the aircraft carrier Eagle. The first, Operation "Colima"/"Pinpoint", took place on 15 July and "Knapsack"/"Insect" on 21 July. In the first operation, 31 aircraft arrived safely and 28 more in the second.

The 32 Spitfires for Operation "Colima"/"Pinpoint" were carried from the United Kingdom ^{to} Gibraltar as follows:-

S.S. Empire <u>Empire Shackleton</u>	-	18	cased Spitfires
S.S. Guido <u>Guido</u>	-	12	" "
S.S. Lublin <u>Lublin</u>	-	2	" "

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A.H.B./
III/1/68
Reinforcing
Operations to
Malta.

A.M. G/e
C.S. 14812
Operation
"Colima"/
"Pinpoint".

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Due to damage to the aircraft in transit and also various deficiencies, Operation "Colima"/"Pinpoint" was postponed until 15 July when 31 Spitfires were flown off H.M.S. Eagle and landed safely at Malta. One, however, failed to take off properly, crashed and had to be jettisoned.

The Operation "Knapsack"/"Inspect" which took place on 24 July was a repetition of "Colima"/"Pinpoint". A total of 32 Spitfire Vs was carried as follows:-

S.S.	S/S. <u>Empire Darwin</u>	-	22	cased Spitfires
S.S.	S/S. <u>Kestrel</u>	-	4	" "
S.S.	S/S. <u>Tern</u>	-	6	" "

Two of the Spitfires in the Empire Darwin arrived at Gibraltar damaged. They had been over-stowed with heavy freight and the tops of the cases had been staved in, resulting in considerable damage.

After a delay due to lack of wind, 29 Spitfires were flown off Eagle between 0726 and 0847 hours 21 July. During the fly-off the force was shadowed by a Ju.88 and also by a Fiat R.S.42, the latter aircraft being damaged and driven off by the carrier's Sea Hurricanes. The Eagle was also attacked by a submarine and four heavy explosions were heard, one of them being very close.

One aircraft after taking off reported that petrol was not being delivered from the overload tank. As there was insufficient wind over the deck of the carrier for the aircraft to land the pilot was instructed to bale out. He did so, but his parachute failed to open and he was killed. The balance of ²⁸ Spitfires arrived safely at Malta, after enemy fighters had made a vain effort to intercept them.

The Policy of Forward Interception

It had also been seen how, after assuming command as A.O.C. Malta, on 15 July, Air Vice-Marshal Keith Park adopted the much-

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Operations
"Knapsack"/
"Inspect"

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~~General TDC/480~~
Fighter Air-
craft Opera-
tional Policy
A.H.B./ILJ5/101/4(G)

discussed policy of forward interception. He outlined this policy in a ~~Memorandum~~ Memorandum "Fighter Interception Plan - Malta", which was circulated to all Unit Commanders on Malta and in a D.O. letter dated 23 July to the V.C.A.S. However, in this Memorandum no mention was made of the very pertinent fact that on the very day the new A.O.C. assumed command Operation "Colima"/"Pinpoint" was successfully completed and Malta fighter defence was reinforced with 31 Spitfires. On 21 July a further 28 Spitfires arrived (Operation "Knapsack"/"Insect"). Within a week, therefore, of the new A.O.C. Malta taking over his command, air reinforcements had arrived which were about equal to the whole German strength of serviceable fighters on Sicily. Furthermore, by the middle of the month, the enemy's second attempt to subdue Malta by air attack had already been largely defeated. It was a combination of these two factors which permitted the new A.O.C. to pursue an aggressive policy in the fighter defence of Malta and nothing new or revolutionary in the conception behind it. Again, in the Middle East, a Commander had arrived at the end of the lean years and obtained personal credit for the fact that he was able to conduct operations from a position of strength rather than weakness.

The forward plan for the employment of the Spitfires on Malta, as outlined by Air Vice-Marshal Keith Park in a personal Memorandum to Squadron Commanders was:

The squadrons are controlled by Fighter Sector Controller in such a way that they can get their operating height given up-sun and are then vectored forward to positions to enable the first squadron to intercept enemy high fighter cover. The second squadron is manoeuvred into the best position to intercept the close-escort to enemy bombers or attack the bombers if they are not closely escorted. The third squadron, having got its height up-sun, is then vectored to intercept the enemy bomber formation about ten miles before it reaches the coast and carry out a head-on attack, followed by quarter attack with the object of forcing the enemy to jettison his bombs into the sea. If a fourth squadron is airborne, its task will be either to attack the bombers, in conjunction with or immediately after the third squadron, when the enemy is about to cross the coast, i.e. to act as rear-rankers to destroy any bombers that might break through the forward fighter screen.

Malta and Gibraltar
Defence ILJ5/74.

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When the system was explained to the squadrons they said that they did not like patrolling over the sea, "because the pilots who had come down might not be picked up immediately". This is understandable, as the enemy had made a habit of systematically shooting up the air/sea rescue launches and the chances of being located and surviving when shot down ^{at} a distance of as much as ten miles from the coast were slight. At the height of the "blitz" there were insufficient aircraft to escort the launches and not only were the rescue launches machine-gunned but also pilots in dinghies and in parachutes. When air superiority was re-established, however, the R.A.F. retaliated by shooting down three of the enemy air/sea rescue craft and this had the effect of promptly putting an end to such outrages.

There was also a shortage of sea rescue craft and this was put forward by Air Vice-Marshal Lloyd as being one of the reasons why fighter pilots had not been asked to operate over the sea at any considerable distance from their home bases. In a letter dated 17 July, the V.C.A.S. expressed the opinion that:

An inadequate sea rescue service cannot justify the issue of any orders which will prevent pilots fighting the enemy in the best position from the point of view of the defence of Malta, and it is quite obvious that in many cases this must be well out to sea It is a hard thing to say, but I am quite certain I am right, and you must remember that quite a large proportion of the casualties of Bomber Command are due to bombers coming down in the sea and the majority of these are never picked up.

Air Vice-Marshal Park found that during the first week of putting his forward plan into practice "several instances occurred of young Flight Commanders, who were leading the squadrons, ignoring the orders of the Fighter Sector Controller and hanging back over the island or even behind the island waiting for the enemy to carry out his attack before going into the battle. This was remedied by changing a few tired and weary leaders who had been

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working for many months on the defensive plan." He then went on to add - perhaps with a touch of ^{unconscious} ~~obvious~~ irony - "I need hardly tell you that our ground crews, also the Army and Navy who have access to our Fighter Control Room, are delighted with the forward plan which will be most effective as soon as we have our R.D.F. system back to its good performance until the recent jamming occurred."

One aspect of forward interception alone proves that it could only have been put into operation in the days of plenty. This policy led inevitably to a number of abortive scrambles. On many occasions two or more squadrons were put up for what turned out to be only a fighter sweep. However, with the considerable reserves of Spitfires, it became possible to get the remaining squadrons airborne in time to attack the bomber raid which usually followed, while the first lot of Spitfires were landing and refuelling.

Return of the 10th Submarine Flotilla - 22 July 1942

One of the first results of the ascendancy gained by the R.A.F. on Malta over the enemy air force based on Sicily was the return of some of the submarines of the 10th Flotilla to Malta. The first submarine arrived on 22 July and on the following day the Captain (S)10, who was then at Malta, resumed operation ^{al} control of the Flotilla from the fortress. Thus, by the third week in July, Malta ^{had} once again been reconstituted as a Naval Base, a measure of the failure of the enemy's second attempt in four months to subdue Malta by air attack.

Visit to Malta of the Welshman 14 July

In July, the fast minelayer Welshman made her third trip to Malta carrying urgently needed supplies and personnel. ⁽¹⁾ She left Gibraltar

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- (1) Stores: 150 tons powdered milk, 100 tons edible oil, 7 cases wireless sets (for Military H.Q.), 3 sets Mk. I, III and V M/S maintenance gear, 3 cases currency, 5 tons mail, 20 tons soap, 33 boxes mine depot tools.
Personnel: 14 Officers and 106 O.Rs (including R.A.F. 4 Officers and 84 O.Rs. maintenance personnel).

Gibraltar
Defences
10/15/44.

A.H.4/11 J5/74

"War at Sea"
Vol. III

A.M. Fife
Defence of
Malta Policy
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Ibid.

Gibraltar in the early hours of 14 July and, in spite of being attacked by a total of 28 enemy aircraft, she arrived safely at Malta at 0620 hours on 16 July. She left at 1955 hours that night, having discharged her cargo, ^{and} arrived back safely at Gibraltar on the afternoon of 20 July, undamaged in spite of the air bombing and torpedo attacks to which she had been subjected on 19 July.

Improvement in Enemy Supply Position July 1942

La Marina
Italiana Nella
Seconda Guerra
Mondiale

Although the intensive air attacks on Malta in July failed in their primary objective which was to neutralise the island, they did help to relieve - for a time at least - the supply crisis in which the Panzer Army had become involved. It is significant that April and July 1942, when the Air Force on Malta was largely preoccupied with warding off enemy air attacks, were the two months when arrivals of supplies for the Panzer Army, in North African ports, were at their peak. In July, 97,794 tons of supplies were despatched to North Africa and 91,491 tons arrived, ⁽¹⁾ the latter figure being almost three times as high as for June (32,327 tons).

Axis Naval
Policy and
Operations in
the Mediterr-
anean R.242

Admiral Weichold points out that the July figures, although an improvement on the low total for June, were "still quite inadequate to meet the increased requirements of the reinforced units in Egypt and the exhausting demands of a war of attrition. The Panzer Army therefore asked for an increase on its previous supply quota of 30,000 tons."

Altogether, the enemy lost 16,592 tons of shipping in July, 11,923 tons by air attack, and the balance of 4,669 tons sunk by the Royal Navy. In the course of these sinkings, the enemy lost some 6,300 tons of supplies.

Taranto /

The most important ship sunk in July was the 6,339-ton Italian vessel the Vettor Pisani which sailed from Taranto on 23 July escorted by two destroyers and two 'E' Boats. Her cargo consisted

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(1) Out of this total 35,095 tons were despatched in July to the Panzer Army and 32,060 tons arrived.

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of 1,256 tons of fuel, 370 tons of miscellaneous material, 88 vehicles, 19 guns, and 7 tanks. She was attacked on 24 July by six Malta-based Beauforts (three of No. 217 Squadron and three of No. 86 Squadron) escorted by nine Beaufighters of No. 235 Squadron. The three ^{Beaufighters} ~~Beauforts~~ of No. 86 Squadron were shot down as they went into the attack, but the other formation (No. 217 Squadron) attacked successfully. A direct hit on the M/V resulted in much smoke and flame. Photographs taken later the same day showed the Vettor

A.H.B. 6, A.H.Q.
Malta No. 217 ^{Squadron}
O.R.Bs.
and ~~the~~ Malta D.I.S.

A.H.B. 113/5/15

Pisani in tow, stern foremost, down by the bows and blazing. Later she was photographed at Argostoli and was seen to be completely burnt out. Her cargo was destroyed, but there were no casualties. Altogether the Beauforts based on Malta in July (Nos. 39, 86 and 217 Squadrons) carried out 44 sorties against enemy convoys. On each occasion they were escorted by Beaufighters of No. 235 Squadron which made 26 sorties. The Beaufort losses for the month were severe and totalled ^{seven} ~~six~~ aircraft.

In the course of an attack by Beauforts on an enemy south-bound convoy on 28 July one of them was shot down and the crew captured by the Italians. However, while being flown as prisoners of war to an internment camp in Italy, they overpowered the Italian crew of the Cant Z 506 bis in which they were travelling and brought the seaplane safely back to Malta, where she was converted for use as a sea rescue craft.

A.H.Q. Malta
O.R.B.

The Wellingtons were also active during the month and carried out a total of 26 sorties mainly on armed shipping search although ^a ~~Messina~~ was raided on two occasions as an alternative target.

During the month of July, Hurricanes (11 in all) carried out night bombing attacks on the Sicilian airfields of Comiso and Gela which were in use as Ju.88 bases. However, the weight of these raids was inconsiderable and there is no evidence that there was any damage inflicted. (Reconnaissance)

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Reconnaissance from Malta (No. 69 Squadron)

No. 69 Sqn.
and A.H.Q. Malta
O.R.Bs.

Reconnaissance activity of No. 69 Squadron, which was devoted mainly to shipping, amounted to 238 hours for the ~~following~~ month of July. This was almost four times the April figure and reveals how little the July air offensive against Malta affected reconnaissance compared with the earlier attacks.

In addition to shadowing enemy convoys bound for Benghazi, nearly all the major units of the Italian fleet were located and photographed. The battleship Littorio was seen to be still in dry dock in Taranto, heavily camouflaged after the attack inflicted on her in June.

A considerable amount of interest was centred on the port of Palermo where the enemy were seen to be bringing into service the 'F' boats or tank landing craft which were being built there. A number of these craft were observed to be alongside one of the ~~large~~ loading tanks and gun carriages. At one time, as many as 15 'F' boats were seen assembled in the harbour. They left the port in groups of three or four, taking the western route to Libya via Pantallaria and Lampedusa. Other 'F' boats of a slightly different type were seen at Messina. They had probably sailed down the west coast of Italy from Genoa or Naples, where a number of these boats were known to be under construction.

The Effect of the July "Blitz" on the Enemy's Invasion Plans

The ^{tank} landing craft - located mainly at Palermo by No. 69 Squadron - were part of the force which had been set aside for the invasion of Malta, Operation "Hercules", plans for which were already far advanced. It has already been seen how after Rommel's phenomenal success^e at Tobruk on 21 June, Hitler made his fateful statement that "the historic moment has now come to conquer Egypt and must be exploited." This in turn involved "the suspension-

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of former limitations on the freedom of movement" which permitted Rommel's attacks into Egypt and as a corollary the postponement of the Malta invasion plan. // The way in which General Auchlinleck took over personal command of the Eighth Army at a time of great crisis and helped to stabilise the force on the El Alamein line, in the early days of July, is not obviously a part of the Malta story. However, it was this stubborn resistance in which the Western Desert Air Force played a notable part, and particularly those spirited actions later in the month, in which the Eighth Army went over to the offensive, ^{that} ~~and~~ finally ruined the enemy plan for the invasion of Malta. On this subject Field Marshal Kesselring is particularly interesting:

The first few days of the advance went according to plan; they proved Rommel right. Soon the resistance stiffened to such an extent that one was forced to conclude that either new forces had been committed or the original formations had made a remarkably quick recovery. The battles grew harder until the fighting near El Alamein stopped the advance and made Rommel go over to the defensive. At this time the battle became critical, the situation only being restored by committing ~~the~~ ^{new} armoured reconnaissance units and Luftwaffe regardless of losses. Both Army and Luftwaffe forces were exhausted; they needed immediate and abundant supplies of men and material. In addition, fresh formations had to be brought up, one infantry division coming from Crete followed by the division of German and Italian paratroops earmarked for Malta.

Since these divisions were ferried over by air because of the urgency of the situation, they therefore had no vehicles; this meant carrying out an emergency adjustment of transport within the German and Italian divisions and air force units which diminished the mobility of all formations even further. Consequently vehicles had to be brought up in comparatively large numbers for anti-aircraft and flying units too. This, coupled with catering for more units made even greater demands on the supply services. In order to guarantee supplies the capture of Malta was necessary, and at the same time this was no longer possible. I had to give up my demands for this assault as conditions could no longer guarantee success. The abandonment of this project was the first death blow to the whole undertaking in North Africa.

Events in July 1942 revealed clearly the interdependence of Malta and North Africa in the sphere of military operations. Just

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as the drain on Rommel's offensive and the resistance at El Alamein relieved Malta of any immediate threat of invasion, so the enemy's concentrated air assault on Malta helped the Eighth Army at a time of great stress. Undoubtedly one of the most important factors in the ability of the British to stabilise at El Alamein was the ascendancy gained by the W.D.A.F. over the Luftwaffe in Libya. In June, the diversion of enemy air strength against the Malta convoys had helped the retreating Eighth Army to escape almost unscathed from ^{from} ~~any~~ enemy air attack. July saw a force of ⁴⁸⁰ ~~500~~ aircraft concentrated against Malta, and no-one can deny that if anything like this force had been available to give the Panzer Army a high degree of close support and carry out air attacks against targets in the rear of the Eighth Army, the remarkable feat of ^g ~~g~~ Generalship shown by General Auchinleck would have been made infinitely more difficult, or even impossible.

According to Admiral Weichold, the Comando Supremo abandoned the projected invasion of Malta on 7 July and the Germans followed suit a week later. On 21 July, The German Naval Staff instructed the German Naval Command Italy to cease preparations for the landing operations. At the same time, the pioneer forces, the heavy tanks and landing craft which had been assembled for the invasion were withdrawn from the Mediterranean for duties in the ^{Black} ~~Red~~ Sea. Weichold then went on to stress an aspect of military operations at that time which, generally speaking, has either been overlooked or ignored.

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Policy in the
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The fact that the German and Italian authorities had to sacrifice the airborne operation in order to go to the assistance of the Axis troops in Egypt shows how serious the plight of the Panzer Army had become. It also proves that General Auchinleck's victory was not merely a local tactical success but a victory which had far-reaching strategical effects on the entire Mediterranean war.

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He then went on to criticise the Axis strategic direction of the war in the Mediterranean making, at the same time, a particularly important and interesting reference to Malta.

Again in 1942 we have the astonishing phenomenon of a local tactical success on land sufficing to cause the German Supreme Military authorities to deviate from their carefully-planned strategy and ignore all the lessons of the past. The successes achieved in Cyrenaica misled the authorities into a one-sided concentration on operations overseas without Naval co-operation, indeed, faced with a wilful neglect of the war at sea. Strategically, the one fatal blunder was the abandoning of the plan to invade Malta. When this happened, the subsequent course of events was almost inevitable.

Steps to Counter Enemy Jamming Operations July 1942

On 11 July, the A.O.C. Malta informed Air Ministry that enemy interference on R.D.F. was becoming serious and made a request that a scientific officer be sent to Malta by special aircraft. Within less than three hours of the receipt of this request, the A.O.C. Malta was informed that all anti-jamming measures for Malta were being co-ordinated by the Director of R.D.F. and that arrangements had been made for a scientific officer to travel immediately to Malta by air and, furthermore, that within four days yet another scientific officer would travel with equipment by destroyer and submarine. Five Beaufighters specially equipped with A.I. Mark VII were also being forwarded by Fighter Command. Elaborate precautions were necessary in order to prevent this secret equipment from falling into enemy hands. The five fighter type Beaufighters with a special nose for Mark VII A.I., but less the A.I. equipment, travelled separately. The equipment was carried in a Sunderland together with the extra personnel, and instructions were given that this aircraft was not to fly over land after leaving the United Kingdom until the arrival at Malta. Furthermore, rather than let the stores fall into enemy hands in the event of any mischance, the aircraft was to be sunk in deep water.

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Defence of Malta
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The enemy radio jamming increased in intensity until the end of August, when it was noticed that the jamming was not synchronised with the enemy's raids. This was later attributed to a serious disagreement between the German scientists and Air Staff.

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In addition to the assistance obtained from Air Ministry, anti-jamming devices were developed and constructed by personnel of the C.O. (Chain Overseas) Station at Fort Dingli to combat this interference. These were highly successful and were later issued to all stations on the island.

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CHAPTER 16

THE AUGUST CONVOY - OPERATION "PEDESTAL"

The Fuel Crisis

The pressure of enemy air operations against Malta during July 1942 had reduced the reserves of aviation spirit to a dangerously low level. It has already been seen how by the end of the month, on the authority of the Chiefs of Staff, the use of Malta as a transit base for aircraft, en route to Middle East, had been almost completely stopped. Strikes against enemy convoys were "reduced to the absolute minimum, e.g. extremely good chances at short range". This stringent programme left Malta, at the end of July, with just sufficient petrol for defensive operations up to the end of September, "on the assumption that submarines would be able to maintain the monthly delivery of 500 tons a month".

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Unless, therefore, replenishment of Malta's fuel stocks could be effected by Operation "Pedestal", it was obvious that the island would inevitably be neutralised by the steady diminution of petrol stocks as effectively as had happened by direct air action at the height of the Spring "blitz". Not only would it be impossible to support current land operations in North Africa with strikes against Rommel's seaborne supply lines, but the island's fighters would be unable to operate in defence of another incoming convoy, so that the surrender of the island from famine would be only a matter of time.

Operation "Pedestal"

Operation "Pedestal" (known by the Admiralty as W.S.21S), the most important reinforcing operation of its kind in the Mediterranean has been described at length elsewhere.⁽¹⁾ It involved passing through to Malta 14 merchantmen totalling 142,000 tons from west to east. At the same time, advantage was to be taken of the convoy operation to fly in 40 ⁽²⁾ more Spitfires from the aircraft carrier Furious (Operation "Bellows") and bring out from Malta the two

/surviving

(1) A.H.B. Narratives "The R.A.F. in Maritime War" Vol.IV,
"Middle East Campaigns" Vol.IV.

(2) Actually 37 Spitfires arrived from Operation "Bellows".

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surviving ships of Operation "Harpoon" and pass them through to Gibraltar (Operation "Ascendant").⁽¹⁾ One of the chief features of "Pedestal" was the increase in carrier-borne air strength by the inclusion of the Victorious, Indomitable and Eagle, with a complement of 72 fighters and 28 Albacores. The plan was basically the same as for the June convoy, except that in this case, instead of Operation "Vigorous" only a dummy convoy (M.W.12 under the command of Admiral Vian) was to sail from Egypt.

It was too much to hope that a convoy of the size of "Pedestal" could escape detection, even at an early stage, in the confined waters of the Mediterranean. Previous experience of convoys had shown that once the convoy had been located, the enemy would direct every available weapon - naval and air - against it. Furthermore, the slow progress of the ships would enable the enemy to transfer important air units to Sicily, Sardinia and Pantellaria to dispute this passage. Accordingly, the strength of aircraft on Malta under the A.O.C. Air Vice-Marshal Keith Park, was considerably increased. Just prior to the convoy, on 9 August, there were 193 operational aircraft on Malta (110 Spitfires and 83 miscellaneous aircraft comprising 28 Beauforts, 34 Beaufighters, 7 Wellington VIIIs, 4 P.R.U. Spitfires, 4 reconnaissance Baltimores, 5 Fleet Air Arm aircraft and 1 Wellington bomber). By the morning of 10 August the strength figure had risen to 211^{aircraft} (110 Spitfires) of which 141 were serviceable (110 Spitfires).

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The Air Force's main functions in support of Operation "Pedestal" were:

- (a) To locate, report and shadow all enemy surface forces in order to warn "Pedestal" and her escort.
- (b) Protect "Pedestal" from air-borne attack.
- (c) Destroy enemy surface forces which might jeopardise the safe passage of "Pedestal".

/(a)

(1) The Orari and Frederic sailed on 10 August, escorted by two destroyers. They arrived safely at Gibraltar on 14 August.

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- (d) Dislocate the enemy's air forces on the ground by means of low-flying attacks by Beaufighters, night bombing attacks on Sardinia by R.A.F. Liberators based on Malta and by large-scale night bombing attacks to be carried out by the United States Liberators based on the Middle East.

It was planned to use the Beaufighters at Luga to accompany the projected Beaufort torpedo strikes against the Italian Fleet, nine to be used as low escort and six, armed with bombs, to act as "high diversion". The Beaufighters at Ta Kali were to be used for low-flying attacks on Sardinian aerodromes on the evening of 11 August and on Pantell^eria on the evening of the 12th.

Idem.

In anticipation of the convoy, an extensive redistribution of Luftwaffe air strength in the Mediterranean was made. Almost the whole of the German long-range bomber force was shifted from Crete to Sicily, with the help of transport aircraft which consisted not merely of Ju.52 but DFS 230 gliders. Large concentrations of torpedo-carrying aircraft also appeared at airfields in Sardinia and Pantell^eria and fighters were switched from North Africa. Altogether the enemy assembled a force of some 600 German and Italian aircraft to oppose the convoy, made up as follows:

	<u>Bombers</u>	<u>Fighters</u>
A.H.B.6 and A.I.3(b) German	148	72
Italian	186	201
	<hr/> 334	<hr/> 273
	<hr/>	<hr/>

Grand Total 607 aircraft

In addition to the concentration of this considerable force of aircraft in the central Mediterranean, plans involving the movement of the Italian 3rd and 7th Cruiser Divisions against the convoy were made. Other preparations involved the stationing of 18 Italian and 2 German submarines in five areas at intervals along the route. It was estimated

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the number of enemy aircraft over the island exceed 100, the nearest being 26 July when 19 Ju.88s attacked Luqa and Hal Far, escorted by 73 fighters (50 Me.109s and 23 Mc.202s), and 27 July, when 22 Ju.88s attacked Luqa, Hal Far and Ta Kali, escorted by ⁷⁶ fighters (48 Me.109s and 28 Mc.202s).

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This does not ~~substantiate~~ A.V.M. Park's claim that forward interception caused the enemy to change his tactics, during this particular period, and considerably increase the number of fighter sweeps, "there being approximately 280 fighter sorties as against 90 for the first fortnight." Enemy figures revealed that in the first half of July they flew 1,353 fighter sorties against Malta and in the last two weeks 749. A.V.M. Park also stated in a signal to Air Ministry (24/7) "Am exercising utmost economy in Spitfires and the wastage has dropped from five to three per day in last two weeks." This was, of course, what could only be expected, as the pressure of enemy operations against the island had dropped so considerably.

In a study prepared by the German Air Historical Branch (8th Abteilung), dated 8 October 1944, the following interesting reference is made to the July "blitz" (which, incidentally, Kesselring himself, in his survey of "War in the Mediterranean", conveniently ignored):

The German offensive continued to the East, Mersa Matruh fell and the first halt came at Alamein ~~where~~ ^{the} the ground and air forces had to be re-organised and re-equipped. The R.A.F. although unbeaten was moved further back, and being near its Egyptian bases was able to strengthen its forces rapidly without interference from our own air force which was constantly on the move. The weight of air attacks on our spearheads increased and both the army and air force began to have difficulties with their supplies due to lengthy supply routes. In addition, Malta had again become so much stronger that by June the African supply routes, both east and west-going, were reported unsafe. Following an order from the C.-in-C. of the Luftwaffe a renewed attack to hold Malta down was launched on the 4th July. It was evident, however, as early as the 7th July, that confronted by 110 enemy fighter, mostly Spitfires, a dive-bombing attack by Ju.88's was no longer possible, even with fighter cover. The battle was continued by means of level and glide-approach attacks and by the 13th July our own air superiority was re-established.

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that the convoy would take, from south of the Balearics to a point
just west of Malta. ^{Twenty-three} ~~20~~ motor-torpedo boats (five of them German) were
distributed between Cape Bon, Pantellaria and south Marittimo. A
destroyer was also sent to the Narrows to increase the mine fields there.

The full Naval escort consisted of Force 'Z' - two battleships
the Nelson (Flag Ship Vice-Admiral Syfret) and Rodney, three cruisers,
the Sirius, Phoebe, Charybdis and 12 destroyers, together with the
three "Fleet" carriers already mentioned, the Victorious, Indomitable
and Eagle. The cruisers Nigeria (Flag Ship Rear-Admiral Burrough),
Kenya and Manchester, the anti aircraft cruiser Cairo and 12 destroyers
comprised Force "X". There were also 8 submarines some of which were
allotted the unenviable role of revealing themselves on the surface
to enemy aircraft, so that they should be reported, and perhaps in that
way ^{deter} ~~prevent~~ the enemy's ships from attacking the convoys.

On the way out from Scapa Flow, where most of the ships taking part
in the operation were assembled, the convoy was completely exercised in
making emergency turns, ~~the~~ using both flags and short-range wireless.
The risk to security in breaking W/T silence was accepted. The radar
reporting and fighter direction organisation were also exercised in
dummy air attacks, after which the fly-past of all carrier-borne aircraft
was arranged for identification purposes. On this occasion, five air-
craft carriers (Furious, Indomitable, Eagle, Victorious and Argus)
participated.

By 0800 hours on 10 August, the convoy had cleared the Strait of
Gibraltar and was sailing eastward ~~and~~ at 13 ¹/₂ knots. It would appear
that the first news of the operation reached the Italian Admiralty
(ⁱⁿ Super Marina), in the form of a report that an east bound convoy had been
sighted off Ceuta (Spanish Morocco), at 0500 hours on the morning of
9 August. Further detailed reports on the actual passage of the Strait
by British Fleet units were received the following day. At 1700 hours,

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Italian
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account
"Battaglia
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a passenger aircraft bound for Algiers passed the information to the Italian Air Ministry (Superaerea) that the convoy had been sighted and giving for the first time an approximate idea of its composition. Refuelling of the flight escort at sea, made necessary by the shortage of fuel at Malta, from the Royal Fleet Auxiliaries Dingledale and Brown Ranger began at 0645 hours on 11 August and was completed by 20.30 hours, a remarkable feat when it is realised that the operation involved the refuelling of three cruisers and 26 destroyers. Soon after dawn on the 11th, German reconnaissance aircraft began shadowing the convoy and this shadowing was kept up in spite of the attempts of the carrier-borne fighters to drive them off.

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Sea" Vol.III.

Directive for
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During the refuelling the aircraft carrier Furious began flying off Spitfires for Malta (Operation "Bellows"): at 12.30 hours, the first flight of eight Spitfires took off. Soon after this at a time when a second range of aircraft was being flown off and while part of the escort was away refuelling, the German submarine U.73 (Kapitanleutnant Rosenbaum) managed to pierce the British anti-submarine screen, the wings of which were open to 2,000 yards to allow for the escorts away oiling. (1) At 13.15 hours, the Eagle was hit by four torpedoes. She heeled over sharply and sank within eight minutes. Four of her aircraft happened to be on patrol and these, by landing on other aircraft carriers, were the only ones to be saved. (2) This tragic incident interrupted the flying-off of the Spitfires from the Furious, and it was not until 15.13 hours that Operation "Bellows" was completed. Altogether 37 Spitfires arrived at Malta. One landed on Indomitable with propeller trouble and one which was unserviceable had to remain behind on board the carrier. After completing her mission, the Furious was detached and returned safely to Gibraltar. During the trip back, at 01.00 hours on 12 August, the escorting destroyer Wolverine rammed and sank the Italian U-boat Dagabur.

/The

(1) The Asdic efficiency of the screen was reduced by the large number of wakes left ahead of the convoy by destroyers going backwards and forwards to the oilers at high speed.

(2) 927 of her company were picked up including her Master, Captain Mackintosh.

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The evening of the 11th, at 20.56 hours, a quarter of an hour after sunset, the first of the enemy air attacks by 36 German bomber and torpedo-carrying aircraft were made on the convoy. In spite of enemy claims of hits on a merchantman, an aircraft carrier and a cruiser, all the ships escaped unscathed. The Navy claimed to have shot down four bombers by A.A. gun fire.

During this early phase of the operation the air force had been locating the enemy fleet, keeping a close reconnaissance watch on enemy airfields to assess their strength in aircraft and attacking airfields in an attempt as planned to "dislocate the enemy air force on the ground".

During 10 and 11 August, P.R.U. Spitfires carried out 12 sorties to determine the position and strength of the enemy air and naval forces, the reconnaissances being maintained as far afield as Cagliari to the west, Naples to the north and Taranto and Navarino to the north-west and west.

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Wellington VIII aircraft also carried out five sorties to make certain that the Italian battle fleet did not leave Taranto, or the cruiser force the Tyrrhenian Sea, without our knowledge. An Albacore also carried out a reconnaissance patrol to the north of Grand Harbour, in order to cover the sailing of Force "Y", as an enemy submarine had been reported in the area.⁽¹⁾

Among the attacks on the enemy air base, the most rewarding were those made on the evening of 11 August by a formation of nine Beaufighters of No. 248 Squadron, led by Wing Commander Pike, D.F.C., on the Sardinian air bases of Elmas and Decimomannu. As the Beaufighters approached Cagliari, they flew over three Italian submarines which were leaving harbour. The submarines apparently reported the Beaufighters, for when they reached Elmas they were immediately greeted by heavy flak. Nevertheless, the Beaufighters pressed home their attack and claimed that they had left at least five multi-engined aircraft in flames, two of which blew up, and several others were seriously damaged. In point of fact, according to an enemy report, not only were six aircraft destroyed and a number made unserviceable,

/but

- (1) The destroyers Matchless and Bodsworth, acting^{ed} as escort to the Troilus and Oran during their return to Gibraltar (Operation "Ascendant".)

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but the effects of a sleepless night (notte de veglia) handicapped them in their action against the convoy on the following day. (1)

Another important effect of this raid was that on their way back to Malta, the Beaufighters were able to report the fact that two Italian cruisers were leaving Cagliari. This was the first news obtained by the British convoy that the Italian 7th Division (the six-inch cruisers Savoia, Montecuccoli and Attendolo) were at sea. Unknown to the British, owing to a grave shortage of fuel, the Italians were unable to make use of their battleships. Accordingly, it was arranged that the 3rd Division (the eight-inch cruisers Gorizia, Bolzano and Trieste) and the above mentioned 7th Division, with 11 destroyers, should rendezvous about 100 miles to the north of Marittimo, on the evening of 12 August, and intercept the convoy on the morning of the 13th, in the vicinity of Pantelleria. However, the possibility of a strike against the Italian ships by the force of torpedo-carrying Beauforts which was being kept available at Malta, was paramount in the Italians' minds. (2)

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"The Italian Naval Staff", says Weichold, "was still thinking of the losses which British torpedo aircraft had inflicted on the Taranto force during the previous operation in June and was aware that the British were making preparations to launch similar air attacks against the Italian force at this time."

By approaching the convoy from the direction of the Tyrrhenian Sea, the Italian Naval Force would be able to keep beyond the effective range of Malta aircraft while west of Sicily. In order to intercept /the

No.248 Sqdn.
O.R.B.

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"Pedestal" and
H.Q. Med. O.R.B.
A.H.B./ILJ5/113/9/4.

- (1) This operation is particularly outstanding as No.248 Squadron had only completed their transfer from Portreath to Malta (via Gibraltar) the afternoon of the previous day.
- (2) A strike of 15 Beauforts with an escort of 15 Beaufighters was at standby throughout the convoy operations. The Beauforts were under the command of Wg. Cdr. R.F.M. Gibbs, the most distinguished and experienced of all Beaufort Commanders in the Mediterranean. He it was who sank the San Andrea, Rommel's so-called "last tanker" at the battle of Alam el Halfa. Unfortunately, this strike was never called upon although there is evidence that its very existence had a strong deterrent effect on the enemy fleet. The R.N.A.S. Section was also at "stand-by" while six long-range Spitfires of No.126 Sqdn. and 1435 Flight were kept at readiness to escort the Beauforts past Pantelleria, should it become necessary to strike in that direction.

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the convoy, however, it would be necessary to sail to the south of Pantellaria which would bring the Italian ships within range of Malta's air striking force. The Italian Naval Staff specified, therefore, that fighter cover for the ships must be provided. The only aircraft capable of giving such cover at all effectively were German. Kesselring's view was that the number of suitable fighters was inadequate to act as escort for both the German bombers and Italian ships. The decision had to be made whether to use German aircraft or Italian ships to annihilate what remained of the British convoy, and Kesselring came out on the side of the German aircraft. At this stage, the matter was referred to Mussolini who had been called in to arbitrate by Cavallero. The ^{Duce} ~~Duce~~ was unwilling to oppose Kesselring's views and decided that the air escort should be used for the air strikes by bombers against the British ^{naval craft} ~~naval craft~~ convoy and not for the protection of the Italian ~~Naval Staff~~. As will be seen, since the Italian Naval Staff were unwilling to accept responsibility for the cruiser force without German air cover, and due to the threat from Admiral Vian's force, the Italian ships were withdrawn during the night 12/13 August.

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From dawn on 12 August, reports were received that enemy aircraft had again begun to shadow the convoy and all ships went in to the first degree of readiness for H.A. ^{A.} and L.A. ^{A.} guns. Twelve fighters were also airborne at 06.10 hours and this number was maintained by the carriers throughout 12 August. At 09.15, the first enemy air attacks of the day took place by some 20 Ju.88s. Only a dozen got through to the convoy and these made individual high-level or shallow ⁰⁷ ~~dive~~-bombing attacks, but without result. These air attacks were also probably co-ordinated with submarine attacks, as the convoy's destroyers received many Asdic contacts and were kept busy dropping depth charges.

The great effort by enemy aircraft based on Sardinia was made at mid-day. It was planned as a combined effort by some 70 escorted bombers to be carried out in stages and employing new methods. Italian torpedo-carrying aircraft would drop a circling torpedo known as a "motobomba F.F.", ahead of the British force, while eight fighter-bombers

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made low-level attacks. This, it was hoped, would disorganise the force and draw the A.A. gun fire. Two groups of torpedo-bombers, 42 in all, were then to attack from either side of the convoy, after which German bombers would carry out a shallow dive-bombing attack, and two Reggioni 2001 fighters, each with a heavy armour-piercing bomb, would attack one of the aircraft carriers.

The attacks were carried out substantially as planned, except that there was half-an-hour gap between the ^{mine to bomba} ~~mine bomber~~ attack and the torpedo attack, instead of five minutes. The mine-laying aircraft were intercepted and one ^{of them was} ~~they saw~~ shot down. The other nine dropped their circling torpedos ^e in the path of the convoy which turned sharply and heard the missiles explode harmlessly in the water. The fighter-bomber attacks were unsuccessful. The torpedo-bombers, reduced in numbers to 25 or 30, dropped their torpedos ^e some 8,000 yards from the ships, intimidated no doubt not merely by the spirited defence of the fighters, but the barrage put up by the ships, particularly the splash barrage of the 16"-guns of the Rodney.

The German dive-bombing attack followed at 13.18 hours. They dived to 3,000 feet and damaged the 7,500-ton M/V Deucalion which, after she had been detached with the destroyer Bramham, was sunk by torpedo aircraft off the Tunisian coast, at 19.40 hours. Finally, the two Reggioni 2001 fighters carrying very special armour-piercing bombs attacked the Victorious, the flagship of Rear-Admiral Lyster. One bomb hit the flight deck, fortunately without exploding. The Naval aircraft involved in these operations claimed to have shot down nine enemy aircraft and the ships' A.A. guns ~~at~~ a further two. 87

After these air attacks, the enemy appeared to have concentrated on submarine attacks throughout the afternoon. There were many reports of sightings and Asdic contacts and Ithuriel hunted and rammed the Italian submarine Cobalto.

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At 18.35 hours (12th August) a series of very determined attacks was launched against the convoy by a force of some 80 enemy aircraft, comprising Ju.87 and Ju.88 bombers and S.79 torpedo aircraft, strongly escorted by fighters. The bombers attacked from ahead and astern - the direction of the sun - while the torpedo-bombers came in from the starboard bow and beam of the convoy.

According to the Navy, timing was excellent. The Savoias dropped their torpedos^e from a distance of 3,000 yards outside the screen. The destroyer Foresight was disabled and taken in tow by the Tartar, but the next day as she was being consistently shadowed by enemy aircraft, the Tartar torpedoed the damaged destroyer near Galita Island. Twelve bombers, 4 Ju.88s and 8 Ju.87s, selected the aircraft carrier Indomitable for attack. They dived from astern, some of the aircraft coming down to as low as 1,000 feet. Three bombers hit the carrier. Her flight deck was put out of action and the fighters that were in the air at that time were forced to return to the Victorious. The Navy's Hurricanes, Martlets and Fulmars claimed to have shot down nine enemy aircraft and the ships' fire one.

Up to that time, losses to the convoy had not been serious. Out of the 14 merchant vessels only one, the Deucalion, had been sunk. There remained, however, the passage of the Skerki Channel and it was then that the convoy was subjected to its greatest ordeal. It was at this time that the convoys parted company with Force "Z", with their two battleships Nelson and Rodney, and the two remaining aircraft carriers Indomitable and Eagle, and was left with Force "X" under Rear-Admiral Burrough. The three cruisers Nigeria, Kenya, Manchester, the A.A. ship Cairo, together with escort destroyers, were to take the ships on to Malta.

An hour afterwards, at 19.56 hours, the Nigeria, the Cairo and the Tanker Ohio were all damaged by torpedos^e fired by the Italian submarine Axum. The Cairo had her stern blown off and had to be sunk. The

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Summary
p. 419.

Nigeria turned back for Gibraltar escorted by two destroyers. Unfortunately, the loss of these two ~~destroyers~~^{crusiers} deprived the convoy of fighter direction at a time when it was most needed. The six Beaufighters of No. 248 Squadron had patrolled overhead from 19.30 hours until the last light and were finally ~~sunk~~^{driven} off at 20.50 hours by the ~~anti-aircraft~~^{anti-air} A.A. gun fire from the naval escort. During their patrol the Beaufighters saw no enemy aircraft which as it so happened had carefully timed their arrival so that they would reach the convoy at dusk. Dive-bombing and torpedo-carrying aircraft, some 20 in all, attacked, scoring a hit with a bomb on the Empire Hope and on the Clan Ferguson and Brisbane Star with torpedos^e. The Empire Hope had to be sunk, the Clan Ferguson blew up with the loss of most of her crew, and the Brisbane Star was among the ships which eventually limped ^{into} Malta. The Kenya was later (at 21.11 hours) damaged by a torpedo. By this time, the evening of 12 August, as Admiral Burrough said, the situation was becoming "rather critical and there was still a possibility of the Italian surface forces coming south to attack the convoy".

No. 69
Sqdn. O.R.B.

Throughout 12 August, No. 69 Squadron's reconnaissance aircraft were kept busy with the heavy calls made on them. In all, the squadron flew 21 reconnaissance sorties, totalling 75 hours of flying time. The P.R.U. Spitfires made 12 sorties covering all the Italian ports and harbours where the Italian naval forces had been or might be located. The Baltimores carried out five sorties on a ~~last~~^{line} patrol between Sardinia and Sicily, while a Baltimore and Maryland searched the Ionian Sea. The ^{line} Maryland, sent out to search for the four Italian cruisers (two 6^{inch} from Cagliari and two 8^{inch}) from Messina, was forced to return without having located them. On landing at base after dark there was a hydraulic failure. The aircraft was wrecked and the crew injured. A Baltimore of the same squadron, however, piloted by P/O R. Munro, located three cruisers and three destroyers off Cape San Vito at 18.54 hours. Another force was located nine minutes later and by 19.18 hours the two forces had joined in a position some 50 miles north-west of Ustica^C. The Baltimore ^{was}

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Report on
Operation
"Pedestal"
A.H.B./IJ5/113/9/4

was unable to continue shadowing the Italian Fleet after dusk, as it was not fitted with A.S.W. The relief Wellington could not leave Malta until just before dusk, as it had to fly through areas infested with enemy fighters to a position to the north of Sicily. Although not trained for night-flying, the Baltimore pilot, P/O Munro, remained on patrol until dusk and brought his aircraft back to base and landed it safely, by night, for the first time.

Italian
Official Acc.
"Battaglia di
Mezzo Agosto"

Malta Daily
Intelligence
Summary No.
419.

According to the official Italian account of the operation, a German submarine reported Admiral Vian's force to consist of four cruisers and ^{ten} ~~the~~ destroyers. The presence of this force in the eastern Mediterranean and the lack of air ^{protection} ~~direction~~ decided the Italians to instruct the 7th Division to proceed to Naples, and the 3rd Division to Messina. This was at 0.33 hours on 13 August. It is quite plain, however, that due to their experience in June the enemy were particularly sensitive to the possibility of air attack from Malta. Furthermore, at 22.37 hours on 12 August, the Legionario had received a radar plot of ^{aircraft} ~~aircraft~~ in the vicinity. This was Wellington VIII "O" which had left Malta at last light on 12 August to take up the search from P/O Munro's Baltimore and located the Italian ships at 23.05 hours. The Wellington continued to shadow the Italian Fleet and, as they still pursued a southerly course, Wellington "Z" which was then in the vicinity was ordered in plain language to "Contact - Illuminate and Attack". The aircraft dropped four 500-lb bombs in an assault dive, but they over ^{shot} ~~shot~~. The Italians logged this attack at 01.40 hours. Another special Wellington ^{shot} ~~shot~~ located the Fleet at 01.50 hours and as it was reported that the ships had resumed a southerly course, it was decided to strike with the R.N.A. squadrons and two torpedo-carrying Albacores, ~~and~~ These took off at 02.00 hours. In the meantime, a Wellington was ordered to attack which it did at 02.20 hours. (1)

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(1) There is no record of this bombing attack in the Official Italian History.

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The story that these attacks and a message ^{on clear} ~~Report~~ "Report result of air attack and latest enemy position for Liberators" - and yet another to an aircraft to "Contact cruisers - Illuminate and Attack" influenced the enemy in their decision to return to their base, is not borne out by enemy records. As related earlier, this important decision had been made before these attacks at 0.33 hours.

At 08.36 13 August, the ships were attacked by Submarine P.42 a few miles south-west of Stromboli. Both the Balzano and Muzio Attendolo were hit. The Balzano went north for repairs and the Muzio Attendolo, which had had her bows blown off, put into Messina.

Italian Official
Naval History.

Plans to make strikes from the Middle East with four Liberators miscarried. Only two were serviceable and these were directed against the airfields at Pantellaria and Gerbini (Sicily). Only one reached its target and bombed Pantellaria. Both ~~then~~ ^{then} refuelled and flew back to the Middle East. Delayed action bombs were also dropped by a Wellington Mark IC on Comiso airfield. This aircraft, which was flown by a crew taken straight from O.C.T.U. and without previous operational experience, crashed on reaching base and was burnt out. It is to the crew's credit (Pilot P/O Sheppard) that they successfully completed their mission and as a result of these attacks - the aircraft made two sorties - there was no effort from Comiso the next day.

A dusk "shoot-up" of Pantellaria airfield by seven Beaufighters was disorganised by the fact that the leader crashed on take-off. Only three of the Beaufighters managed to reach the airfield, where they caused damage to a number of aircraft. ⁽¹⁾ The strike of 15 Beauforts with 15 Beaufighters was again at stand-by from dawn till dusk in case it was required to operate against major units of the Italian Fleet.

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- (1) These aircraft sighted at 20.45 hours "six to eight small torpedo craft four miles west of Pantellaria Harbour, course 280° at high speed". These were probably E-boats travelling to their rendezvous ~~for~~ ^{for} attacks on the convoy. There is irony in the fact that had the Beaufighters confined their attacks to these craft the fate of certain ships in the convoy might have been different.

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7 In the event, these aircraft were not used, and although their presence had a deterrent effect on the Italian Fleet units at sea, it certainly seems regrettable that these aircraft should have been kept idle, ~~rather~~ like a "fleet in being", to intimidate the enemy, rather than in an active operational role against available targets.

The heaviest and most telling of the enemy blows at the convoy were yet to come. At mid-night 12/13 August, the main body of the convoy led by ^{Reap-} Admiral Burrough in the Ashanti passed Cape Bon. Forty minutes later, or much about the time that the enemy cruiser force decided to return to base, E-boats appeared, under the cover of smoke. At 01.20 hours, the Manchester was torpedoed by two Italian E-boats, and at 05.50 hours was scuttled for which her Commander, Captain Drew was later court-martialled. Then followed the torpedoing of five merchant ships, the Glenorchy, Wairangi, Almeria Lykes, the ^{Castle} Rochester, and Santa Elisa. These were all so-called "stragglers", although ^{how} one-third of the ships constituting the convoy could have been left behind as "stragglers" is not understood. The Wairangi and ^e Almeria Lykes were sunk. The Santa Elisa was abandoned and sunk later by a Ju.88. But the Rochester Castle managed to catch up with the main convoy. A mere dozen E-boats were concerned in these damaging attacks and, in spite of claims to the contrary, not one of them was sunk.

Castle /

Revised
Admiralty
Battle Summ-
mary No.32.

By dawn ^{on} of 13th August a depleted and straggling convoy consisting of the Rochester Castle, Wainarama and Melbourne Star, were in company with Admiral Burrough in the Ashanti. The damaged tanker Ohio was about five miles astern, the Port Chalmers some ten miles to the north-west. The Dorset was following alone and the Brisbane Star was hugging the Tunisian coast. By that time, however, and much to Admiral Burrough's relief, it had become clear that

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there was practically no likelihood of an attack by the Italian Fleet which in the disorganised state of the convoy and her weakened escort would have been disastrous.

According to schedule, by first light 13 August, the Pedestal^v convoy should have been between 110 and 150 miles from Malta, and it had been planned to augment the four No. 248 Squadron Beaufighters for convoy escort to within 100 miles of Malta, by long range Spitfires. At dawn, however, the convoy was still 173 miles from Malta, but owing to the urgent need for giving all possible air protection to the vessels, it was decided to use the long-range Spitfires as well as the Beaufighters. The 15 Beaufighters of Nos. 235 and 252 Squadrons were still kept at stand-by ~~(being not being)~~, waiting for the Beauforts' strike which could not have materialised as by that time ^{had} not only ~~been~~ the Italian cruisers ^{been recalled,} ~~which were not~~ but the battleships had not left base.

Including short-range Spitfires, the number of sorties flown on 13 August in protection of the convoy totalled 179. Between dawn and 11.00 hours, Beaufighters of No. 248 Squadron flew nine sorties in two patrols. During the first patrol, in the course of a combat with Me.109 aircraft over the convoy, a Beaufighter was shot down and one damaged. Two further sorties by Beaufighters of No. 235 Squadron were also flown between 06.40 and 09.00 hours. The long-range Spitfires of No. 1435 Squadron had more success. Between dawn and dusk they flew 47 sorties and shot down a Ju.88 and an Italian bomber, for the loss of one Spitfire. No. 126 Squadron's Spitfires, most of which were long-range, flew 31 sorties in eight patrols, shot down one S.M.79 and damaging a number of other enemy aircraft for the loss of a Spitfire. The balance of 101 sorties were all flown by short-range aircraft. Altogether Malta-based aircraft claimed a total of seven enemy aircraft shot down on 13 August for the loss of four aircraft.

A.H.B. Malta
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Admiralty
Revised Battle
Summary No. 32.

Enemy air attacks on the convoy on 13 August began at about 08.00 hours, when Rear-Admiral Burrough with escorting naval craft and the merchant ships Rochester Castle, Waimarama, Melbourne Star and Ohio formed in line ahead, about to be rejoined by the Port Chalmers and Dorset, were a little over 30 miles S.S.E. of Pantellaria. Some 12 Ju.88s made a shallow diving attack, coming down from about 6,000 to 2,000 feet to drop their bombs. The Waimarama was hit and blew up immediately, one of the bombers being destroyed in the explosion. The sea became a "blazing inferno" from which the Ledbury rescued no less than 45 survivors.

The next attack by Stuka dive bombers came at 09.25 hours. It was concentrated on the Ohio, whose main steering gear was put out of action. During this attack, a Spitfire was shot down, possibly by the ship's gun-fire from which all the R.A.F. fighters suffered due to the absence of fighter direction. More dive bombing attacks were made at 10.17 hours and again at 10.50 hours, the enemy being obviously determined to finish the destruction of the important tanker. The Ohio suffered again from four or five near misses and her engines were disabled. The Rochester Castle was set on fire, but managed to continue with the convoy. The Dorset was hit and brought to a standstill. The last air attack on the main body of the convoy came at 11.25 hours by five S.79s, accompanied by more parachute mines dropped by other aircraft. During these attacks, the Spitfires and Beaufighters were seen to shoot down "at least four enemy aircraft in the distance".

At 12.40 hours, the convoy, still 70 to 80 miles from Malta, came within range of the short-range Spitfires which, as Rear-Admiral Burrough stated in his report, provided "such excellent protection" that no further attacks materialised, although large numbers of enemy aircraft were seen in the distance, only to be dispersed and driven off by the fighters. The short-range Spitfires

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found their task complicated by the fact that there was a complete absence of fighter direction and the ships themselves did not give "Help" signals.

On 13 August, P.R.U. Spitfires were again busy covering the ports where enemy ships of war had been located, to ensure that none escaped to molest the convoy. One of the Spitfires searched the Gulf of Hammamet for a ship, thought to be the H.M.S. Kenya, which was making signals. The ship could not be located, but it was given a routing direction by wireless so that it became within short-range fighter cover by dawn on 14 August. The ship proved to be the Brisbane Star which finally arrived at Malta at 15.30 hours the next day, after having been attacked by two more aircraft, each of which was shot down by a Beaufighter.

In the meantime, the tanker Ohio which had had her steering gear put out of action in the attack at 09.25 hours on 13 June and her engines damaged in previous attacks, was lying helpless, together with the Dorset, with the destroyers Penn and Bramham standing by. It is unfortunate that when the two ships were so near their destination and in a position in which they could expect air protection from the R.A.F. they were attacked repeatedly by German aircraft. (1)
Both ships were hit at about 19.00 hours and the 13,000-ton Dorset sank. The only air escort provided was an anti E-boat patrol just before dusk by a Wellington VIII. The plan was that in the event of an attack by E-boats from Pantellaria, the Wellington would have called up four Beaufighters of No. 225 Squadron which remained at readiness all night. The main reason for the loss of the Dorset at this late stage ~~does~~ appear to have been due mainly to the lack of fighter direction, of "Help" signals from the ships and the fact
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- (1) On 13 August Spitfires flew 54 sorties over Malta against aircraft which in all cases but one did not again reach the island.

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that the two ships were lying just outside, or at most barely within, the orbit of the short-range fighters from Malta.

Some time before this, at 14.30 hours, the Malta escort force, four mine sweepers and seven motor launches, had joined the convoy. At 16.00 hours, ^{Rest-} Admiral Burrough decided to part company and returned to Gibraltar with Force "X". An hour later the Dorset was sunk.

The last attack was made on the Ohio at 10.45 hours the next day when she was under tow by three destroyers, the Penn, Bramham, and Ledbury, causing one of the tow lines to part. In this action the Spitfires, which maintained a patrol of 16 aircraft until dusk, gave effective cover and shot down a bomber and a fighter. In the latter stages of her journey the Ohio was escorted by three Baltimores, and an Albacore armed with depth charges carried out an anti E-boat patrol from 17.30 hours until dusk. From dusk onwards, an A.S.V. Swordfish took over a similar duty. The unwieldy ship was towed for a distance of almost 100 miles from Malta, from a position in which she was within easy sight of Pantellaria^e and range of enemy land-based aircraft. It was not until the morning of 15 August that the crippled tanker reached Malta with her immensely valuable cargo of 12,000 tons of oil. The Port Chalmers of 8,500 tons, the Melbourne Star of 11,000 tons and the 8,000-ton Rochester Castle which had been torpedoed by a motor torpedo-boat and was "lying very low in the water", arrived at Malta two hours after the departure of Force "X".

These four ships, the Ohio, Port Chalmers, Melbourne Star and Rochester Castle, together with the Brisbane Star which, as has already been mentioned, reached Malta on 14 August, were the sole survivors of the convoy of fourteen merchant vessels. The cost to the Royal Navy had also been high - an aircraft carrier, a cruiser, an anti-aircraft ship and a destroyer sunk, and a carrier and two destroyers damaged. In spite of the severe losses, 15,000 tons

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of fuel and 32,000 tons of general cargo arrived at Malta, making all the difference to the island's survival as a British base, for it was not until the following November that another convoy, Operation "Stoneage", this time from the east, was able to reach Malta and, with the altered situation on land, finally broke the blockade.

A.H.Q. Malta
A.R.B.

Once the five surviving ships of the convoy had berthed at Malta, the enemy made no serious attempt to bomb them. This was the opportunity for the complete destruction of the convoy on which Rommel's ability to be able to prosecute the war effectively in North Africa depended. At that time, however, there was a pressing need for the enemy air strength to be conserved and redeployed for Rommel's offensive which at that time was planned for 26 August. In North Africa in order to conserve strength and improve serviceability the G.A.F. fighters were being restricted to an average of only 40 - 60 sorties a day, and the dive-bomber force (with the exception of "Pedestal") had carried out no operations since the first week in August.

A.H.B.6

The effect of enemy air operations against the August convoy had unexpected repercussions on the land ^{fighting} ~~issue~~ in North Africa. ^{The} ~~This~~ additional strain on an air force that was already stretched to the limit reduced their serviceability and strength to a point where they were unable to provide adequate escort to their own convoys. This coincided with resumption of air strikes from Malta, due mainly to the replenishment of the island's fuel supplies with the arrival of the Ohio. Another effect of the enemy air action against "Pedestal" was that there was a sharp drop in the serviceability of the German transport squadrons due to the demands made on them during August for the move of the Ju.88s from Crete to Sicily and back again. This was at the height of the enemy air lift of urgently-needed supplies (especially fuel) and reinforcements to North Africa.

/Admiral

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Admiral Weichhold, who was German Admiral in Rome at the time of the "Pedestal" convoy, after enumerating the British losses, makes the important point that:

Axis Naval
Policy and
Operations
in the Medi-
terranean
R.242.

~~whatever~~ the tactical results, strategically the British had achieved the object of their operation. The cargo's of the five supply ships which reached their destination enabled Malta to carry on until the beginning of December. The island therefore retained its striking power and remained the central base for attacks on the Axis convoys to North Africa

After the beginning of August, air operations against Malta were cut down to fighter-bomber raids. This letting-up of the German air raids left the Royal Air Force free to concentrate its attention elsewhere. Day and night, British air activity was directed against the Axis supply lines at sea and against harbour installations, airfields and lines of communication in Crete and North Africa. The Axis now needed increased fighter strength to defend these targets. Reports from C.-in-C. South underlining the difficulty of frustrating the enemy air attacks and safeguarding the convoys because of fighters became a common occurrence. After August the Luftwaffe was forced back on to the defensive.

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Operation 'Pedestal'
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The main lesson of the convoy, from the air point of view, was that ^{more} ships should have been fitted with V.H.F. Once the two fighter direction ships (Oairo and Nigeria) had been ^{put out of action,} ~~stuck~~ the R.A.F. fighters were bereft of all control from the ships. Both the long-range Spitfires and the Beaufighters were fired on continually by all ships, making their task of ^{protection} ~~direction~~ extremely hazardous and almost impossible to fulfil adequately. The additional complication was that enemy raids were coming in too low for the R.D.F. and did not appear on the plotting table. The short-range Spitfires experienced a certain amount of jamming on the R.D.F. and the British ships did not give "Help" signals, as anticipated.

Italian Official
History

Being wise after the event, it is doubtful whether it was justifiable to keep such a high proportion of the available Beau-fighter force (15 aircraft) at stand-by in case the Italian battle fleet left port, when they could have been used in the vital task of affording protection to the convoy. It is now known that the battleships could not leave port due to the shortage of fuel oil.

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Nevertheless, the presence of a striking force of Beauforts and Beaufighters on Malta was known to the enemy and this knowledge did help very materially to prevent the cruiser force from venturing too far from their home bases and attacking the convoy. Had this attack been carried out, there is every likelihood that the five remaining ships of the convoy would have been lost.

In his report, A.V.M. Keith Park paid tribute to the help given to the R.A.F. by the Army garrison on Malta. Throughout the spring and summer 800 men and 100 vehicles had been made available. For the convoy operation, these numbers were increased to 1,300 men and 140 vehicles. Between 28 July and 10 August, the Army provided a further 1,800 men and 122 trucks for the building of aircraft pens.

From the time the convoy came within range of Malta-based aircraft until the remaining ships reached harbour, i.e. 32 hours of daylight, the R.A.F. flew 414 fighter sorties, 292 by short-range Spitfires, 97 by long-range Spitfires and 25 by Beaufighters. One Beaufighter and four Spitfires were lost and claims were made of 14 enemy aircraft shot down by Malta-based fighters. The Germans lost 15 aircraft and the Italians 26.

H.Q. Med.
O.R.B.

The Resumption of the Air Offensive from Malta - August 1942

By mid-August, at the time when the surviving ships of the "Pedestal" convoy reached Malta, Field Marshal Rommel felt himself to be in a position when he could outline his plan to O.K.W. for a final offensive to be launched on 26 August.⁽¹⁾ His aim was to destroy the British Army in the field and capture Alexandria, Cairo, and the Suez Canal. He knew that a tremendous volume of supplies - thought to amount to some 100,000 tons - was already on its way to the Middle East and would reach Suez at the beginning of September. It was therefore imperative for Rommel to forestall

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(1) By coincidence, on the day of Rommel's report to O.K.W. 15 August, the British changed their Army Commanders. General Sir Harold Alexander became C.-in-C. Middle East Forces, and General Sir B.L. Montgomery assumed command of the Eighth Army.

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Panzer Army
War Diary
A.H.B.6.

the offensive which the British would undoubtedly launch in the Autumn. By 19 August, however, due to the fuel crisis (the 15th Panzer Division held approximately 10 per cent and the 21st Panzer Division 20 per cent of the amount of fuel considered necessary for the attack), the offensive had to be postponed until 30 August. From that day, until he was forced to call off the offensive, on 4 September, the German Commander was bedevilled by shortage of fuel. As will be seen, in this situation that was to have such a profound effect on the land battle, Malta-based aircraft played a most vital role.

A.H.B.
A.O.C.-in-C.
Malta IIJ1/
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At Malta, ^athe conflict of interests was apparent between the Governor, Lord Gort, whose main preoccupation was with the survival of the island as a British base, and that of the Air Officer Commanding, who was determined that the operational opportunities to hit Rommel's supply lines should be exploited to the full. Before the unloading of the ships had even begun, the Governor visited the A.O.C. He stressed the importance of reverting to the previous low expenditure of petrol, suggesting 45,000 gallons a week which was hardly adequate for local fighter defence. In view of this conversation (again on that important date, 15th August, when the Ohio reached Malta), the A.O.C. informed the A.O.C.-in-C. that he anticipated difficulty in obtaining *permission* from the Governor of Malta for strikes against Rommel's supply lines, ⁽¹⁾ unless such strikes were specifically demanded by the Commanders-in-Chief at Cairo. The A.O.C. Malta calculated that about 700,000 gallons of petrol would be unloaded from the "Pedestal" ships and this would add about ten weeks to the existing four weeks' stock of aviation petrol. The Governor, however, intended to make the total stock last until Christmas (about 20 weeks) which the A.O.C. pointed out

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(1) It will be recalled that the Governor had obtained the power of vetoing from the Chiefs of Staff owing to the shortage of fuel.

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"would preclude carrying out strikes against enemy shipping, which seems to me one of the main reasons for garrisoning Malta, apart from diverting more than double our own strength of enemy aircraft away from your front."

81 The A.O.C. Malta's appeal to Tedder for the ban on shipping strikes ^{from} ~~the~~ Malta to be lifted received a prompt response. This exchange of correspondence is of historical importance, for on the operations of the small force of torpedo-bombers and escorting Beaufighters at Malta was to hang largely ~~on~~ the success or failure of Rommel's last offensive in Egypt. On 16 August, the Middle East Defence Committee sent a signal to the A.O.C. Malta, for the Governor, stating that ^{that} ~~that~~ additional stocks of petrol were available at Malta, ^{that} ~~that~~ they considered that it was absolutely essential to resume without delay strikes against most important enemy shipping that was carrying supplies and reinforcements to Tripolitania and Cyrenaica.

Idem.

"Request, therefore," the message concluded, "you authorise A.O.C. to take such action as he considers necessary. You may be assured that we shall call upon Malta to undertake offensive operations only against those ships which, in our opinion, vitally affect the issue in the Western Desert."

Two days later, on 18 August, the farcical situation had developed whereby the Middle East Defence Committee in Cairo had to appeal to the Chiefs of Staff in London for permission to carry out an individual strike against two ships which were regarded as of primary importance to impending operations in the Western Desert. For, by that time, 784,000 gallons of aviation petrol had been received from the convoy bringing the grand total up to 947,000 gallons. The Governor notified the Middle East Defence Committee that he had authorised the A.O.C. to undertake this particular strike which, incidentally, was to result in the sinking of the Rosalina ^{Pilo} ~~Rosalina~~, which was crippled by air attack and eventually sunk by a submarine. The Governor, however, still insisted that he should be consulted beforehand about any proposed strikes.

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The Chiefs of Staff finally decided the issue, on 19 August, when they notified the Commanders-in-Chief, Middle East, and the Governor of Malta as follows:-

We attach supreme importance to the destruction of this and all other south-bound enemy shipping, particularly during the next ten days. We do not consider that conservation of petrol would justify limiting strikes during this period. (1)

Thereafter, the A.O.C. Malta was free^d of ^{all} ~~the~~ ^{from} restrictions by the Governor of Malta, and air operations against enemy shipping were carried out purely along the lines of military necessity.

By the time the unloading of the five ships of the "Pedestal" convoy had been completed, on 21 August, stocks of aviation spirit on Malta amounted to 973,118 gallons (noon, 23 August). Including the convoy, expenditure of aviation spirit for the previous twelve weeks had been 95,958 gallons. At that rate, the Governor informed the Chiefs of Staff, all stocks would be exhausted by the beginning of November, but the A.O.C. hoped to be able to reduce the consumption to 80,000 gallons per week, thus eking out until mid-November. (2)

The detailed policy for the consumption of aviation petrol on Malta was laid down by the C.A.S. on 28 August. It was ^{restricted} ~~reconstructed~~ to:

- (a) Strikes against important shipping destined for Africa.
- (b) Operations and training which directly contributed to the success of these shipping strikes.
- (c) Essential defensive action.
- (d) Refuelling the decreasing number of transit aircraft passing through Malta.

The offensive sweeps and attacks on enemy land objectives were not to be undertaken save in exceptional circumstances, where they made a direct contribution to the success of the shipping strikes.

/After

(1) Extended eventually for ⁷² another ten days.

(2) Using this as a yardstick, it was on this pre-eminently ~~vital~~ vital factor that the planning of Operation "Lightfoot" (the El Alamein offensive) and the subsequent advance to Martuba was to depend. In the event, such was the accuracy of the time-table that advanced forces of the Eighth Army occupied the Martuba-Derna ~~area~~ ^{airfields} on 15 November. Cover was given to Operation "Stone Age", the November convoy to Malta from Alexandria, and Malta was ^{relieved} ~~relieved~~.

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After being authorised by the Chiefs of Staff to extend for another ten days permission to ignore the question of conservation of petrol when planning strikes against south-bound enemy shipping, the Middle East Defence Committee finally recommended to the Chiefs of Staff, on 7 September, that "to avoid constant reference to you recommend that on expiry of present directive, it should be left to us to decide what targets Malta must attack." Thus, by Tedder's ^{timely} ~~admirable~~ manoeuvring, the full ^{back} operational control of the Air Force on Malta was maintained by Lloyd through a most important period of the land operations in North Africa. Had Lord Gort been able to keep the conservation of petrol as the primary consideration and prevented all air attacks against enemy shipping over that period, a number of enemy tankers absolutely vital to enemy land operations would have reached North Africa unmolested by air attack, and the story of the Battle of Alamein^m-Halfa and probably the whole history of British fortunes in the Middle East might have been very different.

Shipping Strikes Against Enemy Supply Lines - August 1942

from Malta

The most impressive fact about the Beaufort torpedo strikes against Rommel's supply lines during August 1942 was the smallness of the British Force employed. Only two squadrons of Beauforts, Nos. 39 and 86, were involved. No. 217 Squadron aircraft did not take part as, after having been at stand-by from 11 - 15 August, during the "Pedestal" convoy, they were switched back to Egypt. (1)

A.H.Q. Malta
and No. 17
Sqdn. O.R.Bs.

The strength of the Beauforts available was never more than 30 and, by the end of the month, the numbers had dropped to fewer than 20. The Beaufighter squadrons which took part in these operations were Nos. 227, 235 and 252, their strength being approximately 40 aircraft. Long-range Spitfires of No. 126 Squadron also carried out a few sorties in /support

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- (1) No. 217 Squadron could only muster three aircraft, the balance of the crews being flown to Egypt in a D.C.3.

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support of one of the strikes. As will be seen, as a result of no more than 50⁽¹⁾ sorties, four of Rommel's supply ships were sunk or so badly damaged that the whole offensive was put out of gear. The ships were:

Name	Date	Position	How sunk	Tonnage	Fuel (in tons)
<u>Rosalino</u> <u>Pilo</u> (Italian S.S.)	17 Aug.	50 miles 190 deg. from Pantellaria	By aircraft and submarine attack	8,326	431
<u>Pozarica</u> (Italian tanker)	21 Aug.	12 miles N. of Paxos.	By aircraft - beached	7,800	1,011
<u>Istria</u> (Italian S.S.)	27 Aug.	40 miles 50 deg. from Ras el Tin	By aircraft Wellingtons of No.201 Group.	5,416	407
<u>Dielpi</u> (Italian S.S.)	28 Aug.	33.38 N. 21.23 S.	By aircraft	1,527	464
<u>San Andrea</u> (Italian tanker)	30 Aug.	39.49 N. 18.15 E.	By aircraft	5,077	2,411
Totals				28,146	4,724

List of
Enemy Shipping
sunk in the
Mediterranean
A,H,B,6,

Panzer Army
War Diary

What was equally serious from a long-term point of view, by early September all enemy ships but one (the Ankara) at that time available and capable of transporting fuel in bulk had been lost. Unfortunately, such was the fine timing during this period that on 16 August, before the Governor could be persuaded to permit aircraft to be used on shipping strikes, three enemy ships, the Ravello, Sportivo and Davide Bianchi, safely reached Benghazi with 2,344 tons of supplies, including 2,013 tons of fuel. However, in order to be available at the front the fuel had to be transported a distance of 600 miles by road or 500 by sea. This entailed not merely a considerable delay and hazard, but in the case of road transport the expenditure of a high proportion of the fuel in transportation. For the trucks were involved in a round journey of 1200 miles, or something like the distance from London to Rome. ~~In the aggregate~~

(1) Excludes the Istria sunk by Wellingtons of No. 201 Group.

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87 ~~these particular journeys probably used up some 80,000 gallons of petrol.~~ On occasion, every available truck was sent to Benghazi, when petrol arrived there, the trucks being driven by night and day to reduce the time which even then, bearing in mind the condition of the roads, halts for meals, and loading and unloading, must have taken ^{almost} ~~about~~ a week.

The first of this series of important strikes from Malta came on the afternoon of 17 August, two days after the arrival of the Ohio. The attack was carried out against the 8,326-ton M.V. Rosalino Pilo which was bound for Tobruk carrying a mixed cargo of 3,439 tons, including 1,232 tons of ammunition, 431 tons of fuel, 15 guns, 117 vehicles, three launches and 101 men ^{also had on board.} She was 35 miles off Lampedusa Island escorted by two destroyers and patrolled by four Ju.88s and two enemy fighters when, at 16.00 hours, she was attacked by a force of six Beauforts of No. 86 Squadron, escorted by five Beaufighters of Nos. 252 and 235 Squadrons, two of them carrying bombs, and four long-range Spitfires of No. 126 Squadron. Two torpedo hits were scored by the Beauforts and the Rosalino Pilo was left stationary, pouring white smoke and down by the stern. Two Beaufighters then attacked ^{one of them} and scored a ^{bomb} hit with a 250-lb ~~blast~~ bomb on the stern. Beaufighters and Beauforts also attacked the M.V. and other surface craft with machine gun and cannon fire. Two Beauforts and two Beaufighters were damaged, while claims were made of one Ju.88 and one enemy fighter probably destroyed. The Rosalino Pilo was already in a sinking condition when she was finally sunk by a British submarine by the light of flares dropped by a Wellington from Malta.

A.H.Q. M.E.
Table of Ops.
A.H.8/IIJ1/31/1
and Malta
O.R.B.

The next successful Beaufort strike came on 21 August when the Pozarica of 7,800 tons, carrying 1,011 tons of cargo, all fuel, was sunk by aircraft of No. 39 Squadron. The first attack took place on the preceding day when 12 Beauforts of No. 39 Squadron, escorted by 10 Beaufighters of No. 227 Squadron (six of which were carrying bombs) attacked a convoy comprising five destroyers, a tanker and a small M/V.

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Malta and
No. 39 Sqdn.
O.R.B.

which were being escorted by a Cant 2501 and six single-engined fighters, four miles off Cape Stilo. It was estimated that the tanker was fully laden and had a draught of 22/24 ^{feet} ~~feet~~. The torpedos ^e were released with a 22 foot setting, but as they passed harmlessly under the ship, it was assumed that she was not fully laden. The tanker and other craft were then raked with cannon and machine gun fire. A small pilot vessel ahead of the convoy was sunk ⁽¹⁾ and a Macchi 200 and Cant ^Z 2501 were damaged.

CANT Z 501 /

The next day, 21 August, at 16,00 hours, the tanker was again attacked by nine Beauforts of No. 39 Squadron and five Beaufighters of No. 227 Squadron, the latter carrying bombs. She was then 12 miles off Paxos, one of the Ionian Isles off the west coast of Greece. Three hits were scored on the starboard side of the tanker and one bomb hit a destroyer. Reconnaissance later showed the tanker to be stationary, with oil flowing from both sides. The Beaufighters claimed to have shot down two P.32s, one Ju.52, two Br.20s, for the loss of two Beauforts. The Pozarica was later found beached in Saida Bay, Corfu, where she was again attacked, this time by Malta-based Wellingtons which managed to set fire to the surrounding petrol and oil. ⁽²⁾

The next strike took place on 27 August when 9 Beauforts of No. 39 Squadron, led by Flying Officer ^{K.R.} Grant, together with nine Beaufighters of No. 227 Squadron, five with bombs, attacked the Dielpi of 1,527 tons. She was bound for Tobruk carrying 464 tons of fuel, 48 tons of Miscellaneous material, 20 men and three vehicles. When she was located she was only 73 miles from the North African coast at Ras Aamer. The Beaufighters attacked first, in their customary diversionary role and

A.H.B.6

/scored

- (1) This may have been the Agia Maria which was lost, together with her cargo of 44 tons.
- (2) One enemy report states that the Pozarica's valuable cargo of fuel was lost. Another states that the cargo was taken over by the tanker San Andrea which was subsequently sunk on 31 August with the loss of her entire cargo.

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H.Q. M.E.
Tables of
Operations and
Nos. 39 and 227
Sqn. O.R.Bs.

scored a hit on the stern of the Dielpai with a 250-lb bomb. They also raked the M/V and destroyer with machine gun and cannon fire, from deck level. The destroyer was left smoking from the stern. The Beauforts, then dropped their torpedoes, scoring three hits on the ship which was left ablaze and sinking, with decks awash and back broken.

That night the Istria of 5,416 tons, carrying 426 tons of ammunition, 407 tons of fuel, 47 tons of miscellaneous material and 105 M.T. and men of Jagerbrigade Ramke and Inf.Div.164, was sunk by Wellingtons of No. 38 Squadron based on Egypt.

Probably the sinking which did more to dash Rommel's hopes of a successful outcome of his offensive at Alam el Halfa was that of the 5,077-ton Italian tanker San Andrea, carrying 2,411 tons of fuel for the Panzer Army. (1) It was by far the largest petrol consignment of the month and its loss came on the very eve of the Panzer Army attack. "There were neither sufficient forces nor adequate stores for a major offensive of this kind," wrote Vice-Admiral Weichold. "On 30 August, a tanker with a very valuable cargo of 2,285 tons of fuel for the

Axis Naval

Policy and Ops. Panzer Army had been sunk. On 2 September Field Marshal Rommel felt in the Mediterranean 1939 - compelled to carry out his decision of 31 August and order the May 1943 R.242. operation to cease."

No. 69 Sqn.
O.R.Bs.

The ⁿSan Adrea was en route to Tobruk, when she was located at 08.30 hours on the morning of 30 August by a P.R.U. Spitfire of No. 69 Squadron (Flight Sergeant J.O. Dalley), in the Taranto area "coast-crawling southwards at eight knots." She was escorted by a destroyer, and Italian float plane and at least one single-engined fighter.

That afternoon, a Baltimore of No. 69 Squadron (Lieutenant M. Currie) led a shipping strike of nine Beauforts of No. 39 Squadron, escorted

Malta Daily Int. by 11 Beaufighters of No. 227 Squadron, five of which carried bombs. Summary and No. 39 Sqn. O.R.Bs. The plan was for the Beaufighters to create a diversion by attacking with their bombs and cannon and at the same time protecting the Beauforts against the enemy air escort.

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(1) Reported to have included 1,011 tons from the tanker Pozarica.

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One Beaufort and three Beaufighters returned early due to mechanical trouble. At 14.10 hours the tanker was located 10 miles off Ugento, in the heel of Italy. The Beaufighters attacked first, scoring near-misses with their bombs on the tanker and raking the destroyer with cannon and machine gun fire. Next, the Beauforts dropped their torpedos^e at an average range of 700 yards. Wing Commander Gibbs, the C.O. of No. 39 Squadron, scored a hit amid ships and another probable hit was also scored. The tanker immediately blew up and began to burn throughout its length. Hatches and super-structure were thrown high in the air and the ship became ^{enveloped} ~~involved~~ in flames and smoke. A number of combats took place in the course of which a Macchi was shot down, a Ju.88 probably destroyed and a CZ.501 damaged. In the course of what must be deemed not only a highly successful but also historically important operation, three Beaufighters and one Beaufort were damaged.

During the latter part of August two tankers, the Giorgio carrying ¹⁴⁷⁴ ~~225~~ tons of fuel, and the Gualdi with 1,216 tons of fuel reached Tobruk, the Giorgio on 28/8 and the Gualdi 30/8. However, the greater part of the Giorgio's fuel was found to be grossly contaminated with sea water.

Panzer Army
Wehr Diary.

Although the arrival of these supplies probably prevented the cancellation of the enemy offensive, they were no substitute for the assured and even flow of fuel that a modern mechanised force requires. Before the battle, Rommel's Panzer Divisions had only 2.5 units of fuel, when their actual requirements were in the region of 10 units. Rommel gambled on either the arrival of tankers that were already on the way, or else the kind of quick victory he had achieved at Tobruk when he was able to prosecute his offensive on captured supplies.

Rommel launched his last offensive in Egypt at 22.00 hours on 30 August 1942. During the night, the attack was seriously disorganised when a bomber of No. 104 Squadron scored a direct hit on

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Africa Corps

the ~~Africa Corps~~ H.Q. Because of the activity of the W.D.A.F. reconnaissance aircraft, "surprise" which, according to the enemy Commander, was "an essential pre-requisite for the success of the operation" was lost. Extreme difficulty was experienced in crossing the mine fields in the southern sector which was much denser than had been anticipated. By the time these had been traversed, the enemy Panzers and supply echelons found themselves in the Ragil Depression, their way barred to the north and east by the ^{Eighth} ~~Army~~ ^{impassable} and to the south by the ~~Qattara~~ ^{Qattara} Depression. There they became the target for day-and-night bombing of an intensity never before experienced in the Desert.

A.H.B. Middle
East Narr.
V .IV

High Level Reports
and Letters
A.H.B. 6 Trans.

On 1 September, Rommel notified O K H that he had ordered the Panzer Army to go over to the defensive "because the P.O.L. promised for 1 September has not arrived. The steamer San Andrea has not arrived and the Abruzzi is still at sea." As has been seen, the San Andrea had been sunk by Wing Commander Gibbs. The 680-ton tanker Abruzzi was so badly damaged on the night 1/2 September, probably by aircraft of the 98th U.S.A.A.F. Heavy Bombardment Group, that she had to be beached 100 miles to the west of Tobruk. That night, the Picci Fazio^S, an Italian tanker of 2,261 tons, was sunk by a Wellington of No. 38 Squadron, under the control of No. 201 Group. She was carrying 1,100 tons of fuel.

On the morning of 2 September, Rommel decided to withdraw his forces, the reason being given that:

Africa Corps
War Diary

Enemy air superiority and the supply shortage particularly of fuel - the enemy has succeeded in sinking a number of ships recently - have forced us to break off the offensive.

At 12.30 hours, detailed orders were given for the withdrawal. Two more ships, the Padenna of 1,589 tons, carrying 386 tons of fuel, four vehicles and four guns, and the Davide Bianchi of 1,477 tons, carrying 910 tons and 40 tons of material and equipment were sunk during

/the

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the night 3/4 September, within 50 miles of Tobruk, their destination. The Padenna was sunk by the submarine Thresher after having been attacked by aircraft, and the Davide Bianchi by a Wellington of No. 38 Squadron.

// It is notable that the sinkings during the latter part of the Battle of Alam el Halfa were by Egypt-based aircraft, the enemy having been forced by the depredation of Malta-based aircraft to follow the easterly supply route, using Taranto or Brindisi and the west coast of Greece, taking advantage of the shelter and concealment provided by the Ionian Islands.

By 6 September, the Battle of Alam el Halfa was over, with Rommel's offensive defeated and the Panzer Army withdrawn to a line a little further to the east, in the Southern Sector, of their original positions.

High level
reports and
directives
A.H.B.6 Trans-
lation No. VII/
80.

On 7 September, the enemy High Command in the Mediterranean gave their views on the serious reverse to Axis arms that ^{had} occurred, and Field Marshal Kesselring made this statement:

Next to Alamein, Malta is the second British centre of strength in the Mediterranean. An attack aimed at the occupation of Malta is not possible before next summer owing to weather conditions. The neutralisation of Malta is therefore the only means to maintain adequate transport movements to North Africa. C.-in-C. South declared that besides strong Italian co-operation, considerable reinforcement of his fighter forces was necessary in order to eliminate enemy fighter operations and enable further attacks on enemy airfields. Malta must be continually held down, so that shipping losses could be reduced to an endurable degree.

The Duce declared that the battle in the Mediterranean area consisted of two parts - the battle at sea and the battle on land. The battle at sea had been lost, so that the subsequent battle on Egyptian soil could not be carried through.

A further message was sent, on 7 September, from the Deputy Chief of the German Naval Command in Italy to the Chief of Naval Staff, Operations Division:

There is no doubt that towards the end continuation of the offensive in North Africa collapsed because of inadequate supply services. The fear that this would happen has unfortunately been realised.

/After

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After the offensive had been broken off, it depends on the supply question whether the Panzer Army will be capable of holding their own, even on the defensive, in face of the ever increasing enemy the supply problem must therefore be solved at all costs. Even if we can increase defences against submarines, we have no means at our disposal at present to meet the far superior abilities of the R.A.F. in night operations at sea. This last danger has grown to such an extent that it must lead to a catastrophe if no relief is found. I see to-day more clearly than ever before that there can only be one possibility and that is by the strategic offensive. The R.A.F. in the Mediterranean, i.e. in Malta, must be eliminated. Fresh operations must be launched immediately in this area the decreasing number of vessels is so threatening that no possibility must be left untried

Reinforcement of Malta with Spitfires (Operation "Headlong"/"Baritone")

As it happened, in the spring and mid-summer, any success against the enemy's supply lines to North Africa was bound to result in a further attempt to neutralise the offensive power of the Island by air assault. It was therefore fortunate that during August the reinforcements of Malta with Spitfires was pursued with vigour. Operation "Bellows" which was an integral part of Operation "Pedestal" had resulted in the arrival at Malta of 37 Spitfires from the Furious. Initial arrangements for Operation "Headlong"/"Baritone" were made in early July when it was planned to fly off 32 Spitfires Vc from the Eagle, as soon as practicable after the return of that carrier from "Pedestal". With the sinking of H.M.S. Eagle, on August 11, it was decided to use H.M.S. Furious.

A. M. F. 1e
Operation
"Headlong"/
"Baritone"
~~Operation~~
~~"Headlong"/~~
~~"Baritone"~~
CS. 15616.

The Naval anti-submarine escort was increased and the Furious left Gibraltar on the morning of 16 August with the cruiser Charybdis and 12 destroyers. During 16 August, the R.A.F. contingent on the carrier were occupied in the inspection of aircraft and equipment. Maps and charts were marked up, signals arrangements checked, and all pilots inspected the flight deck. That afternoon, all pilots were issued with maps and information cards and briefed by the Wing Commander in charge of the operation. As a wise precaution, at 19.30 hours, the Ward Room bar was closed to R.A.F. officers "when all ~~had~~ paid their Mess bills and were then despatched to bed". After breakfast on 17 August, all

/pilots

Report by
Wg. Cdr.
Bentley.

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pilots were given a final briefing on the flight-deck "stressing run-up action to take in event of emergency and signals"; the weather report was read out and explained.

The fly-off began at 07.30 hours (17 August), a total of 55 minutes being taken in ranging the aircraft. The entire fly-off was completed in two hours five minutes, the aircraft being flown off in three ranges of eight aircraft and two of four. A wind speed over the deck of 40-44 knots was obtained, visibility was good and a wind of 40 m.p.h. at 15,000 feet from 270° was reported.

One Spitfire crashed on take-off and the pilot was drowned. Two pilots baled out, one for engine trouble and the other for under-carriage failure, but luckily both of these pilots were picked up unhurt. The balance of 29 Spitfires arrived ~~safely~~ at Malta unobserved by the enemy. The Furious arrived back safely at Gibraltar at 08.10 hours on 18 August.

The last Spitfire reinforcement operation, known by the code-name of 'Train', was on 29 October. Out of 31 Spitfires embarked on the Furious, two could not be flown off due to engine defects. The remaining 29 Spitfires were flown off in four flights and all arrived safely at Malta.

Chapter 17

A.M. File
Operation
"Headlong"/
"Baritone"
C 15616.

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CHAPTER 17

THE LUFTWAFFE'S FINAL AIR OFFENSIVE AGAINST MALTA
11-19 OCTOBER 1942

September Free of Daylight Bombing Attacks

By the end of August 1942, Malta's strength of 138 Spitfires was higher than it had ever been before. It permitted a full squadron strength of 16 Spitfires to Nos. 126, 185, 229 and 249 Squadrons, a further 13 to No. 1435 Squadron (1) six P.R.U. aircraft and, for the first time, a Command Reserve of 55 Spitfires. It was as well that the opportunity had been taken to strengthen Malta's fighter defence, for it was not until the end of October, when the third enemy air offensive against Malta had already been defeated, that it proved possible to fly in further reinforcements. (2)

State of Air-
craft, WB/9/4.
A.H.B./

A.H.Q. Malta
O.R.B.

Throughout September, the requirements of land operations in North Africa, convoy escort and other duties kept the Axis air forces fully occupied. They had also developed a healthy respect for Malta's fighter defences. No daylight bombing raids were attempted against the island. However, the enemy continued to send over high-flying fighter sweeps. The number of day alerts fell from 56 in August to 38 in September and on ten days there were no alerts. The Spitfires were scrambled 76 times to intercept enemy fighter sweeps. They claimed six Me.109s and nine other aircraft (five of them Italian) destroyed for the loss of six Spitfires, two Beauforts, one Beaufighter, 1 P.R.U. Spitfire and one Wellington Mark VIII. (3) The number of these claims of enemy aircraft destroyed were as a result of armed reconnaissance patrols - 85 in number - over Sicilian airfields.

The enemy night-bombing offensive was also, in the words of the A.O.C. "timid and ineffective". Only eight of the 47 bombers which approached the island got close enough to drop their bombs on land. No material damage was caused and the remaining raiders were forced by the

/night

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- (1) No. 1435 (N.F.) Flight was upgraded to No. 1435 Squadron on 23 July 1942.
(2) On 29 October 29 Spitfires arrived at Malta flown off the aircraft carrier Furious (Operation "Train"). Although experiments were taking place to fly Spitfires direct from Gibraltar to Malta with the aid of 170-gallon long range tanks, it did not prove practicable to carry out this method of reinforcement until November, by which time, with "Torch" and the victory at El Alamein, the period of crisis had passed.
(3) Luftwaffe records show four aircraft destroyed (3 Me.109s, and 1 Ju.88). Italian losses are unknown. (A.H.B.6)

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night fighters to jettison their bombs in the sea, some of them as ^{fast} ~~many~~ as 30 miles from Malta. Altogether, 14 nights were clear of alerts, compared with 11 nights in August. Night Beaufighters of No. 89 Squadron flew 46 sorties, including 22 intruder operations over Sicilian airfields and ports, during which attacks were made on flare paths, when illuminated, and on E-boats and submarines.

Malta Reopened as Submarine Base.

One direct result of the ascendancy gained by the Spitfires over the enemy fighters was the decision to reopen the submarine base at Malta.

War at Sea,
Vol.III.

The 1st Submarine Flotilla had been temporarily transferred to Gibraltar, but the C.-in-C. Mediterranean who was concerned at the stream of supplies to North Africa asked that the 'S' Class submarines at Gibraltar should be transferred to Malta. The Admiralty agreed and arrangements were made to transfer the vessels from 12 September onwards, as they became available. As will be seen, this was soon reflected in the number of sightings and sinkings made by British submarines in the Mediterranean.

The Governor of Malta and Flying Awards

A.H.B./
A.O.C.,-in-C
Malta IIJL/
183/160(D).

In mid-September, Air Ministry informed Air Vice-Marshal Park that a proposal had been received that the Governor of Malta, Lord Gort, should have power of immediate award of decorations for military personnel. The awards were to come out of the "Middle East allowance" and the citations would be notified to the War Office and repeated to the Middle East. The A.O.C. Malta was asked whether he considered that a similar system should be adopted for flying Awards.

Air Vice-Marshal Park pointed out in his reply that the military garrison at Malta came under the Governor in his capacity as Commander-in-Chief of the garrison, but that the naval and air forces based on Malta carried out offensive operations under the control of their respective Commanders-in-Chiefs to whom recommendations for all awards

/should

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should be made. In the A.O.C. Malta's view the existing system worked smoothly "without friction or delays" and he therefore had no wish to change, unless the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief Middle East "especially desired this".

The suggestion that such powers should be delegated to Lord Gort had a quick reaction from the A.O.C.-in-C. Middle East.

"I would object most strongly" he signalled to Air Ministry to Governor of Malta having power for awards to flying personnel. Units and personnel operating from Malta come under my command " At Malta itself I feel that acceptance of such a situation would cut to the root of the morale and consequently operational efficiency of our troops. Suggest this proposal should really have been at least repeated to me."

September Shipping Strikes from Malta

Once the Spitfires had eliminated - for the time at least - the enemy day bomber, Malta's torpedo and fighter bombers were able to develop their attacks on enemy shipping to North Africa under more favourable conditions. This was counterbalanced to some extent by the fact that the success of Malta's anti-shipping offensive had driven the enemy into using the easterly supply route which kept the ships out of range of Malta-based aircraft. There were also stringent limitations on the amount of aviation petrol which the Governor, Lord Gort, would permit to be used for purposes other than defence.

A.H.B.Malta
O.R.B.

Operation "Pedestal" had only partially relieved Malta's fuel crisis, and because there was no prospect of large-scale relief in the immediate future, every effort was made to economise. Fighter operations were restricted to the absolute minimum, and the transit of Wellington VIIIs and other aircraft through Malta was stopped. In this way, it was hoped to reduce petrol consumption to a weekly 200 tons which would allow Malta to continue operations until 19 November. Specially-fitted submarines had already achieved success in bringing aviation fuel into Malta, and by 20 September their contribution had risen to 160 tons a month.

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On 25 September, the A.O.C. Malta was informed that the Chiefs of Staff had reviewed the situation and that they considered that assuming Malta did not get the heavy air attacks, the expenditure of aviation fuel should be reduced to 150 tons a week. That would extend Malta's air operation until 18 December. The A.O.C. commented on this decision, "What a pity Whitehall have to remove sting of wasp to extend its miserable existence a couple of weeks, instead of finding ways and means of running more honey into the nest."

A.O.C. Malta
A.H.B./IIJ1/183/160(D)

During the month of September there were 16 strikes from Malta representing a total of 129 sorties. Of these 16 attacks on enemy shipping, eight were made by Wellington VIIIs of ^{No.} 69 Squadron, three by Beauforts of No. 39 Squadron, two by Beaufighters of No. 227 Squadron and three by Swordfish and Albacores of the Royal Naval Air Squadron. Beaufighters also flew 29 sorties in conjunction with the Beaufort strikes.

A.H.Q. Malta
O.R.B.

A.H.B. List of
Enemy Shipping
Sunk.

In September
~~During the month~~, sinkings totalled 37,550 tons. The Navy ^{sdnK} ~~sank~~ 13,742 tons, Air 21,071 tons and Air/Navy shared 2,737 tons. By far the greater proportion of the Air sinkings was from Egypt, although two ships were so badly damaged by Malta-based aircraft that they had to be beached. From Malta the only successful sinking was that of the Carbonia (1,237 tons) on the night of 16/17 September.

The first target of the month was a tanker of 4,000 tons which was attacked by Wellingtons, in the region of ^F ~~P~~ano Island and Antipaxos during the nights 1/2 and 2/3 September. That same night a Swordfish and two Albacores of the R.N.A.S. Squadron scored hits with two torpedos ^{2 in} ~~of~~ a 5,000-ton M/V 15 miles north-east of Cape Spartivento ^V ~~on~~ the south-east part of the toe of Italy. When they left the vessel, she was down by the stern and belching clouds of black and white smoke. Next day a reconnaissance aircraft found the ship aground 3½ miles

A.H.B. List of
Enemy Shipping,
Sqdn. O.R.Bs.
and A.H.Q. Malta
Daily Int. Summ.

south of Locri. This was probably the Monti of 4,301 tons. Her cargo consisted of Army and G.A.F. ammunition.

A.H.B./IIA/9/22(A)

/On

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On the afternoon of 6 September, a convoy of three M/Vs from ^{Taranto} ~~Taranto~~ and Brindisi, escorted by 11 destroyers and ^{patrolled by} ~~six~~ six M.C.202s and 200s and 6 Ju.88s, was intercepted by nine Beauforts of No. 39 Squadron accompanied by 11 Beaufighters of No. 89 and 227 Squadrons, 30 miles south of Cape Santa Maria di Leuca. While five Beaufighters dealt with the air escort, six provided flak diversion and raked the destroyers and merchant vessels with machine gun and cannon fire. The Beauforts scored a hit on the 7,000-ton Manara which was later found beached south of Arilla Bay near Corfu. By 17 September, the seriously damaged ship had been towed into Corfu Harbour and beached again.

The main success scored during September by aircraft based on Malta was the 1,237-ton M/V Carbonia. She was located by six Beaufighters of No. 227 Squadron on the morning of 17 September sailing unescorted off the Tunisian coast, 30 miles south of Keliba when ^{en} ~~en~~ route to Tripoli. In the course of a mast-high attack the Carbonia was hit with a 500-lb bomb. Deck cargo was hurled into the sea and the vessel was left stationary with a list to port. Photographic reconnaissance on the following day revealed a long streak of oil with wreckage spread over half a mile. There were about 30 large packing cases and three upturned ship's boats in the vicinity and three or four more boats were pulled up on the beach in front of ^{Hammamet} ~~Hammamet~~ village. According to enemy reports the Carbonia was carrying 560 tons of fuel, 26 tons of miscellaneous cargo, 25 men and four guns.

The last successful attack of the month was again the ^{S.S.} ~~S.S.~~ Ravenna of 1,148 tons on the night of 28/29 September. She was attacked by a Wellington of No. 69 Squadron off Cape Spartivento, when on a westerly course, and escorted by three destroyers. A ^{near miss} ~~hit~~ was scored with a stick of four 500-lb bombs very close to her stern. She was later beached off Locri. Apparently the Ravenna was later sunk by a submarine, as official records list her as shared between the R.A.F. and R.N.

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The Final Axis Air Offensive Against Malta (11-19 October 1942)

Rommel's failure at Alamein Halfa had emphasised once more the inability of the enemy to protect their lines of communication across the Mediterranean from the depredations of Malta-based torpedo-bombers and submarines. In his post-mortem of 4 September on the failure of the Panzer Army in their offensive of late August, Marshal Cavallero stated:

High
 High Level Reports
 and Directives
 A.H.B. Translation
 No. VII/80

Duce

Since the offensive has been broken off, the hope of pushing enemy air bases further east and thus at least decreasing the air threat to our shipping from the east has not been fulfilled. In order to improve the sea transport situation so that supplies may be brought across and the Panzer Army maintained at battle strength, Malta must be neutralised again The Malta problem is so urgent to-day that the Duce has requested that Field Marshal Kesselring come to a conference in Rome to discuss stronger action against Malta and reinforce air cover for shipping movements.

Three days later, on 7 September, at the conference between the Duce and Field Marshal Kesselring at Rome it was stated:

Next to Alamein, Malta is the second British centre of strength in the Mediterranean. An attack aimed at the occupation of Malta is not possible before next summer owing to weather conditions. The neutralisation of Malta is therefore the only means to maintain adequate transport movements to Africa Malta must be continually held down, so that shipping losses could be reduced to an endurable degree.

On the same day, the Deputy Chief of German Naval Command in Italy informed the Chief of Naval Staff Operations Division:

Even if

if
Even if we can increase defences against submarines, we have no means at our disposal at present to meet the far superior abilities of the R.A.F. in night operations at sea. This last danger has grown to such an extent that it must lead to a catastrophe if no relief is found. I see to-day more clearly than ever only one possibility, and that is by the strategic offensive. The R.A.F. in the Mediterranean, i.e. in Malta, must be eliminated. Fresh operations must be launched immediately in this area.

Ibid

On 14 September, Hitler himself wrote:

Because of the revival of Malta as an air base and the numerous sinkings in the Mediterranean, supplies for the First Panzer Army have fallen far below normal requirements. Unless Malta is weakened or paralysed once more the situation cannot be remedied. The Commander-in-Chief Air will report whether and when additional air forces can be made available to the Commander General, Armed Forces, South.

Fuehrer Directive
 A.H.B./231/67(B)

/By

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By 10 October when the enemy were fully prepared to launch their third and final air offensive against Malta, they had been able to build up a force of 650 bombers and fighters, some 370 of them serviceable. Out of this total strength 319 were German and the balance of 337 Italian.

Strength of Axis Air Forces on Sicily
10 October 1942

A.H.B. 6

	<u>Strength</u>	<u>Serviceable</u>
<u>Luftwaffe</u>		
Bombers	242	160
Fighters	77	54
<u>Italian Air Force</u>		
Bombers	129	67
Fighters	208	96
	<u>656</u>	<u>377</u>

Of the 242 German bombers, 88 (62 serviceable) were long-range bombers transferred from Crete and Greece. Not strictly relevant to the air assault was a force of 68 coastal aircraft (36 serviceable) based on Sicily and a further 49 (33 serviceable) in Sardinia.

To counter this threat from the Axis Air Force based on Sicily, Malta had built up the following fighter strength (30 September 1942):

	<u>Strength</u>	<u>Serviceable</u>
<u>Spitfire</u> 126 Squadron	16	16
185 "	16	14
229 "	16	14
249 "	16	13
1435 "	16	15
<u>Command</u>		
<u>Reserve</u>	49	44
	<u>129</u> (1)	<u>116</u>
<u>Hurricane</u> 229 Squadron	9	4
<u>Beaufighter</u> 89 " (Detachment)	6	6
227 "	18	13
	<u>162</u>	<u>139</u>

A.H.Q. Malta
State of
Aircraft
A.H.B./VB/9/1

(1) The P.R.U. Spitfires, 6 in number, are excluded from this total.

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The basic force was, of course, the 129 Spitfires of which 116 were serviceable. The value of the Hurricanes was negligible, while the Beaufighters (apart from their use as night fighters) were a part of Malta's coastal forces and used for strikes with the Beauforts against enemy shipping. The build-up of the enemy force in Sicily was watched very closely by Malta's reconnaissance aircraft. As early as the latter part of September it was evident that the Luftwaffe force had been considerably strengthened and that Malta was probably due to undergo another series of intensified attacks. However, the main German reinforcement appears to have taken place during the period of attacks on Malta, when some 250 further aircraft including 116 German bombers were located. In addition to this increase in aircraft, there was a noticeable movement from the eastern to the western Sicilian airfields. In the case of the Ju.87s this was made with the help of gliders five of which were allotted to a wing for the transport of equipment.

A.H.Q. Malta
V.R.B.

A.H.B.6.

Malta
Daily Int.Sums.
A.H.B.-/J A/9/22 (A)

A curious feature noted in the course of this intensive reconnaissance of enemy airfields was the appearance at Pachino L.G. of a number of aircraft which had no tail planes. It was concluded from the careless way in which these were dispersed that they were elaborate fighter dummies. When the fighters moved back to North Africa later in the month, the dummies also left.

It is generally accepted that the offensive actually began on 11 October when the enemy sent 58 escorted bombers against the island, although enemy aircraft (usually Me.109s) had been flying in large formations of up to 43 aircraft during the preceding three days. On 10 October, for instance, 120 single-engined fighter sorties were flown against the island. The majority, however, avoided combat. The only damage was by two Ju.88s

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which jettisoned their bombs on the island of Gozo killing 16 people and injuring 60.

On the next day, 11 October, the raids began in earnest. They started at dawn and continued throughout the day until dusk.

A.H.Q. Malta
O.R.B. and
Attacks on Malta
1942 (AI3B)
A.H.B./IJ5/110

Altogether 257 enemy sorties were flown against the island, 78 of these being by Ju.88 bombers. A truly surprising thing is that after employing as many as 65 Me.109s as escort to ^a merely 6 Ju.88s the last wave of enemy bombers, 30 Ju.88s, came over at dusk unescorted by fighters. In this particular raid only one of the bombers managed to get through to Luqa destroying a Beaufighter. The remainder were intercepted by Spitfires of No. 229 Squadron 25 miles north of the island, forcing the enemy aircraft to jettison their bombs.

In spite of this intensive enemy air activity which was designed to put the three airfields of Luqa, Hal Far and Ta Kali out of action and thus ground the Spitfires, surprisingly little damage was achieved by the remaining raids. At Ta Kali between 20 and 30 bombs from six Ju.88s, which bombed from a high level, overshot the runway and did no damage. At Hal Far. ^{the} S.H.Q. unit was damaged and a fact which annoyed personnel, the coal dump virtually "dispersed". During the day's fighting seven Spitfires were lost for claims of 7 Ju.88s, 5 Me.109s, 1 He.111 and 3 M.C.202s destroyed. According to Luftwaffe records they lost a total of nine aircraft (6 Ju.88 and 3 Me.109).

D.I.S.
A.H.B./IJ5/113/5/15

A.H.B.6

The Italian losses are not known.

At dawn on 12 October, enemy bombers again attacked the island, concentrating their ^{attacks} ~~bombing~~ on the three airfields. At Hal Far one Spitfire was burned out and a Spitfire and two Hurricanes damaged. At Luqa a number of aircraft were damaged. The pattern of interceptions of this - the first wave of bombers and fighters - is interesting. At 06.20 hours, Spitfires of No. 185 Squadron attacked ^{the enemy aircraft} at 22,000 feet north of the island before ~~they~~ ^{they} crossed the coast.

/No. 229

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No. 229 Squadron then intercepted the same wave of aircraft to the north of the Grand Harbour at 18,500 feet. Five minutes later No. 249 Squadron engaged the enemy force over Luqa, after they had dropped their bombs, and a dog-fight ensued.

One of the most brilliant interceptions by the defence took place soon after mid-day, only a few miles south of the Sicilian coast, when ^{eight} ~~8~~ Spitfires of No. 249 Squadron, seven of No. 229 Squadron and six of No. 1435 Squadron ~~with~~ forced 8 Ju.88s with their escort of fighters to turn back. The aircraft of Nos. 229 and 249 Squadrons intercepted further enemy formations 35 miles to the north of the island at 20,000 to 24,000 feet. Although considerably outnumbered they attacked head on and claimed eight enemy aircraft destroyed. By this time only seven enemy fighters were left to continue in the direction of Malta. These were again intercepted by Spitfires of No. 1435 Squadron which destroyed one of the enemy fighters.

As a result of the day's brilliant air operations on 12 October the C.R.A. sent a message to the A.O.C. Malta:

All ranks of the Royal Artillery and Royal Malta Artillery send heartiest congratulations on the splendid total of "kills" to-day and particularly on magnificent interception at mid-day.

/By

~~(4) - DOMESTICATED (born in US) 1/35 11/1/61~~

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By 13 October, the third day of the Blitz, enemy air activity had already begun to decline. There were five alerts involving 219 enemy aircraft. Spitfires flew a total of 107 sorties. For the loss of one Spitfire claims were made of 17 enemy aircraft destroyed. German records show that only one aircraft was lost, the great disparity being accounted for by the fact that possibly some of the losses were carried over to another date.

A.H.B.6

The main target on 13 October was the important all-weather airfield at Luqa. Waves of between 40 and 50 aircraft attempted to fight their way through, but although bombs were dropped in the area, none was actually on the airfield or even around the perimeter. Air Vice-Marshal Park's policy of forward interception again proved its value, as the majority of the incoming raiders were engaged by the R.A.F. fighters before reaching the island. Those bombers that did manage to fight their way through to the targets were so unnerved that they released their bombs indiscriminately and fled. In spite, therefore, of the efforts of over 200 enemy aircraft no damage was caused to either aircraft on the ground or installations, and the only casualties were two civilians killed and two Army O.Rs. on Krendi Strip injured.

During that night 13 raiders attacked the island. Three approached at a great height, dropped their bombs in the sea and returned to Sicily. Six more turned back with their bombs and four eventually made landfall. These aircraft dropped their bombs close to the runway at Hal Far but without causing any serious damage, while other bombs fell into the sea.

Hal Far O.R.B.

Raids started again early the next morning (14 October) just after 6 a.m., when a force of 12 Ju.88s escorted by 40 Me.109s and some Italian fighters, in two formations, were intercepted by 29 Spitfires (nine of No. 126, eight of No. 185, four of No. 229 and eight of No. 249 Squadrons). The first formation immediately turned tail and made for Sicily. The second formation was attacked by the Spitfires which destroyed one Ju.88 and two Me.109s. However, a

/number

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number of bombers managed to get through. They dive-bombed the airfield at Ta Kali causing it to become temporarily unserviceable. Three more raids followed, the day's total of enemy sorties amounting to 220 while the Spitfires flew 108. In the later raids the majority of the enemy aircraft were forced to return to base without making landfall. In two raids, a number of bombs were dropped at Hal Far causing some craters but little other damage. Claims were made of 23 enemy aircraft destroyed for the loss of six Spitfires. German records show four Ju.88s and one Heinkel lost, together with three Me.109s listed as "Not enemy action".

A.H.B.6

The 15th October is significant as being the day when the Luftwaffe made their supreme effort to beat down Malta's air defences. Raids began soon after dawn with as few as six bombers escorted by more than 50 fighters. The first wave of aircraft was intercepted to the north of the island by 28 Spitfires which claimed three Ju.88s and five Me.109s. One or two bombers reached the target area and bombs were dropped at Luqa but caused very little damage.

The next wave of aircraft introduced new tactics in which fighter bombers were substituted for the conventional Ju.88 twin-engined bomber. About 09.00 hours, a formation of 50 Me.109s, 15 of them carrying bombs, were intercepted to the north of the island by 27 Spitfires. The enemy had ~~no height advantage~~ ^{the height advantage}, but two Me.109s were destroyed for the loss of the same number of Spitfires. Most of the fighter bombers were forced to jettison their bombs ^{into} the sea. A few bombs fell on Gozo and at Mellieha where a civilian was killed and two injured.

A.H.B. /
A.H.B. Malta
O.R.B. and
D.I.S. IIJ/
5/113/5/15

Evidently one of the Me.109 pilots shot down in this raid was of particular importance as three-quarters of an hour later no less than 50 enemy fighters were out acting as escort to a rescue sea-plane searching an area 35 miles to the north of the island. In an interception by 16 Spitfires (eight of No. 185 Squadron and eight of 229 Squadron) two M.C.202s were shot down. It was noted that the

/German

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German fighters evaded combat each time they were approached.

The next raid, at 12.58 hours, was by 35 Me.109s, seven carrying bombs. The bombers were intercepted five miles to the north of St. Paul's Bay by 15 Spitfires, the majority being forced to jettison their bombs into the sea. The remainder dropped their bombs wide, in the Ta Kali area, causing no damage.

In the last raid of this eventful day, at 15.16 hours, the enemy reverted to conventional bombing by Ju.88s, 10 of which were escorted by 50 Me. 109s and M.C. 202s. Again interception was effected to the north-east of Malta by 24 Spitfires. Most of the bombers were forced to jettison their bombs ^{into} the sea, but a few bombs were dropped ^{at} on Luqa airfield which was ^{crated}.

In all, on 15 October, the enemy flew 250 sorties while the R.A.F. flew 110. Claims were made of 14 enemy aircraft destroyed (including two Italian) for the loss of four Spitfires (one pilot missing and one wounded). Luftwaffe records show four enemy aircraft destroyed but Italian losses are not known. That night (15/16 October) a total of 14 enemy bombers raided the island without success.

A.H.B.6

By 16 October, any hope the enemy had of being able to neutralise Malta by air assault had vanished. For by that time the whole serviceable strength of some fifty odd serviceable German fighters was being used as escort to half a dozen bombers. Furthermore, the standard of interception was so high that none of these bombers managed to achieve any material damage to military equipment or installations on the island. However, this was not achieved without ~~losses~~ ^{sacrifices}. For by 16 October the number of serviceable Spitfires had dropped from 116 at the opening of the Blitz to 46.

On 16 October the enemy changed his tactics by introducing attacks by many formations, on a wide front, and approaching from several directions at once. These were countered by the available Spitfire force which flew 125 sorties against 260 by the enemy.

/Claims

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Claims were made of seven enemy aircraft destroyed for the loss of six Spitfires (three pilots missing and two wounded). Luftwaffe records show three aircraft destroyed. The result of this enemy activity was that one aircraft was slightly damaged on the ground during the bombing of Hal Far, and a number of houses were destroyed at Sliema and 13 civilians were injured.

Daily Int. Sum.
A.H.B./IXA/
A.H.B./IIJS/113/5/15

A.H.B. 6

Nine enemy aircraft raided the island during the night 16/17 October to no effect. During daylight hours on 17 October the enemy flew 245 sorties and the Spitfires 103. Claims were made of eight enemy aircraft destroyed for the loss of three Spitfires (two pilots missing and one wounded). The Luftwaffe records show six aircraft shot down, all of them Ju.88s. One interesting point is that one of the Ju.88s of ~~Stab.~~ ^{Stab.} JG77 was rammed by a Spitfire. This was probably the work of a pilot of No. 126 Squadron, Flight Lieutenant Jones who was missing after the first raid of the day had been intercepted and the enemy aircraft ^{was} attacked "head on". During the night 18/19 October there were six alerts for a total of 14 enemy bombers which dropped bombs and incendiaries but without causing any material damage.

On 18 October a high level of enemy air activity was maintained, beginning soon after dawn, when 70 enemy fighters escorting nine bombers approached the island at a great height. They were intercepted by 23 Spitfires (eight of No. 126, eight of No. 185 and seven of No. 249 Squadrons) which forced the enemy bombers to jettison their bombs and the whole force of some 80 aircraft to turn back when still 15 miles to the north of the island. During the rest of the day, the raids consisted entirely of fighter-bombers escorted by fighters which approached the island at a great height and, on occasion, split into small formations of about ten aircraft. The last raid of the day, at 14.47 hours, comprised the surprisingly high total of 90 Me.109s which approached in seven formations, some at a

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great height. They were turned back as a result of interceptions by 26 Spitfires. Altogether, the Spitfires flew 102 sorties. They claimed two enemy aircraft destroyed for the loss of two Spitfires. Enemy records show one Ju.88 destroyed and a Me.109 described as "Not enemy action".

HAB.6

The 19th October was the last day of the ^{6/1/2} Blitz. During the night 20 bombers attacked the island from a great height. Anti-personnel and incendiary bombs were dropped causing minor damage. In all there were six alerts which lasted with only short intervals from dusk 18 October until dawn the next day. // Soon after daybreak, 15 Me.109s carrying bombs and heavily escorted by other fighters which acted as high cover crossed the coast and dropped bombs at Hal Far, slightly damaging two Hurricanes. Only part of this particular wave of aircraft was intercepted by Spitfires of No. 1435 Squadron which dived on the enemy from 10,000 feet and damaged a Me.109. The next wave of aircraft consisting of 25 enemy fighters, without bombers, crossed the coast on a high sweep. When challenged by 12 Spitfires (four of No. 126 and eight of No. 185 Squadrons) the enemy refused combat and returned to base. The next raid at 09.57 hours consisted for the first time wholly of Italian fighters and fighter-bombers, some 40 in all. They crossed the coast and dropped bombs in the Ghargur area without causing either damage or casualties. During this time a number of other raiders created diversions by crossing the coast but ^ravoiding ^{ed} any contact with the R.A.F. defenders.

Daily Int.

Line 8

by machine O.R.B.s

During the rest of the day until dusk, excluding reconnaissance aircraft, 130 fighters and fighter-bombers attacked the island in four main waves. Bombs were dropped but again neither damage nor casualties were caused. Interceptions were difficult as the enemy avoided combat and no claims were made.

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During the last raid of the day, however, three Spitfires and two Beaufighters made a highly successful ^{captivity} ~~interrogation~~ of a dusk raid by 40 enemy bombers. They approached in two formations. The one from the west was intercepted 20 miles from the coast by three Spitfires of No. 249 Squadron which forced the enemy to jettison their bombs. The same Spitfires then intercepted another formation 15 miles to the east of the island, and compelled nearly all the bombers to jettison their bombs in the sea. Finally, only three bombers managed to cross the coast and reach their objective. Bombs were dropped near Luqa and Hal Far but causing no material damage. In this interception a Ju.88 was shot down by Flight Sergeant Pring ⁽¹⁾ of No. 89 Squadron. Meanwhile a Beaufighter chased and destroyed a Ju.88 to the north-east of the island. Both of these losses were confirmed by enemy records.

J.I.S.
A.H.B. and
A.H.Q. Malta
O.R.B. and
A.H.B.6.

~~The~~ ^{the} raid at dusk on the 19th October was virtually the end of the third Axis attack to subdue the island by concentrated air assault. Although some ⁷⁰ ~~80~~ enemy aircraft attacked the island on 20 October, the raids were noticeably lacking in drive, and the 19th October is officially accepted as the date on which the ^{'Blitz'} ~~Blitz~~ ⁽²⁾ of October 1942 ended. It was on the following day, 20 October, that the G.O.C. Malta sent this message to the A.O.C. Malta:

On what appears to be the conclusion of the first phase of the renewed enemy air activity on Malta, all ranks of the Army send their heartiest congratulations to their comrades of the Royal Air Force on their magnificent achievement.

Vice-Admiral Weichhold who was German Admiral in Rome at the time of the enemy air offensive against Malta has written in his study of Axis Naval policy and operations in the Mediterranean at that time:

/It

A.H.B.6

- (1) Interrogation of the crew of this Ju.88 gave substantially the same story and it shows to what extent the R.A.F. Spitfires had dominated the enemy. "About 40 Ju.88s started out to make an attack on Hal Far and Luqa on 19 October in two formations, one attacking from the west, the other from the east. Three Spitfires intercepted and broke up first the western and then the eastern formation so that only three aircraft crossed the coast doing negligible damage."

- (2) Ten days later, on 29 October, Malta was reinforced with a further SECRET 29 Spitfires from Operation 'Train'.

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S E C R E T

Axis Naval Policy
and Ops. in the
Mediterranean
1939 and May 1943
R.242.

It soon became obvious that the British air defences could no longer be taken by surprise. Each German attack was intercepted by radar before it began. Very strong fighter escort for the bombers became necessary. British fighter opposition was, however, so intense that the number of fighters required to escort the German bombers grew out of all proportion. By 15 October a force of 14 bombers was being escorted by 98 fighters. After about eight days, the raids were abandoned because they were proving too costly, and fighter bomber operations were reverted to. These had little effect.

The failure of the third Axis air offensive against Malta was a bitter blow to the enemy and it is obvious from the apologetic way in which Field Marshal Kesselring discusses it that he was most sensitive on that score:

On the German side all that was possible at the time was done; not every requirement could be fulfilled. A high quality of air force units was to some extent a compensation. The fighter units already had operational experience against the R.A.F.; the bomber formations also had had years of experience in flying over the sea. For daylight operations Ju.88s were to be used for the main tasks, the slower high altitude bombers being used mainly for night bombing. The Italian bombers and fighters were hardly worth considering because of their obsolete aircraft and the inadequate training of their bomber crews in night flying. The attack was again under the experienced command of II Fliegerkorps. In spite of the fact that the right tactical moment had been chosen and all operational conditions fulfilled, the attack did not have the success desired; I had to call it off on 18 October 1942 because of the high rate of casualties, particularly in view of the imminent Anglo-American invasion.(1)

A.H.B.6 Transl.
No. VII/104.

Kesselring then went on to outline the reasons for the enemy failure:

1. Since the opportunity for surprise did not occur, the bombing raids on the air bases were ineffective. The real battle against the enemy fighters had to be carried on in the air and against bomb-proof dispersal areas, and was correspondingly more difficult and less effective.
2. Protection of the German bombers was rendered difficult to a great extent by the neutralisation for the first time of the German radar (deflection by dropping tinfoil strips "Window").
3. The British defence methods had been still further refined and extended in scope and range. This was possible because of the greater number of operational aircraft available.
 - (a) The effective attacks by single fighters from very great altitudes (10,000 metres and more) in a dive through German formations continued to be as successful as before and it was not possible to prevent these attacks by single enemy fighters with a corresponding layering of German fighters.

/(b)

(1) Kesselring here is just excusing himself. He had no prior knowledge of the "Torch" operation. It would have been more logical to have given as a reason the possibility of an Eighth Army offensive at El Alamein which anti-dated the "Torch" landings by more than a fortnight.

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- (b) Enemy fighters, staggered at a high altitude, paid special attention to the vulnerable periods of attack by the German dive-bombers; they attacked the dive-bombers just before they started to dive and as they pulled out of the dive until they re-formed. Counter measures are naturally defensive in character and not so important as the attack.
- (c) Control from the ground was difficult since our radar locating apparatus was neutralised by the method mentioned in paragraph 2.
- (d) Aircraft badly shot up needed special protection, which had to be provided by the fighter escorts and considerably decreased the battle strength of the fighters remaining on escort duties.

D.I.S.
A.H.B./11J5/113/5/15

During the nine days from 11 - 19 October, the Axis ^{a f} Air Forces based on Malta had flown about 2,400 sorties against the island, all but 125 of them being by day. In the course of these operations the Luftwaffe lost 54 aircraft, of these eight were described as being "Not due to enemy action" and two by A.A. gun fire. The Italian losses are not known. They were probably severe, as the Italians - particularly their fighters - were heavily engaged in the attacks and, on occasion, put up a more spirited show than their German allies. The complete R.A.F. claims amounted to 109 enemy aircraft destroyed (95 Luftwaffe and 14 ^{Italian} ~~German~~ Air Force). R.A.F. losses during the battle were 30 Spitfires, 17 pilots safe. By the

A.H.B.6

A.H.Q. Malta ^{C.R.B.} end of the offensive, the serviceability of the Spitfires had fallen ¹¹⁶ from ~~200~~ to 60, while at one time, as has already been noted, only 40 Spitfires were available for the defence of the island.

6 B. and
Weekly Aircraft
Serviceability
State VB/9/1

A.H.B./

In spite of operating 2,400 aircraft against Malta, no airfield was put out of action for more than half an hour and only two aircraft, A Beaufighter and a Spitfire, were destroyed on the ground. More-
'blitz'
over, even at the height of the Blitz only on one night did Malta-based aircraft fail to carry out a strike against enemy shipping and on that night no enemy shipping passed within range. From the strategic point of view, the time chosen for the offensive was a major blunder. About one half of the Luftwaffe first line strength in the Mediterranean was deployed in the Central Basin when every available aircraft was needed in the Western Desert to meet the

/imminent

S E C R E T

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S E C R E T

Eighth

imminent offensive by the ~~Army~~ Army. In fact, the offensive was called ~~up~~^{off} only four days before the British attack at El Alamein.

An outstanding feature of this particular phase of the enemy air war against Malta was the dominance won by the British pilots over the enemy. The proportion of fighters to bombers was increased to a point when ten or more fighters were acting as escort to one bomber, and the whole of the Luftwaffe's Sicily-based fighter strength was in the air at once. Although in the subsequent combats, the R.A.F. fighters were frequently heavily outnumbered, the mere appearance of the Spitfires was often sufficient for the enemy bombers to jettison their bombs ~~in~~^{into} the sea and, together with their escort, return to base. Clearly the value of the A.O.C Malta's tactics of forward interception had been proved. Usually the first interception by Spitfires took place some 25-30 miles to the north of the island. Thereafter the enemy aircraft had to run the gauntlet of two or three more defensive Spitfire patrols before reaching their target. By that time, the bomber crews had become so unnerved that they usually jettisoned their bombs somewhere in the target area and fled back to base.

Quite early on in the offensive, it was apparent that the bombers could never reach Malta in sufficient numbers to make any lasting impression on the island's defences. By 16 October, the enemy had ~~gone~~^{given} up using the Ju.88 twin-engined bomber in favour of the Me.109 fighter-bomber. The latter was a wholly tactical weapon and therefore quite unsuitable for the purpose of subduing a strongly defended sea and air base by air assault. By 19 October it was quite evident that only fighters could operate over Malta in face of the Spitfires and the lethal concentration of A.A. gun-fire. The third Axis air offensive against Malta had failed.

/Attacks

S E C R E T

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Attacks by Malta-Based Aircraft on Enemy Shipping October 1942

The Axis fears for the security of their supply lines to North Africa which had prompted the air offensive against Malta were fully confirmed by the end of October. Out of 83,695 tons of supplies despatched to Libya during the month only 46,698 tons arrived. The losses were the most severe for the whole of 1942. The German forces in North Africa suffered most severely. Only 11,629 tons arrived out of 21,799 tons. The losses of fuel were particularly severe for only 2,844 tons arrived out of 7,889 tons despatched, compared for instance with a receipt of 19,088 tons in September. As a result Rommel complained bitterly almost daily about the supply crisis that was threatening the security of the Panzer Army in the Western Desert.

Lq
8 - Marina
11 - Liana
Nella Seconda
Guerra Mondiale

A.H.B. List of
Enemy Shipping
Losses in the
Mediterranean.

Enemy shipping losses were even more disastrous. During the month the Royal Navy and the R.A.F. between them sank 25 enemy ships totalling 56,537 tons in the Mediterranean. Of these, 11 ships of 20,085 tons were sunk by air action and one ship of 5,397 tons was shared between the Navy and the Air Force. The balance of 31,055 tons comprising 13 ships was sunk by the Royal Navy. Among the ships sunk by air action were a number of vital tankers and supply ships sunk just before and during the Battle of El Alamein, the loss of which had a direct effect on the success of the ^{Eighth} ~~WALL~~ Army's land operations then in progress. ^{enemy shipping} These losses also reveal Malta's resilience under air attack.

Particulars of the enemy shipping losses from air attack during October are as follows:-

Date	Name	Position	Tonnage	Remarks
October 7/8	<u>Dandolo</u> (Ital. S.S.)	33.36 N. 23.35 E.	4,964	No. 38 Squadron (Egypt-based)
" 19/20	<u>Titania</u> (Ital. S.S.)	34.45 N. 12.31 E.	5,397	Sub. and F.A.A. attack (Malta)
" 26	<u>Terzesta</u> (Ital. M.V.)	off Tobruk	5,890	No. 38 Squadron (Egypt-based)
" 26	<u>Proserpina</u> (ex Beauce) (Ital. tanker)	30 miles 320° from Tobruk.	4,870	No. 47 Squadron (Egypt-based)
" 28	<u>Luisiano</u> (Ital. tanker)	20 miles 260° from Navarino.	2,552	No. 69 Squadron (Malta)
Total			23,673 tons	

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S E C R E T

The balance of six ships totalling 1,809 tons were all under 1,000 tons and sunk mainly in the course of air raids on Genoa by Lancasters from U.K. Other ships which suffered serious damage from air attack are excluded from this list but are included in the text of the narrative.

A.H.B.6

The first success against enemy North Africa-bound shipping went to an Egypt-based Wellington of No. 38 Squadron, based at ^{Gaza}~~Ginacolia~~. On 6 October the Dandolo of 4,964 tons, carrying a cargo of bombs, 829 tons of ammunition, 391 tons of food, 351 tons of miscellaneous material, 62 vehicles, 4 guns, together with 25 men left Crete for Tebruk. The Dandolo was of such importance that orders were given to Fliegerkorps X for her protection from dawn to dusk with at least six bombers and fighters. She was hit and sunk by Wellington "C" piloted by Sergeant Buchanan of No. 38 Squadron in the early hours of 7 October when no more than 60 miles from Ras el Tim.

The hazards of these anti-shipping strikes are exemplified by an incident which took place on 14 October when three Beaufighters of No. 227 Squadron were despatched to attack a 1/2,000 ton ship off the Tripolitanian coast. Two Beaufighters were shot down by A.A. gunfire from the destroyer escort before they had managed to reach the target. An attack by a Beaufighter was unavailing. An especially gallant act enabled two of the crew to be rescued. Squadron Leader Warburton, who was piloting a P.R.U. Spitfire of No. 69 Squadron, saw a dinghy from one of the Beaufighters. Although fired on at first by the destroyer and chased by six M.C.202s, he guided the destroyer to the dinghy and waited in the vicinity for long enough to see the occupants picked up.

Nos. 69 and
227 Sqdn.
O.R.Bs.

Although not listed as a sinking, an especially significant strike was carried out on the night of 15 October when two Fleet Air Arm Albacores of No. 828 Squadron attacked the Amsterdam of 8,676 tons, 80 miles to the north-east of Homs on the Tripolitanian coast. One of the Albacores scored a hit amidships on the Amsterdam and she was later found

/beached

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A.H.Q. Malta
S.R.B. & D.I.S.
A.H.B./II 55/113/5/15

beached near Homs and according to an enemy document some of her cargo, including ^{91 tons of 146 vehicles & 4 guns (1)} fuel oil, was salvaged. The Amsterdam was listed by Lloyds as lost during October but is omitted from the Italian records.

Another strike which was to have most serious repercussions in North Africa, although in this case again not listed as a sinking, occurred on the night 18/19 October, when the tanker Panuco (8,000 tons) was severely damaged and had to be beached. The Panuco was in convoy with two destroyers when she was attacked by two Wellingtons of No. 69 Squadron off Punta Stilo. In spite of the intense light and heavy A.A. gunfire, Wellington "W" piloted by Pilot Officer Dompkersley scored a hit on the tanker which was damaged and had to be towed to Grotone, where she was beached. The Panuco was scheduled to arrive at Tobruk on 20 October with 2,600 tons of fuel. On 20 October - only three days before the beginning of the Battle of El Alamein - the Panzer Army sent what was described as a "very urgent message" to Rome emphasising "the very serious petrol situation caused by the loss of the Panuco this will jeopardise the majority of the German troops if the enemy should attack".

Panzer Army
War Operations
A.L. 981.

As a result of the torpedoing of the Panuco, the Panzer Army requested Kesselring to fly over 1,000 tons of fuel from Greece to Tobruk, ^{tem} temporarily holding up the transportation of personnel. Thus Malta not only diverted something like one half of the total Luftwaffe strength in the Mediterranean from the battle area, just before the British offensive, and ^{entailed} caused losses in aircraft and a drop in serviceability which the enemy could ill afford, it caused an additional strain to be imposed on an air force which was already ^{stretched} stretched to the limit by the multiplicity of duties attending a major air lift. It is noteworthy that this successful strike was made at the end of an enemy air assault on Malta which had lasted for ten days, and had involved 2,400 enemy aircraft sorties.

/At

- (1) The salvage of the cargo of the ship was closely watched by Malta's reconnaissance aircraft of No. 69 Squadron. Squadron Leader Warburton photographed it on a number of occasions.

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S E C R E T

No. 69 Sqn.
O.R.B.

A.H.Q. Malta
O.R.B.

A.H.B. 6

At 10,45 hours on the morning of 19 October a P.R.U. Spitfire of No. 69 Squadron, piloted by Flight Lieutenant Coldbeck, sighted and photographed an enemy convoy in a position some 35 miles to the north-west of Lampedusa Island. This particular convoy had been attacked on the previous night, in very bad weather conditions, by Fleet Air Arm Swordfish and Albacores from Malta, but without success. The Spitfire gave a sighting report over the R/T and during that night (19/20 October) ten more sorties were made by Wellingtons, Albacores and Swordfish against the convoy. Direct hits with a torpedo and ~~with~~ a bomb were claimed on the merchant vessel and a hit with a torpedo on a tanker. As a result, probably of the torpedo attack, the Titania of 5,397 tons was severely damaged. She was subsequently sunk by a torpedo from a British submarine early the following morning. Both the tanker Proserpina and the ^{S.S. e} ~~S.S. e~~ Targeste were sunk by Egypt-based aircraft and a full account of these sinkings is given in Volume IV, "Middle East Campaigns", pages 292 and 293. The Proserpina was sunk by a Beaufort of No. 47 Squadron and the Targeste by a Wellington of No. 38 Squadron. (1)

After the death of General Stumme on 24 October (Stumme had taken over control of the Panzer Army after Field Marshal Rommel went back to Germany on 23 September), Rommel returned to North Africa and resumed command of the Panzer Army on 25 October. Rommel was then faced with the loss of these two important ships on the day after his return. In a report to the German War Ministry and the Italian Supreme Command on the evening of 26 October, Rommel wrote:

Panzer Army
Supply Messages
A.L.866.

Now that the Proserpina has been burned off Tobruk the Panzer Army ~~has~~ has petrol for only two or three days' current consumption. Therefore it is impossible at present to initiate mobile operations by the Panzer and motorised troops, although this is most urgently necessary. If every possible method is not used forthwith to send us petrol, there is no prospect of success.

Further, Rommel himself wrote:

(1) The ~~Targeste~~ ^{Targeste} was carrying 20,000 tons of cargo /At
(1,042 tons of ammunition, 1,003 tons of food, 2
40 tons of miscellaneous ~~material~~ ^{material} ~~with~~ ^{with} 40 vehicles).

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Rommel's
Papers

shattering At about half past eleven (29 October) I received the ~~shattering~~ news that the tanker Luisiana sent as a replacement for the Proserpina had been sunk by an aerial torpedo. Now we were really up against it.

No. 69 Sqdn.
and A.H.Q.
Malta O.R.Bs.

The 2,550-ton tanker Luisiana⁰, carrying 1,500 tons of petrol for the Panzer Army, was sunk by a Malta-based Wellington of No. 69 Squadron. It was one of the Malta ^a ^f Air Force's most brilliant victories and wholly the work of that veteran reconnaissance squadron, No. 69. On the morning of 27 October, Baltimore "J" of No. 69 Squadron piloted by Lieutenant Douglas took off on a shipping search of the Greek coast. Soon after making land fall at Sapienza and turning north to the Island of Protia the search had to be abandoned owing to a deterioration in the weather. The abandonment of the search, as it so happened, turned out for the best as during the return journey to base a convoy which included the tanker Luisiana⁰, a merchant vessel escorted by three destroyers, together with a small auxiliary ship, ^{was} ~~was~~ ^{was} ^{was} located crawling along the coast at a speed of no more than about three knots.

The Baltimore arrived back at base at 16.15 hours. After a fruitless search by three Wellingtons of No. 69 Squadron (which, incidentally, were attacked by enemy night fighters - a most unusual occurrence), three more Wellingtons of the same Squadron set out from Luqa that same evening, 28 October. One of the Wellingtons was forced to return to base owing to engine trouble. The first aircraft to arrive on the scene, Wellington "X" piloted by Pilot Officer Matthews found the tanker travelling at 10 knots some 20 miles off Sapienza. The Luisiana⁰ was easily identified as she was flying a balloon. Matthews attacked from a height of 75 feet and at a distance of 1,000 yards. An explosion was seen and a column of white smoke. The Wellington broke away to port and dropped flares for the guidance of the second Wellington "W" piloted by Pilot Officer Donkersley. At 22.52 hours, on a second run-in, the torpedo was dropped from an estimated distance of 6/800 yards. A direct

/hit

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hit amidships was observed and the tanker burst into flames.

Although by that time some 40 miles astern, the crew of Wellington "X" saw ^{the} explosion. Both aircraft reached Malta safely some four hours after leaving base, having accomplished a round trip of some 800 miles over the sea, ~~and~~ pinpointed their target and sunk her.

Both Pilot Officers Donkersley and Matthews were awarded a D.F.C.

The next day the German G.O.C. Rome sent the following report to the Combined H.Q. of the Armed Forces Operational Staff:

German-Italian
Forces in
Africa
A.L.743.

Since ^{we have} ~~we have~~ been unable to dominate Malta permanently, sinkings have ~~risen~~ ^{risen} sharply, escort has become small and shipping space still smaller, and therefore a complete alleviation of the supply position and an end of the petrol crisis are not to be expected If we do not succeed in rectifying this position, making convoys perfectly safe from air attack and permanently dominating Malta, no measures will suffice in the long run to keep up the Panzer Army's supply position, let alone to transport material to reinforce the Army. During the last three months the transport losses have amounted to 40,000 tons monthly, even higher in October. If losses continue at this rate, there will soon not be enough cargo space available. The use of warships to protect convoys is limited by the shortage of fuel oil; their use as supply transport is limited for the same reason, and alone cannot ensure the supplying of so large an Army. Real help can be ^{only} obtained by continually reinforcing the sea transport with air transport.

Although Malta-based aircraft were to continue sinking enemy supply ships, with the torpedoing of the ⁰ ~~Luisiana~~ came the end of what might be termed ^{the} "classic" period of the Malta story in World War II. October was a month which saw the decisive defeat of the ^{neutralist} ~~Luftwaffe's~~ last attempt to ~~neutralize~~ the island by air assault. With the enemy forces so fully preoccupied with events in North Africa any possibility of an invasion of Malta was now out of the question.

For the ^{final phase} ~~remainder~~ of the Battle of El Alamein the enemy's attempts to rush more supplies to the Panzer Army were to be frustrated by No. 201 Group. The failure to subdue Malta meant that enemy shipping was forced to take the easterly course ^{and} that, in turn, brought them within range of Egypt-based aircraft. In this way the Naval Auxiliaries, Zara (1,976 tons), the Osta (348 tons), Tripolino (1,464 tons) and Brioni (1,987 tons), all sunk between 1 and 2 November (with the exception of the Brioni which was sunk in part by Liberators), fell victim to either Wellingtons or Beauforts

/from

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from Egypt.

Rommel
Papers

Rommel himself wrote:

We had lost the decisive battle of the African campaign. It was decisive because the defeat resulted in the loss of ~~the major~~ ^{the} part of our infantry and of our motorised forces

As a result of the British command of the air and hence of the sea in the Central Mediterranean, and of other reasons detailed elsewhere, the Army's supplies were barely sufficient to enable it to eke out a bare existence even on quiet days. It was out of the question to think of building up stocks for a defensive battle.

Western

Air Marshal Coningham the A.O.C. ~~British~~ ^A Desert Air Force always maintained the view that 'the air war is indivisible'. Whatever the operations of the British air forces based on Malta, they were complementary to and even an integral part of air operations in North Africa. On 5 January 1943, Field Marshal Miloh addressed a conference at the German Air Ministry. What he told the conference is in a sense the final word on the subject of Malta's part in the crucial phase of military operations in the Mediterranean and Middle East:

A.H.B.6
Miloh Docs.
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"We must convince everybody in Germany; the war can be won only with the Luftwaffe. I will go further - and this has been acknowledged by the highest authorities - the war could even be lost unless there is air superiority at vital points - not air superiority in all quarters, but at the most important points. The ground troops cannot be victorious without air superiority or mastery of the air over their own area and at points where a concerted effort is being made. Last year this point was clearly proved by Rommel's action in Africa. He was compelled to fall back only because reasons of supply prevented the Germans building up air superiority against the British. This is the only reason for the reverse which occurred there. If Rommel had had enough aircraft to prevent the British moving up through their rear areas without sustaining heavy losses and if we had had air superiority for the duration of critical situations, he would never have fallen back from the Alamein position."

Yet, as will be seen in the next Chapter, the enemy in North Africa were not alone in being faced with an urgent supply crisis. Malta's defensive battle of October and the fact that the island had obtained no appreciable reinforcement of supplies since the previous August, had run down stocks of all commodities to a dangerously low level. The shortage of high octane petrol limited severely the number of sorties that the Spitfires could fly against the enemy. Had the

/ enemy

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enemy been able to maintain the level of air attack against Malta, they would have reduced the island's petrol stocks to a point where the defensive force would have been grounded.

(Part IV.)

PART VIITHE PART PLAYED BY MALTA IN OPERATIONS "TORCH" AND "HUSKY"

CHAPTER 18: ^{ALLIED} THE LANDINGS IN FRENCH NORTH-WEST AFRICA (OPERATION "TORCH") NOVEMBER, 1942.

Malta's Supply Crisis

November 1942 was a memorable month in the Mediterranean. By the 4th, the Battle of El Alamein had been won: on 8 November began the Anglo-American landings in French North Africa, Operation "Torch"; and on 20 November the east to west "Stoneage" convoy to Malta anchored in Grand Harbour, and the blockade of the island was finally raised.

Although October had seen the defeat of the third Axis air assault, the supply position on Malta could hardly have been worse. The high level of air operations during the blitz had run down the fuel stocks alarmingly. There is some point in the view that had the enemy been able to maintain their pressure against the island, they would have reached their objective by sheer attrition, and the defensive force of Spitfires would have been eventually grounded for lack of fuel.

The Governor of Malta informed the Middle East Defence Committee, at the end of September, that by the third week in November the island's current stocks of petrol would have been used up and the grave decision would then have to be made to fall back on the Fortress Reserve which would last merely for another three weeks. Furthermore, the civil population had been reduced to a ration with a calory value of approximately 1700 for men, between the ages of 16 and 60, and 1500 for the remainder of the population. This was considered to be a dangerously ^{low} ~~low~~ diet. Some of the most important rationed commodities, such as preserved meat and edible oils, would be wholly exhausted by December, and only by using wheat conserved for the next year's seed crop would it be possible to issue flour for that month's bread ration.

The gravity of the food position was further emphasised by the so-called Rowntree Report which was considered by the Chiefs of Staff at a meeting on 28 September. Lord Gort had sent Mr. Rowntree, the Deputy Director of Communal Feeding, home to report on the food position on the island. He pointed out that the civilian population had been existing on

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Papers of M. of
M. Defence
Committee,
Pt. III.
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183/122(G).

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C.A.S. Malta
A.H.3/ID3/1706(B)

the basic minimum of food calories and had therefore "nearly exhausted their bodily and/or tangible reserves (i.e. their own declared hoards)". The position was described by the Chiefs of Staff as "disquieting". The time-table given for ^{the} "exhaustion date" of food supplies was 10 December. By the general slaughter of all live stock, including draught animals, the "exhaustion date" could be prolonged for another two weeks.

Suggestions made in the Rowntree Report that bombers/towing gliders should be used to supplement the food stocks were rejected by the Air Staff as impracticable, as there was insufficient petrol for current operational needs. They were also averse to the misuse of operational aircraft, especially in view of the "Lightfoot" offensive planned for the third week in October. The Rowntree Report did not add anything to the situation as already known both in the United Kingdom and the Middle East. It did, however, serve to restrict the consumption of petrol still further to 150 tons a week and so have a marked effect on plans for the ^{participation} ~~transportation~~ of Malta's Air Force in Operation "Torch".

It is not generally known to what extent Malta's dire needs governed the timing of the "Lightfoot" offensive ⁽¹⁾ at El Alamein and the subsequent advance into Cyrenaica. Owing to the heavy losses sustained in the August convoy (Operation "Pedestal"), it was decided not to attempt a west to east convoy while the enemy controlled the Sicilian Narrows. On the other hand, owing to the complete failure of Operation "Vigorous" in June, the passage of a convoy from Alexandria was only considered practicable if the Royal Air Force controlled the Martuba-Derna nexus of airfields on the Cyrenaican "hump". This would enable a west-bound convoy to be given protection by R.A.F. fighters throughout its course, particularly in "Bomb Alley" between Crete and North Africa. The Middle East Commanders were thus set the problem of the occupation of the Martubas in time to afford ^{air} protection to the ~~/"Stone Age"~~

(1) More generally known as "Supercharge". What was virtually the first battle of El Alamein (Operation "Lightfoot") failed, and was followed by a second offensive on 2 November which was given the code name of "Supercharge".

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"Stone Age" convoy for 18 November at the latest. This demanded that within four weeks of the opening of the offensive in Egypt, the Eighth Army should advance some 400 miles, clear the airfield of mines and booby traps, ^{rapidly} ~~prepare~~ them, and that advanced elements of the W.D.A.F. would occupy them and be ready for full-scale operations. The "race for the Martubas", as it became known, was one of the most important features of the expulsion of the Panzer Army from Egypt. It established beyond doubt the principle that land operations in North Africa had become increasingly a struggle for ~~strategic~~ ⁽¹⁹⁴²⁾ air bases. The Manxman and Welshman Break the Blockade (12 and 18 November)

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East Narrative
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In the meantime, action was taken to rush urgently needed stores to Malta under cover of the "Torch" landings in the fast minelayers Manxman and Welshman. On the night 10 ^{November} ~~October~~ the Manxman left Port Said with 350 tons of supplies and 200 naval and military personnel. She reached Malta on the afternoon of 12 November and was quickly unloaded. She was the first surface blockade-runner to reach Malta since the August convoy. The Italians placed the greatest emphasis on this exploit and saw in it the complete failure of the Axis policy to subdue Malta.

"The War at Sea",
Vol. III

Her sister ship, the Welshman, made the west to east run via Gibraltar and Algiers (Operation "Analysis"). She was carrying 4,355 cases of milk powder, 560 sacks of beans, 360 sacks of peas, 4,693 cases of preserved meat and ^{fifteen} ~~15~~ 18-inch torpedos. The Welshman left Plymouth on 1 November and Algiers on 15 November. Having been forced back by bad weather, she tried again on the night 17 November and reached Malta at 08.45 hours on 18 November. (1)

Two days later, the minelaying cruiser Adventure left Plymouth with a number of Service personnel for Malta and 2,000 aircraft depth charges. She reached Malta successfully and made another trip with stores and R.A.F. personnel in mid-December.

/Operation

ABD E0 KA /

(1) Another attempt (Operation "Crupper") ^{to} pass ~~the~~ through the 2,609-ton Ardecho and 1,947-ton Tadorna from the west was unsuccessful. Both ships were captured by the Germans and taken to Bizerta on 9 November.

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Operation "Stoneage" (16 - 20 November)

Operation "Stoneage", known as Convoy ~~Ma~~ MW.13, consisted of four merchant ships, the Denbighshire of 8,983 tons (British), the Bantam of 9,312 tons (Dutch), the Mormacmoon of 7,939 tons (American) and the Robin Locksley of 7,101 tons (*America*). The Admiralty had instructed the C.-in-C. Mediterranean, "The most important thing is to get 'Stoneage' into Malta, and all your forces should be used as necessary to achieve this." In the event, the naval force actually used comprised the whole of the strength then available in the eastern Mediterranean.

The four merchant ships left Port Said on 16th November, escorted by the cruiser Euryalus and ten Hunt class destroyers, while cover was provided by the Cleopatra, Dido, Orion and Arethusa, of the 15th Cruiser Squadron, and seven Fleet destroyers.

War Cabinet
Papers Hist. (B)
(Crusader)(5).

No. 201 Group
O,R,B,

For the control of "Stoneage", a Combined Operations Room was set up in H.Q. No. 201 Group, with the A.O.C.-in-C., the C.-in-C. Mediterranean and the A.O.C. No. 201 Group. Provision was made by No. 201 Group for anti-submarine protection for the convoy, while reconnaissance and shadowing of enemy surface forces was undertaken by A.H.Q. Malta. The Italians had a strong naval force at their disposal. It consisted of the 35,000-ton battleships Impero, Littorio, and Roma, three Cavour-class battleships, two 8-inch and three 6-inch cruisers. Plans for "Stoneage" were made on the assumption that the Italians would "undoubtedly attempt a surface interception of our convoy".

The capture of the Martuba airfields became the Eighth Army's main preoccupation after the capture of the Port of Tobruk on 13 November which assured their supply position for the next phase of the pursuit. The Army gave priority to the capture of airfields, and their clearance of mines and booby traps took precedence even over the verges of the main coast road. The squadrons of the Western Desert Air Force pursuit force pressed hard on the heels of the advancing troops. On 13

/November

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Gazala
A.H.Q. W.D. War
Diary and
Daily Int.
Sums.

November they were operating from Sidi Azeiz, on 14 November from Gambut and on 16 November (the day the "Stoneage" convoy sailed from Port Said) from ^{Gazala}~~Gambut~~. To help this swift move forward, supplies were flown by transport aircraft of No. 216 Group, and surplus stores were held at Gazala ready for the move to the Martubas, as soon as the airfields had been captured by the Army. Unfortunately, the weather broke on 16 November flooding the landing grounds and making them unserviceable. The advance units of the W.D.A.F., assigned to the protection of the convoys, were therefore forced to operate from their existing base at Gazala, which reduced their effective range quite considerably.

longitude
Operation
"Stoneage"
A.H.B./ILJ5/
101/4.

Arrangements were made by A.H.Q. Egypt to afford the convoy full fighter protection from D + 1 until it had passed ^{longitude}~~longitude~~ 29° 30' east, when responsibility for the convoy would pass to the Western Desert Air Force. At the change-over line between Egypt and Malta, laid down as 19° 15' east, which should be reached on D + 3, A.H.Q. Malta would take over the convoy's protection. During the operation, No. 201 Group had a force of 75 aircraft at its disposal, including American Liberators and B.24s. On 17 November, nine Beaufighters flew to Malta to augment the long-range fighter force there.

Correspondence
with P.M. A.H.B./
ILJ1/183/27(E)

Malta's strength in serviceable aircraft, at the time of the "Stoneage" operation, was high and amounted to 199 aircraft:

Fighters

Spitfire	109
Beaufighter	35
Hurricane	9

Medium Bomber

Wellington	15
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Torpedo Bomber

Beaufort	22
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G.R./L.R.

Baltimore	9
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Weekly State
Middle East
Aircraft
A.H.B./VB/9/1

Total	-	199
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The convoy left Port Said at dusk on 16 November, Hudsons of No. 459 Squadron and Swordfish of No. 815 Squadron providing anti-submarine escort. At dawn on 17 November, the convoy was off Alexandria. Fighters of No. 252 Wing were on patrol all day and Bisleys of No. 15 S.A.A.F. Squadron carried out anti-submarine patrols. At 15.30 hours (17 November), the escort of four carriers and ten destroyers sailed from Alexandria to rendezvous with the convoy at dawn on 18 November, when the ships came under the protection of the varied assortment of aircraft based on Gambut especially for the operation. Bisleys and Hudsons continued their anti-submarine patrols from their bases, while Beaufighters of No. 252 Squadron gave dusk and dawn protection.

Operation
"Stoneage"
A.H.B./IIJ5/
101/41.

When the ships were located some 20 miles to the north of Dernaⁿ, fighters of No. 211 Group of the Western Desert Air Force took over their protection. At 11.10 hours, six Ju.88s attacked the convoy, but on being intercepted by the fighters, they dropped their bombs and fled. Soon afterwards, Euryalus heard a German aircraft from^a ground station ask "Have you sunk the louse?" The reply was not heard, but the first station said "Bravo!"

Report from
H.M.S.
Euryalus

At 15.50 hours, six Beaufighters of No. 252 Squadron arrived over the convoy. At about 16.30 hours, 25 Ju.52s with two Ju.88s as escort, were sighted flying ahead of the convoy on a north easterly course. The Beaufighters attacked and claimed one Ju.52 as a probable. One of the Beaufighters was attacked and crashed on landing. After dusk, when the escorting fighters had left the convoy, an attack was launched by SM.79s, Italian torpedo bombers. The Arethusa of the 15th Cruiser Squadron was hit by a torpedo about 80 miles north east of Benghazi and damaged. She was forced to return to Alexandria at reduced speed, escorted by the destroyer Petard. They were again attacked by enemy aircraft ^{but this time} without result and both ships ^{safely} entered Alexandria on the evening of 21 November. During their return journey, anti-submarine escort

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III.

/was

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was provided by Hudsons and Bisleys and a Sunderland of No. 230 Squadron.

From dawn on 19 November, the convoy came under the protection of Malta-based fighters. Beaufighters and Spitfires provided continuous protection, while six Baltimores of No. 203 Squadron (No. 201 Group), from Gambut, made a special reconnaissance to cover the approach of the Italian naval force, should they attempt to intercept. Very rough weather was experienced all day and three Spitfires (two from No. 126 Squadron and one from No. 185 Squadron) flew into the sea with the loss of their pilots.⁽¹⁾ Malta aircraft also made a reconnaissance of the Italian ports and confirmed that all major Italian naval units were still in harbour. In fact, the Italians made no attempt to intercept the convoy. The convoy MW.13 reached Malta without further incident in the early hours of 20 November.

Operation
"Stoneage"
A.H.B./ILJ5/
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A.H.Q. Malta
O.R.B.

Air escort was provided for the naval force on their return journey to Alexandria. The Euryalus was attacked by a single torpedo-bomber after dark 22 November without success, and all ships reached Alexandria in safety.

From the official report on Operation "Stoneage", it was concluded that there was "a marked improvement in all phases of fighter protection which now appears to be in a high state of efficiency." Although enemy aircraft shadowed the convoy for long periods, the presence of fighter cover kept them at a distance. The co-operation from Malta fighters was considered to be particularly good.

Operation
"Stoneage"
A.H.B./ILJ5/
101/41.

Further Malta Convoys (December)

After the successful passage of Operation "Stoneage", convoys for the relief and build up of Malta proceeded more or less as a matter of routine. A convoy of five ships known as MW.14 was despatched from Port Said and arrived at Malta on the morning of 5 December without incident. The unloading of this convoy was completed by 10 December. It was then estimated that Malta had sufficient flour to last until /mid-May

A.H.Q. Malta
O.R.B. and "The
War at Sea",
Vol.III.

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- (1) Their loss was attributed to engine trouble. All three pilots baled out, but such heavy seas were running that they were drowned before rescuing destroyers could reach them.

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mid-May 1943, benzine and kerosene until mid-April, coal about the end of February and food stuffs (other than flour) to the end of March or later, except for preserved milk and meat.

Three more convoys, MW.15, 16 and 17, sailed for Malta on 6, 9 and 17 December respectively. As a result of these convoys, by 29 December the Governor was able to report that almost 70 per cent of the island's most important requirements had been raised to full scale. No serious attempt was made by the enemy air force either to stop the convoys from reaching the island or to interfere with their unloading.

By the third week in November, therefore, the enemy blockade ^{of} ~~was~~ Malta had been effectively broken and, with the altered strategic position in the Mediterranean, was never renewed. The receipt of considerable supplies of aviation petrol enabled the R.A.F. on the island to resume an aggressive air policy, while the Royal Navy was again free to make use of Malta as an important offensive base.

Return of Force K to Malta (27 November)

~~After Operation "Pedestal", the Vice-Admiral Malta, Vice-Admiral Sir R. Leatham, asked permission for a small surface striking force to be based on Malta. This the Admiralty was at that time unable to grant. However, by November, with the greatly improved strategic situation in the Mediterranean, it was decided to return Force K to Malta.~~

~~"The Torch"~~
~~S.W., Vol. III~~

~~The force consisted of the cruisers Cleopatra (A/A ship), Dido and Euryalus and the destroyers Jervis, Javelin, Kelvin and Nubian. The ships left Alexandria on 25 November and arrived at Malta on the 27th.~~
~~Plans for the~~
The "Torch" Landings in French North Africa 8 November 1942

Bearing in mind the complexity, magnitude and importance to the Allied cause of the "Torch" landings in French North-West Africa, it is surprising to find that the actual decision to launch the operation was not taken until the end of July, 1942. The first convoy left the Clyde on 22 October, so that ^{there} ~~their~~ were barely three months between the decision to make the landings and the actual start of the operation. Planning on the Air side began in early August, when the H.Q. of the

C.O.S.(W)239

/Allied

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A.H.B./ILJ1/
25/1/42.

Allied Expeditionary Force was set up in Norfolk House ⁽¹⁾, but the outline plan, in its final form, was not issued until 8 October, only a month before the actual landings.

Of the three "Torch" landings on 8 November, the one nearest Malta was at Algiers. Algiers is 650 miles from Malta and well outside the operational range of Malta-based aircraft. The two American landings at Oran and Casablanca were 860 and 1,300 miles distant from Malta respectively, or as far distant to the west as Fuka is to the east in the one case and Jerusalem in the other. From the point of view of the Mediterranean theatre, the American landings at Casablanca might almost have been in another hemisphere.

In the planning of "Torch", little or no regard was paid to the vast fund of operational experience accumulated by Middle East Command. They knew of the plan, but were not consulted when it was being drawn up and, such was the degree of security, that they were not told of the moment for its execution. Although Malta existed as an island base across the enemy's lines of sea communication and had already exercised a powerful influence on operations in North Africa, hardly any effort was made to draw the island into the general strategic plan for "Torch". Malta was the one control point from which enemy reinforcement of Tunisia could have been stemmed. But, apart from the directive of a general nature, there was no attempt - in the early stages at least - to develop these potentialities.

The planning of "Torch" was largely dominated by the Americans who at that time had very little appreciation of the military and strategic factors governing operations in the Mediterranean. They were obsessed with the fear of a German ^{drive} ~~push~~ through the Iberian Peninsula and the possibility of a serious defeat of American armies in this their first major military operation.

If, General Eisenhower wrote in his draft plan dated 8 August 1942, the enemy should move into southern Spain, he might by air action or otherwise, gain control of the Straits of Gibraltar, or at least interfere materially with the passage of our shipping, before preventive action could be taken by the Casablanca Force.

/The

(1) No. 333 Group was built up from a small staff which was assembled at Air Ministry towards the end of July 1942. The A.O.C. was Air Marshal Sir William Welsh, who reported to General Eisenhower on 10 August 1942.

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The British, on the other hand, as was expressed by the Chiefs of Staff Committee, were much concerned about the early occupation of Tunisia.

In our view the Germans will instantly appreciate that if they can once hold up our advances to Tunis and Bizerta, their very short sea communications from Italy will soon place them at a great advantage. Indeed, it can be said the whole conception of "Torch" may stand or fall on this question of early Allied occupation of Tunisia. Your plan does not specify any particular striking force for Tunisia, but there seems little doubt that at least a Corps will be required.

On the subject of a German invasion of Spain, the Chiefs of Staff were even more emphatic and quoted the J.I.C. view:

C.A.S. "Torch"
Policy Part 3
A.H.B./ID3/1605(B)

The establishment of air forces in southern Spain and the Balearics is considered improbable during this period (D 15 to D 30). Operationally there would not be sufficient advantages to base aircraft in the Balearics which would be deficient in fuel, bomb stocks and facilities generally.

On the other hand, the Chiefs of Staff went on to say, we do consider that in view of the uncertainty of the Spanish attitude, any Air Forces which the Germans can spare quickly are more likely to be sent to Sicily which is close to the threatened area and where established air bases exist.

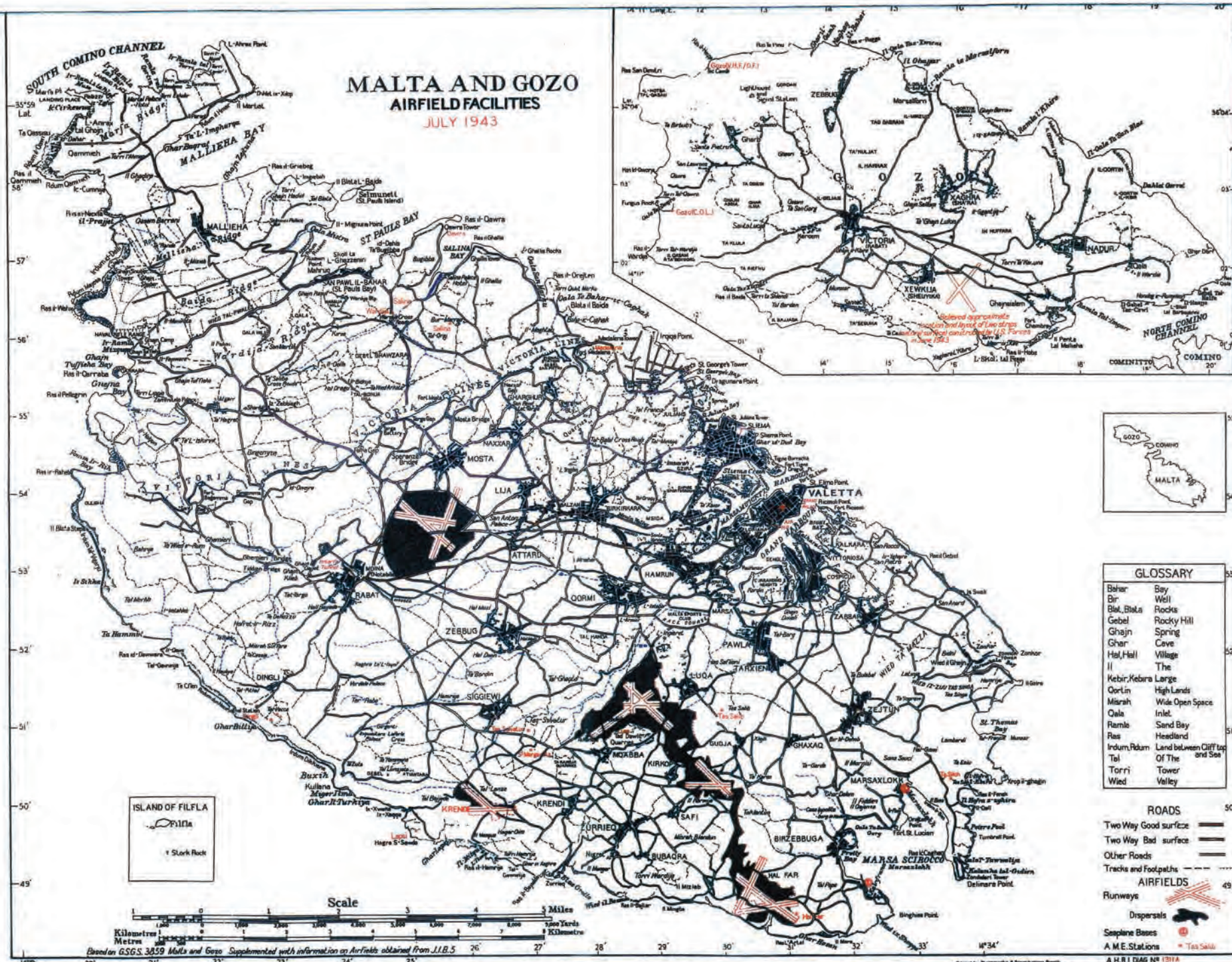
Nevertheless, the predominantly Army emphasis in this Committee is made obvious by the fact that although the need of an Army Corps to operate in Tunisia was stressed, there was no mention of air action to help neutralise the enemy ^{air} reinforcement of both Sicily and Tunisia. Nor was any attempt made to provide Malta with an equally important force of surface ships. After "Pedestal", the Vice-Admiral Malta had, as has already been mentioned, suggested that the base could again maintain and operate a small surface striking force. But the Admiralty, while appreciating the desire for such a force, decided that it was not possible to spare ships for it at that moment. (1)

At no time, from the point of view of Malta, did a more realistic outlook occupy the planners of the "Torch" operation. The main emphasis by General Eisenhower was on Casablanca. The ^{and} tenor of his views and his cautious approach to the problem ~~was~~ ^{was}

/evident

(1) Force K eventually returned to Malta on 27 November, nearly three weeks after the initial landings in North Africa.

MALTA AND GOZO AIRFIELD FACILITIES JULY 1943



GLOSSARY

Bahar	Bay
Bir	Well
Blat, Blata	Rocks
Gebel	Rocky Hill
Ghajn	Spring
Ghar	Cave
Hal, Hall	Village
Il	The
Kebr, Kebrin	Large
Qorlin	High Lands
Misrah	Wide Open Space
Qala	Inlet
Ramla	Sand Bay
Ras	Headland
Indum, Rdm	Land between Cliff Top and Sea
Tal	Of The
Torri	Tower
Wied	Valley

ROADS

- Two Way Good surface
- Two Way Bad surface
- Other Roads
- Tracks and Footpaths

AIRFIELDS

- Runways
- Dispersals
- Sample Bases
- A.M.E. Stations
- A.H.B. QUAG N° 151A

Based on G.S.G.S. 3859 Malta and Gozo. Supplemented with information on Airfields obtained from J.I.B.5

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evident in the following extract from a memorandum submitted by him to the Combined Chiefs of Staff on 23 August:

The most favourable situation that we can reasonably hope to find in North Africa is continued neutrality on the part of the Spanish and submission on the part of the French. Under these conditions the expedition, assuming that initial and follow-up forces arrive as planned, should succeed.

In general, the A.C.A.S. (P) minuted

Eisenhower has been taking counsel of his fears, and in particular of the American obsession with the certainty of instantaneous and effective German action in Spain. The J.I.C. on the other hand, are unshakable on this point.

And again, later, after more objections had been raised by the Americans to the British plan to land as far as possible to the east, including Bone and Philippeville:

The truth is that Eisenhower doesn't like this job and makes no bones about it, saying so in the presence of his subordinate Commanders.

The relative numbers of troops suggested, on 3 September, by the President of the United States for the operation give an idea of the disproportionate emphasis placed by the Americans on the landings to the west:

Casablanca	58,000 U.S. troops	
Oran	45,000 " "	
Algiers	10,000 " "	followed by British troops

The final agreement on 5 September to "Toroh", as it eventually became a historical fact, was finished with a touch of humour, when the President signalled to the Prime Minister "Hurrah!" and the Former Naval Person replied, on the following day, in American idiom, "Okay. Full blast."

Lack of Suitable Aircraft

The stress to which Malta had been subjected for so long from incessant enemy air attack, was reflected in the ^{atm} position of its Air Force which, by the end of October, had become largely defensive in character. Out of a strength of 128 aircraft, at 31 October, there were no Beauforts or Wellingtons and only seven Beaufighters.

A.H.B. Malta
State of Aircraft
A.H.B./VB/9/4.

/ All

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All the rest were S.E. fighters (106 Spitfires) or reconnaissance aircraft. A week before "Torch", therefore, there was no force on Malta suitable for dealing with any attempt by the enemy to rush reinforcements and supplies to Tunisia by sea and air.

Aircraft
Reinforcement of Malta for "Torch" and "Stoneage"

The A.O.C. Malta had been reminded by H.Q. Middle East that "the convoy is of paramount importance" and the Admiralty signalled to the C.-in-C. Mediterranean, "The most important thing is to get 'Stoneage' into Malta and all ^{four} ~~air~~ forces should be used as necessary to achieve this." "Stoneage" file A.H.B./IIJ5/101/41

Hist.(B) Crusader War Cabinet Papers, Libya.

Thus the first call on aircraft reinforcements reaching Malta in early November was in support of "Stoneage" although, as will be seen, good use was made of them for "Torch". // The A.O.C. Malta had complained for some time to H.Q. Middle East of the way in which the Beaufighter force had been allowed to run down. However, in the autumn of 1942 this was a general complaint. When H.Q. Middle East, in turn, asked Air Ministry to help, they were told that this was impossible, as more Beaufighters could only be provided by breaking down Coastal Command squadrons which were already extended on operations. At that time, Coastal Command had only four Beaufighter squadrons and another two re-arming. Fighter Command had 16 Beaufighter squadrons but these were all equipped for night fighting and, in any case, were an essential part of the Metropolitan fighter ^{defence} ~~advance~~ force. Thus Beaufighters for Malta had to be obtained from within the resources of Middle East Command.

A.H.B. Narratives.

Two Beaufighter squadrons, No. 227 and a detachment of No. 272 were moved to Malta from No. 201 Group. ^{fourteen} ~~th~~ aircraft and 29 aircrew of No. 227 Squadron arrived at Luqa on 6 November, while No. 272 Squadron O.R. ^{8,} ~~13~~ records, on the same date:

Squadron O.R.Bs. "A momentous day. All available aircraft, 16 Beaufighters in tip-top condition, heavily laden with 17 ground crew, kit, and most important of all food and drink, left for Malta. The take-off was a magnificent example of discipline, all 16 aircraft being airborne in seven minutes, and as a spectacle it was deeply moving to those who were left behind." (1)

/Detachments

- (1) Within a month, the number of operational casualties to the Beaufighters amounted to 27 and of these 13 were a total loss.

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Detachments of Nos. 40 and 104 Wellington Squadrons, belonging to No. 238 Wing of No. 205 Group, were also transferred to the island.

No. 39 Beaufort Squadrons ^{recorded in their O.R.B.} ~~reported~~ at the beginning of the month

"Nothing to report; no aircraft; no aircrew; ground staff dispersed among other squadrons." On 5 November ground crew ^{from} of Middle East arrived. On the following day, three Beauforts with crews, which were not, however, trained for torpedo work, were taken over from the Transit Flight. Five more aircraft with crews arrived from Middle East on 7 November, together with one spare, making a total of nine. No. 39 Squadron resumed operations from Malta on 12 November with an attempt at mine-laying in Tunis harbour. This was made abortive owing to an electric storm.

No. 39 Sqn.
O.R.B.

By the end of November, the strength of aircraft on Malta had risen to 256, made up as follows:-

A.H.Q. Malta State of Aircraft, 30 November

<u>Type of Aircraft</u>	<u>Unit</u>	<u>Total Strength</u>	<u>Serviceable</u>
Beaufighter	46 Squadron	5	3
	89 "	9	9
	227 "	13	4
	272 "	13	7
	Luqa	9	-
		<u>49</u>	<u>23</u>
Hurricane Spitfire	229 Squadron	10	8
	69 "	7	6
	126 "	16	15
	185 "	21	18
	229 "	20	17
	249 "	22	18
	1435 N.F. Flight	16	15
	Command Reserve	<u>27</u>	<u>22</u>
		<u>139</u>	<u>119</u>
<u>Total Fighters</u>		188	142
Baltimore Wellington	69 Squadron	11	8
	40 "	14	10
	104 "	9	6
	69 "	11	7
	Luqa	2	-
		<u>3</u>	<u>-</u>
Beaufort	39 "	18	12
	Luqa	<u>3</u>	<u>-</u>
		<u>68</u>	<u>43</u>
<u>Total Bombers</u>		68	43
<u>Grand Total of Aircraft</u>		256	185

/Although

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Although the majority of these aircraft had been found from within the resources of Middle East Command, this rate of expansion ^{was} ~~is~~ all the more remarkable when it is remembered that, in addition to all other commitments, Air Ministry had to find 35 fully-equipped squadrons for "Torch".

The Concentration of C.A.F. Units ⁱⁿ ~~at~~ Tunisia, November 1942

From the British side alone, Operation "Torch" involved, in the Combined Advance and Assault Convoys, the movement of 240 merchant ships with a further 94 escorts. The first of the Advance Convoys, KX.1, left the Clyde as early as 2 October and arrived at Gibraltar on 14 October. The main movement of the Assault Convoys did not start until 22 October, when Convoy RMS(O)1 left the Clyde. It could not be hoped that preparation and movements on this mammoth scale should pass wholly unremarked by enemy intelligence. Cover plans were accordingly drawn up which initially misled the enemy into thinking that the preparations were a prelude to the invasion of Norway. The tremendous concentration of both shipping and aircraft at Gibraltar was attributed by the enemy - as was intended - to a large scale operation for the relief of Malta. Other destinations considered as possibilities by the enemy were Oran, an invasion of the south coast of France, Corsica, Sardinia and Sicily, a landing in Libya and, finally, an invasion of French ~~North~~-West Africa.

"War in the
Mediterranean",
Part I,
A.H.B. 6 Trans.
No. VII/104.

Kesselring tells how effectively German Intelligence was misled, "by a spate of propaganda which can only be described as a very bad war of nerves. For weeks on end, the most contradictory rumours, views and observations were reported to my Headquarters. Artistic variations of locations of landings, strength of the invading force and its equipment kept turning up."

ibid.

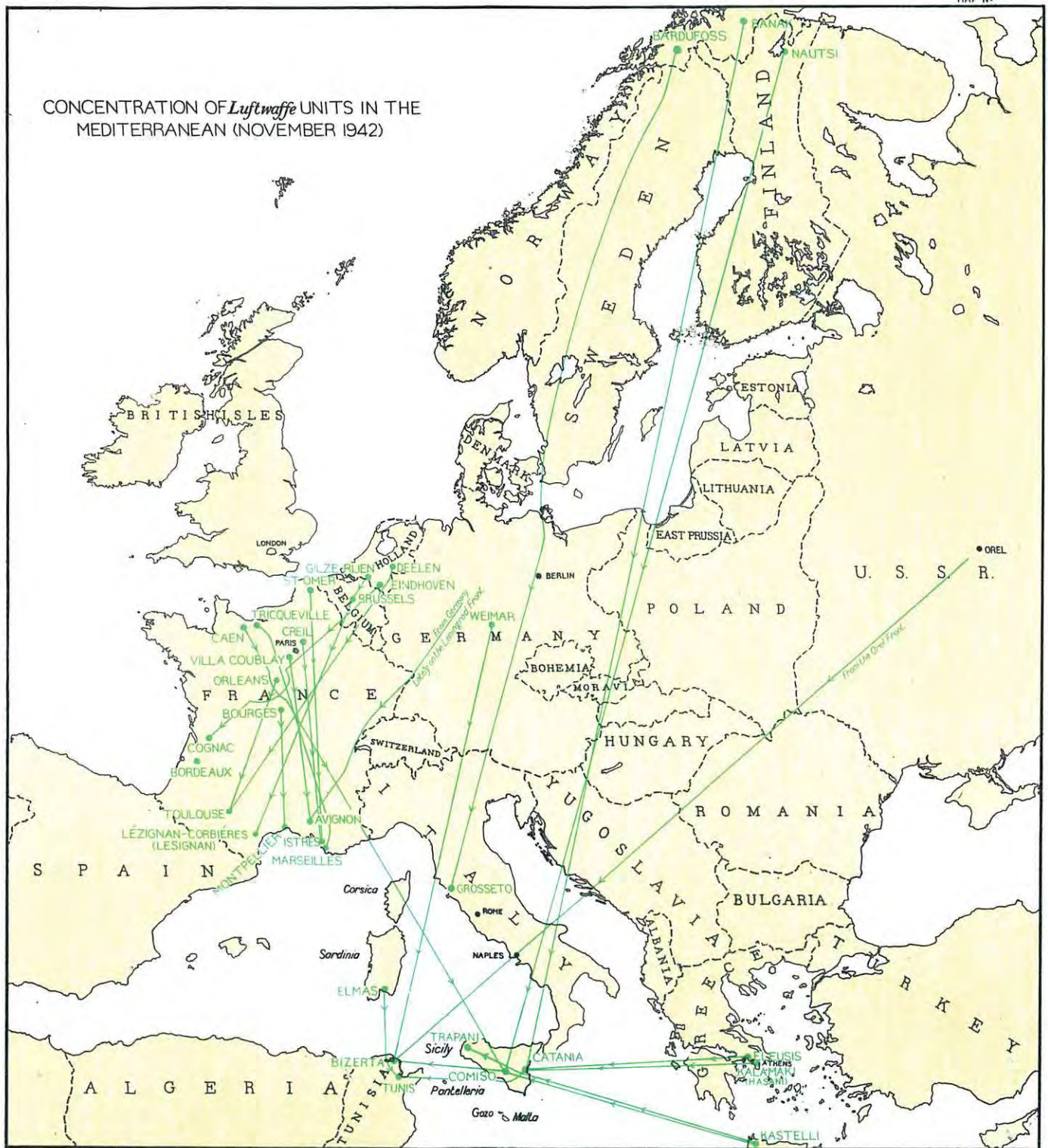
["The War in the
Mediterranean"
Part I. F/M
Kesselring.]

The C.-in-C. South took immediate precautions. The air bases in Sicily and Sardinia were overhauled and provisioned. The same was done for the torpedo units at Grosseto in southern Italy. The reconnaissance service was extended. Arrangements were made for the urgent reinforcement of the Luftwaffe in the Mediterranean with units trained in

/naval

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CONCENTRATION OF *Luftwaffe* UNITS IN THE MEDITERRANEAN (NOVEMBER 1942)



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naval warfare and in operating over the sea.

A.H.B. 6 and
"Rise and Fall
of the German
Air Force."
A.P.

At the beginning of November 1942, there were 800 operational German aircraft in the Mediterranean and 300 transports. These were divided up into Fliegerfuhrer Afrika 236, Fliegerkorps II 318 (mainly based on Sicily) and Fliegerkorps X (Greece and Crete) 210. Another 34 aircraft, largely reconnaissance and based on Trapani, were at the disposal of Oberbefehlshaber Sud. The Italians had a further 1,200 aircraft, 400 based on Sicily and 160 on Sardinia.

^{As soon as}
~~Since~~ the German authorities were aware that a vast convoy operation was projected by the Allies, four Gruppen of long-range bombers (mainly torpedo aircraft) were ordered to move from north Norway to Catania and Comiso, in Sicily, and to Grosseto in Italy. These aircraft were considered to have more scope in attacking convoys in the Mediterranean than on the convoy route to Russia. ⁽¹⁾ The transfer, a trip of around 3,000 miles was accomplished in from five to nine days, and one Staffel claimed to have done the transfer in 48 hours, while other aircraft managed the journey in three days. ~~[Parts of two Gruppen, one of long-range bombers and another of twin-engined fighters for escort duty, were transferred from Greece and Crete to Sicily.]~~

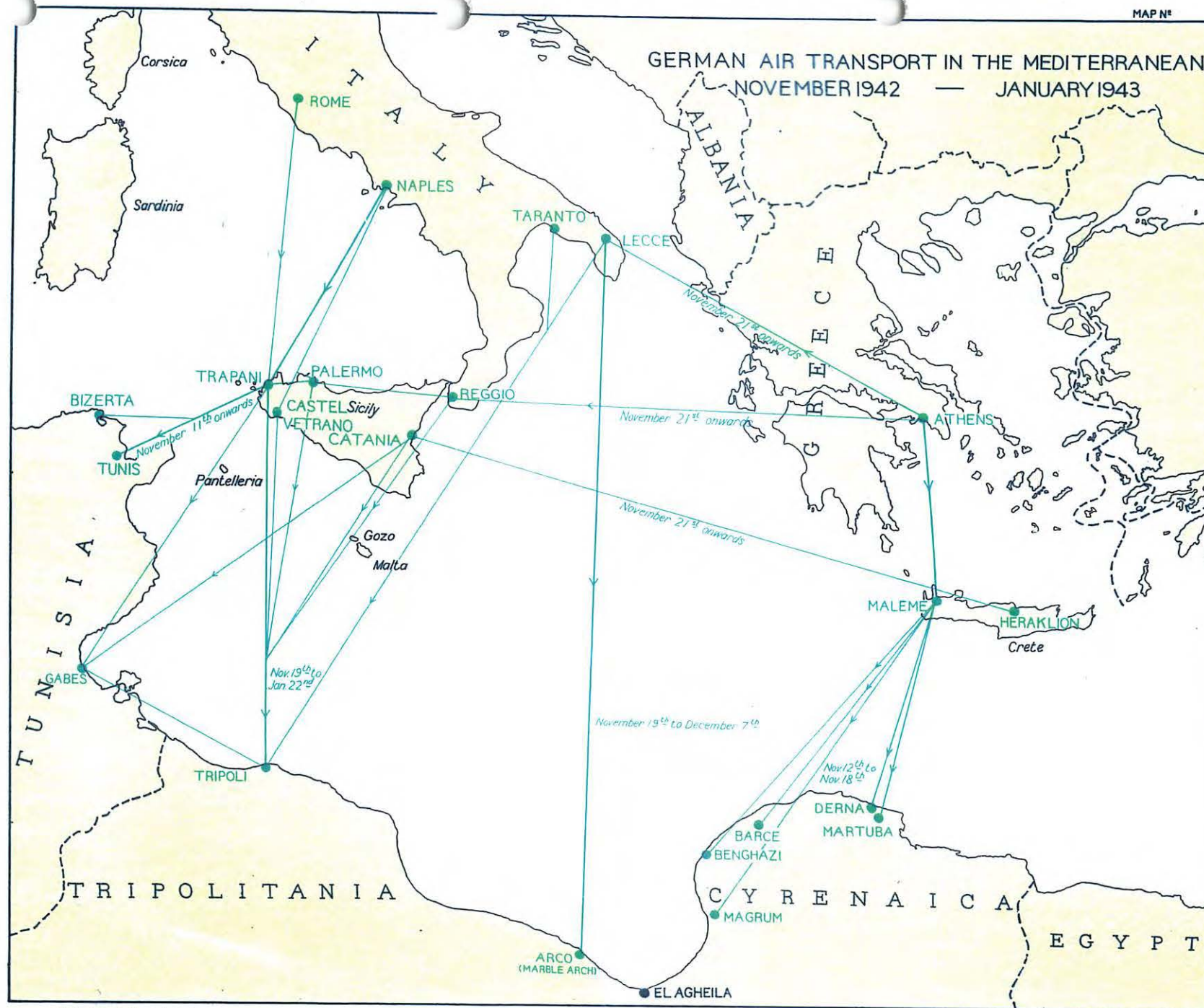
Weichhold Axis
Naval Policy ^{Operations}
Ops: ~~None~~ in
the Mediter-
ranean 1939-
1943.

In spite of these ^{preparations} ~~operations~~, when it came to the actual landings, the German Naval Staff confessed themselves "completely outwitted in ^{game.} the intelligence ~~campaign~~". Thus, what the First Sea Lord described as "the most valuable convoys ever to leave these shores", 14, in all, [?] reached Malta unscathed. It is one of the most remarkable occurrences in all maritime history ~~and seems, on the face of it, barely accountable by normal means~~, bearing in mind the fact that various components of the vast invasion armada were seen by enemy aircraft and U-boats, but never seriously challenged. Two U-boats which might have intercepted the convoy were sunk by Liberators. The only U-boat group in the /approaches

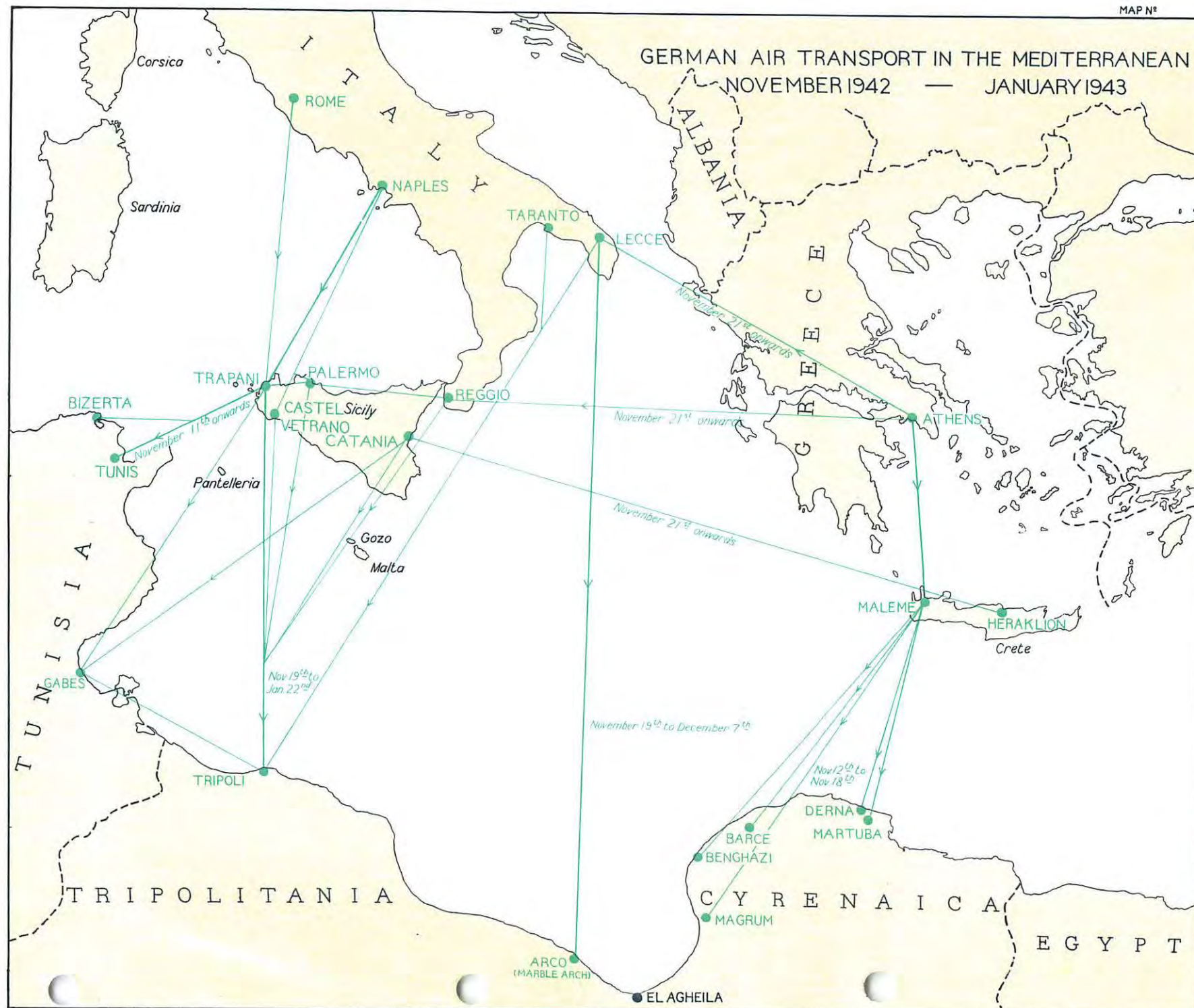
(1) The Admiralty had decided to send no more Arctic Convoys through to Russia except during the winter months.

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GERMAN AIR TRANSPORT IN THE MEDITERRANEAN NOVEMBER 1942 — JANUARY 1943



GERMAN AIR TRANSPORT IN THE MEDITERRANEAN NOVEMBER 1942 — JANUARY 1943



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approaches to Gibraltar was drawn off by a luckless Sierra Leone ⁰⁷
convoy which suffered severe losses, but in this way provided a diversion.

As Admiral Weichold himself remarked, "It therefore seems that all the Allied convoys sailed under a lucky star." It was left to the B.B.C. to announce to the enemy, early on the morning of 8 November, that the landings had actually been made in French North ^{- West} Africa.

^{German} ~~General~~ reaction to the news of the Allied landings were prompt. Elements of a Gruppe of long-range bombers were moved from Greece to Sicily, and parts of a twin-engined fighter Gruppe and a Staffel of long-distance aircraft from Crete to Sicily. On 9 November, a dive-bomber Gruppe and two Gruppen of S.E. fighters, which had been ferried to Sicily from Sardinia, arrived in Tunis ^{id.}. Another S.E. fighter Gruppe was transferred from the Russian front, and part of a Tac/R Staffel which had been refitting in Germany had reached Bizerta by 13 November. By 15 November, a Gruppe and another Staffel ^{of} single-engined fighters and a Staffel of long-range reconnaissance aircraft had been transferred from Sicily to Bizerta.

Staffel /

A considerable ^{re} deployment of Luftwaffe aircraft strength was also made from Holland, Belgium and North ⁱⁿ France, to airfields in the south of France, when that area was occupied. This was partly due to enemy fears that the Allies might attempt landings in the south of France. As soon as events had shown that this was unlikely, a number of these units returned to their normal bases.

A.H. 8-6

A.H. 8-6 "The Rise and Fall of the German Air Force."

The speed with which the Luftwaffe built up their forces in Tunisia is indicated by the following figures taken from the German Q.M.G. Strength Returns. On 10 November, out of the 433 operational aircraft of Fliegerkorps II, 68 were in Tunis ^{id.}. The strength of transport aircraft, all areas, totalled 673 (105 still under transfer). By 20 November ^{the} a newly constituted Fliegerfuhrer Tunis had 213 aircraft (139 serviceable) compared with 162 (70 serviceable) under Fliegerfuhrer Afrika. Within twelve days of the landings, therefore, there were more aircraft in Tunisia than opposing the Desert Air Force. They included two Gruppen

A.H.B. 6

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of F.W. 190 comprising 43 aircraft (39 serviceable). Apart from 33 Ju.87s, all bombers were retained at bases on Sicily and Sardinia. There, Fliegerfuhrer Tunis could ~~put~~ count on a further 270 aircraft. This was a high proportion of the 852 operational aircraft in the Mediterranean at that time. These were supplemented by a further 646 transport aircraft, 106 of them still under transfer.

Initially, the operational efficiency of the Tunisian-based flying units of the Luftwaffe was limited by inadequate supply and servicing facilities. There was a particular lack of M.T. and personnel for handling the supplies of bombs, ammunition and fuel brought over by sea. There was also a lack of good airfields. However, the bad weather which caused the Allied Air Forces considerable difficulties did not have such an adverse effect on the Germans, whose airfields at Bizerta (El Ahmed) and Tunis (El Aouina) remained in better condition. A convenient all-weather runway was provided at El Aouina by the raised roadway which runs from La Marsa to Tunis and was often used both by dive-bombers and fighters.

The Enemy's ^Extensive Use of Transport Aircraft

This quick concentration of flying units in the Mediterranean in November 1942, from bases as far distant as the Arctic, is a demonstration of strategic mobility and the flexibility of ~~the~~ air power which could hardly be matched even to-day. It derived from the German insistence on the fact that mobility is the very essence of concentrating striking forces at the right time and place, and their extensive use of transport aircraft. Even at the outbreak of war, every squadron had one or two transport aircraft on its strength. These were used for the routine movement of equipment and personnel. At a time of crisis, such as the "Torch" landings presented, hundreds of transport aircraft, in this case including not only the Ju.52 but the giant six-engined Me.323, together with the D.F.S. 230 glider, were made available for the transportation of bombs, fuel, ammunition, ground staffs, aircraft spares and airfield equipment to the new air bases. Moreover, the Ju.52 could be used

/as

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as a mobile wireless station which helped in the rapid establishment of advanced base communications.

On 12 November 1942, German air transport in the Mediterranean was divided into two separate forces, administered by a Lufttransportfuhrer. The Headquarters ^{of} the Lufttransportfuhrer I was at Athens and Lufttransportfuhrer II at Rome. The staffs corresponded to the two areas of operations. The Central H.Q. at Rome had Wing Staffs at Naples and Trapani and Control Officers at the airfields of Sidi Ahmed, ^{El Aouina} Bizerta, ^{El Aouina} Matina, ^{dit} (Tunis) and some of the fields in the Sicily, Calabria and Naples areas. Towards the end of November, additional transport aircraft amounting to 280 were transferred to the Mediterranean from training schools, the Russian front and from Germany. This raised the strength of air transport units in the Mediterranean to nearly 600 aircraft, of which 370 were serviceable.

A.H.B. 6

Axis Transportation to Tunisia Gmds. Docks Cabinet Office Arch-iv-AL 1025.

The bulk of the airborne supplies delivered to Tunisia was conveyed from Naples and Reggio di Calabria in large escorted formations or pulks of as many as 120 aircraft. Fighters based at Milo, Borizzo and Castelvetro met the transport formations near Trapani and escorted them across the Sicilian Narrows. Other fighter escorts were met off the African coast for the period of landing, unloading, reloading and return. After their arrival off the Gulf of Tunis, the Flights divided off into sections for Bizerta and Tunis. The service to Tunisia employed, at its peak, a daily average of 200 Ju.52 aircraft which carried a load of 1.8 metric tons and 15 of the huge six-engined Me.323s, with a load capacity of 10 tons. Part of the Ju.52 fleet made two trips a day from Sicily ^{to} Tunisia and back and achieved a daily average airlift of 585 metric tons.

Beaufighter Operations from Malta in Support of "Torch" (November 1942)

The varied assortment of aircraft, including transports, assembled on Tunis airport provided an attractive target for the Malta-based Beaufighters. On 10 November, nine Beaufighters of No. 272 Squadron carried out a surprise attack on a long line of enemy aircraft using the airfield. They destroyed one Me.323, one Sm. 82 and one F.W.58.

Sqdn. O.R.B.

/The

S E C R E T

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The Me.323 was the first destroyed by British aircraft in the Mediterranean and, up to that time, was so unfamiliar that it was described as "a six-engined Merseburg Glider". One of the Beaufighters had to force land on the beach near El Aouina airfield.

After the next low-level attack was made on El Aouina airport, on 16 November, by seven Beaufighters of the same squadron, the enemy were well prepared. On their arrival, a rocket was fired and "a terrific barrage was put up overhead." One aircraft went in so low that it was damaged when it went under H.T. electric cables near the airfield. In the course of this highly-successful raid, two Ju.52s and two Ju.87s were destroyed - the exact score claimed - for the loss of two Beaufighters. A Heinkel was also shot down.

Sqdn. O.R.Bs.
D.I.S. ~~and~~ *and*
Enemy ~~records.~~
Records

While No. 272 Squadron concentrated largely on shooting up airfields, No. 227 Beaufighter Squadron was mainly used in attacks against shipping when 250-lb and 500-lb bombs were used. On ^{the} occasions ^{when} enemy air transports were intercepted by the Beaufighters, they afforded easy targets. For instance, on 12 November, all six Sm.82s were shot down by seven aircraft of No. 272 Squadron. In the month of November, the Luftwaffe lost 40 transport aircraft from air action.

A.H.Q. Malta *O.R.B.*
S-2

Altogether, during November, Beaufighters of Nos. 227 and 272 Squadron flew 186 sorties. Their activities included, in addition to those mentioned above, low-level attacks on Gabes Zliten airfields, on the seaplane-base at Mersa Ksiba (north of Sfax) and (Bou Chemmeh ^K) near the Tunisian-Libyan border). They also acted as escorts to the Beauforts. In November, the Beaufighter casualties, however, were heavy. Thirteen were lost on operations and practically every aircraft sustained damage.

Operations by Wellingtons of Nos. 40 and 104 Squadrons

The Wellingtons of No. 238 Wing (Nos. 40 and 104 Squadrons) began their offensive against the enemy, in this new phase of operations, with an attack on the Sardinian airfield at Cagliari (Elmas) on the night 7/8 November. This was done with the intention of covering the "Torch" landings. After that, the Wellingtons operated every night when

SECRET

weather conditions permitted. Altogether 219 sorties were made against targets in Tunisia, Sardinia and Sicily and 334 tons of bombs were dropped. ^{As soon as} ~~Since~~ it was firmly established that the enemy would occupy and defend as much as possible of Tunisia, the main weight of the bombing attack was concentrated on the airfields at Tunis and Bizerta. The near-

A.H.B. Malta
O.R.B. and
D.I.S.

ness of these targets enabled the Wellingtons to carry out double sorties. The German bomber bases ^{at} Catania, Gerbini and Comiso were also attacked.

Introduction of Spitfire Bomber

The Spitfire bomber carrying 250-lb bombs was introduced during this phase of operations from Malta. They were employed mainly against the enemy airfields of Comiso and Gela. They were most active on the 25th and 30th November when they flew 13 and 19 sorties respectively.

A.F. 2. Malta
~~AW~~ O.R.B.
A.H.B./IIJS/113/5/15

A feature of these attacks was that although many German and Italian fighters were still based on the south-east part of Sicily, they showed a noticeable reluctance to engage the Spitfires. Altogether the Spitfire bombers dropped 13 tons of bombs during the month.

Shipping Strikes during November

^{November}

The ^{Navy} sinkings by air in the Mediterranean were the highest recorded since the outbreak of hostilities. They totalled 44,806 tons out of the months total of 56,371 tons, the balance being divided between Navy 5,781 tons and mine 5,78⁴ tons. Depredations by Malta-based aircraft in October had forced the enemy to route their supply ships much further to the west and this prevented Malta from making any successful shipping strikes in the early part of November. Thus the early sinkings in the month were entirely due to aircraft of No. 201 Group. Gradually, however, as the Panzer Army was driven westwards and

A.H.Q. Malta
Sqn. O.R.Bs
and List of
Enemy Shipping
Losses in the
Mediterranean.

the reinforcement of Tunisia developed, the Axis supply routes were brought increasingly within the range of the Malta-based aircraft.

The most successful of the month's sinkings occurred on the night 17/18 November, when two Fleet Air Arm Albacores carrying torpedoes attacked what was then reported as an 8,000-ton tanker 46 miles to the north east of ^{Homs} ~~Q.H.M.S.~~ She was the 10,534-ton tanker Giulio Giordano carrying 4,225 tons of fuel. Three flares were dropped by a Special

/Wellington

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Wellington, and the Albacores then attacked from port and starboard, with two torpedoes. Both torpedoes struck the tanker amidships. She heeled over, ^{blazing} ~~missing~~ furiously, the fire being visible 80 miles away. Later on it was reported that the blazing hulk had been sunk by H.M. Submarine Porpoise, but the sinking was nevertheless credited wholly to the Fleet Air Arm.

The next sinking was the 783-ton Italian ship the Lago Tana. She was first located and attacked 32 miles east of Kuriat by four Beaufighters of No. 227 Squadron, one of which scored a direct hit amidships with a bomb. The Lago Tana was left disabled, with a crew preparing to abandon her. Later she was torpedoed by a Beaufort of No. 39 Squadron.

On the night 22/23 November, the Favorita of 3,576 tons, was attacked by a torpedo-carrying Wellington which was on a special reconnaissance for shipping in the waters between western Sicily and southern Sardinia. The ship was located, in convoy, 80 miles east of Cape Carbonara and a hit was scored amidships with a torpedo fired from 50 feet, at a range of 800 yards. A red flash, followed by a column of black smoke was seen and the ship, which was disabled, was later sunk by gun fire from H.M. submarine Splendid.

Two nights later the 4,283-ton Italian S.S. Luigi was sunk in a position 75 miles to the north-west of Ustica, an island off Sicily. During the night 24/25 November, five torpedo Wellingtons of No. 69 Squadron were carrying out a search in the Tyrrhenian Sea. At 22.25 hours the Luigi was located in convoy with a destroyer by Wellington "S" (Flight Sergeant B. McFadden). The aircraft stayed in the vicinity for about 25 minutes and then attacked from the starboard beam, dropping its torpedo from 80 feet at 1,200 yards range. The torpedo ran well and an explosion with a reddish-yellow flash was seen 10 feet from the vessel's stern. The escorting destroyer immediately made off at a high
/speed

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speed in a northerly direction. Weather was ^{bad}~~very poor~~ at the time of the strike, with violent rainstorms and conditions of very poor visibility, and all the other Wellingtons returned to base with their torpedoes. Later reconnaissance from Malta revealed an oil slick extending for ten miles and men in boats. However, the evidence for the sinking of the Luigi was not sufficient at the time of the strike to justify a claim by A.H.Q. Malta.

a / On 25 November, seven Beaufighters (four of them carrying bombs) which were on an offensive ^{reconnaissance}~~mission~~ for enemy shipping to the east of Homs located two M/Vs 15 miles from Misurata. They were escorted by two destroyers. Four 500-lb bombs were dropped from a low altitude and one of the M/Vs was hit on the port side, but no further results were observed. The vessel was then raked with cannon and machine-gun fire which started a fire on the bridge. She was the 1,371-ton Algerine which, according to enemy records, eventually foundered. Again no claim for the sinking of the ship was made by A.H.Q. Malta.

For the rest of the month, adverse weather conditions at sea prevented any more successful shipping strikes. Although aircraft were out and there were a number of sightings made, on each occasion bad visibility baulked the pilots.

Analysis of Supplies reaching Tunisia in November 1942

In spite of the efforts of Malta-based aircraft, analysis of enemy figures of shipping losses shows that during November no cargoes were lost between Italy and Tunisia. Out of 34,339 tons despatched, that same ^{full}~~total~~ tonnage arrived safely at its destination. Complete figures for the German forces in Tunisia were:-

/Tunis

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	<u>Stores</u>	<u>Vehicles</u>	<u>Armour</u>	<u>Guns</u>	<u>Men</u>
Tunis	7,112 tons	413	34 tanks 1 Tiger	36	594
Bizerta	5,436 tons	655	62 tanks 3 Tigers	78	1,273
	12,548 tons	1,068	96 tanks 4 Tigers	114	1,867

These were carried by 25 M.Vs. and three naval ferry barges.

These statistics are interesting when compared with the supplies and reinforcements which arrived for Rommel's Panzer Army.

<u>Stores</u>	<u>Vehicles</u>	<u>Armour</u>	<u>Guns</u>	<u>Men</u>
19,825 tons	383	37 tanks	90	512

It is apparent from these figures to what extent the landings in French North Africa diverted guns, tanks and vehicles from the Panzer Army, in order to build up the new Command in Tunisia.

The movement of men and material to North Africa by air was also considerable. Tunisia received a further 18,497 men by air and 3,687 tons of material, compared with 3,224 men and 3,106 tons of material transported to Libya. As is to be expected, the main build-up of men in Tunisia was made by air whereas the great bulk of supplies came by sea.

Admiral Weichold expressed the view that:

The uninterrupted discharge of ships in the Tunisian ports in these vital days enabled the Axis to pour in so many reinforcements that the Allied advance was checked and the final objective denied.

Axis Naval Policy and Operations in the Mediterranean R.242.

The Axis success was largely a triumph of air and sea transportation. Most of the troops were conveyed by air and most of the material sent by sea In the same month some 90,000 tons gross of shipping sailed to Tunisia without a single ship being lost.

The Failure of Malta to Prevent Enemy Build-up in Tunisia, November 1942

It has been seen how, in spite of Malta's efforts, the enemy were able to build up their forces in Tunisia during the initial three weeks of the "Torch" landings. This

/ failure

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to prevent or even impede German reinforcement of Tunisia failure, was due to a complex situation in which the following were the main factors:

- (a) Malta's acute petrol shortage before the arrival of the "Stoneage" convoy.
- (b) Lack of suitable aircraft.
- (c) Faulty planning.
- (d) Concentration on the "Stoneage" convoy.
- (e) Lack of a surface force at Malta.

Once, however, the enemy had decided to act in the Central Mediterranean and concentrate considerable air forces there, and with their known ability for executing swift strategic moves, it is doubtful whether Malta could have done very much more. ~~The main factor was air power.~~ Even if the aircraft had been available, Malta was too limited in area to operate an air fleet ^s sufficiently strong to dominate the enemy anywhere but over its own skies. This is made apparent in the following important exchange of signals, mostly on the C.A.S. and Chief of Staff level, on the subject of enemy supplies to Tunisia.

Even as late as 17 November, the Admiralty had not fully grasped the implications that had arisen in the Mediterranean over the "Torch" landings. When discussing the utilisation of his force, the C.-in-C. Mediterranean was assured by the Admiralty that "the most important thing is to get 'Stoneage' into Malta." After that his naval forces should be used "in such a manner as best to assist the battle in Cyrenaica." The urgent need to station a force at Malta to stop the flow of reinforcements to Tunisia was completely ignored. ^{"It is for you"} ~~"This view"~~, the message continued, "after consultation with C.-in-C. Middle East, to decide whether this would be best achieved by stopping supplies going to Tripoli, which would mean sending ^a detachment ^{or} to Malta, ~~was~~ by assisting them in their advance." The Naval Commander of the Expeditionary Force, Admiral Ramsay, then interpolated a request that as soon as "Stoneage" was safely in, the most urgent attention should be

Action Against
Enemy Supply
Routes to
Tunisia and
Cyrenaica. A.H.R./
ID3/927.

/given

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given to stopping supplies to Bizerta. "The air this end," he said, "has not built up to a level which enables us to employ surface forces."

A.O.C.-in-C.
Malta. A.H.B./
ILJ1/183/
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It was on the 20th November that the Chiefs of Staff issued their directive. "Now that 'Stoneage' is safely in, main task of Malta Air Force is to stop reinforcements to Tunis and assist operations there." This was amplified on 22 November, by a further directive from the Chiefs of Staff to the Commanders-in-Chief Middle East. "It is evident that if the First and Eighth Armies are to achieve a speedy and decisive victory, the object of prime importance at the present time must be the stoppage of seaborne supplies to Tunisia and Tripolitania." Air power could only make its full contribution to that object "by exploiting Malta, with its limited airfield capacity to the utmost extent as an offensive base from which shipping at sea and ports of disembarkation can be attacked." They suggested that first priority on Malta should be given to torpedo-bombers, particularly those able to operate at night, and asked that the move of two Albacore squadrons and a Beaufort squadron should be considered by the Commanders-in-Chief.

Ibid.

The Prime Minister intervened, on 23 November, with a pertinent note in which he asked "what the Admiralty proposed to do to interrupt with surface ships based on Malta the Axis communications to Tunis and Bizerta?" Sir Dudley Pound's view was that these communications could best be cut from the western Mediterranean rather than ^{the} east, whereas the communications to Tripoli could best be cut by forces operating from Malta. He was still pre-occupied with the running of the next convoy to Malta, and showed but little appreciation of the new situation that had arisen in the Mediterranean with the occupation ^{by the Eighth Army} of the strategically-important airfields on the Cyrenaician "hump", and the Allied landings in French North Africa.

The Chiefs of Staff were assured by ^{the} ~~these~~ Commanders-in-Chief on 23 November that Malta was already operating to capacity with the object of stopping supplies to Tunisia and Tripoli. The types of aircraft were under constant review to ensure the composition of the forces ^{best} ~~based~~

/for

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for the immediate task. They pointed out that enemy shipping to Tunisia made the passage in daylight with strong S.E. fighter escort. Attacks on this shipping by the 22 Beauforts held at Malta, with twin-engined fighter escort, was likely to be expensive and ineffective. The need for more Albacores for night attacks was agreed and six would be sent to Malta from the Desert. They considered that the night Wellington torpedo strike force was adequate.

The Naval Commander Expeditionary Force, in this case Admiral Sir A.B. Cunningham, put the situation very succinctly in a signal to the Admiralty on 24 November:

The enemy is getting supplies into Bizerta and Tunis by sea. All information at our disposal as well as the actual situation make clear that this bridge-head is the vital factor determining whether or not the Axis are to be evicted completely from Africa and that the liquidation of the bridge-head through which the supply of Tripoli is intended has become the immediate concern of all forces in the Mediterranean.

Ibid

The Admiralty expressed the view, rather belatedly on 24 November, that arrangements for cutting supply communications to Tunisia and Tripoli would not be complete without a surface force at Malta. They also thought that submarines could be "most usefully employed in cutting communications to Tunisia."

Return to Malta of Force K November 27

As a result of this interchange of signals, Force K consisting of the cruisers Cleopatra (A/A ship), Dido and Euryalus and the destroyers Jarvis, Javelin, Kelvin and Nubian left Alexandria on 25 November and arrived at Malta on the 27th. They were followed by a motor-torpedo boat flotilla. At much the same time another Naval striking force (Force Q) was constituted at Bone for action against enemy convoys for Tunisia. It consisted of the cruisers Aurora, Argonaut and Sirius and the destroyers Quiberon and Quentin. These two Naval forces, (Force K and Force Q) operating from Malta and Bone respectively, had an immediate and dramatic effect on the enemy supply lines. Together with the submarines, they sank in December 23 ships totalling 49,237 tons, compared with 21 ships totalling 29,846 tons, sunk by aircraft, and three ships of 10,761 tons shared. In November,

"The War at Sea" Vol.III.

List of Enemy Shipping sunk in the Mediterranean

/ aircraft

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aircraft sank 24 ships totalling 44,806 tons compared with only six of 5,781 tons sunk by the Navy.

The most successful interception ~~and not strictly relevant to this~~ ~~action~~ was made on 2 December by Force Q which attacked an enemy about
convoy/40 miles off Cape Bon. Four enemy ships (two shared with the Fleet Air Arm)⁽¹⁾ and a destroyer were sunk. Unfortunately, a few hours later the Quentin was sunk by an aircraft torpedo and the Guiberon damaged by a near miss.

Shipping Strikes from Malta, December 1942

Malta's first success of the month fell to Beaufighter "A" of No. 227 Squadron (Pilot Officers W. J. McGregor and E. Gittens). They were out on a shipping strike, on 1 December, in search of an Italian M/V previously sighted by a Beaufighter of No. 272 Squadron. The ship, the Audace of 1,459 tons, ~~was~~ carrying 784 tons of petrol, 18 men and one vehicle, was located by a reconnaissance Baltimore of No. 69 Squadron, travelling on a southerly course, three miles to the south of Hammamet. The Beaufighter attacked with cannon and machine-gun fire from 400 feet. The deck cargo of petrol was set alight and the crew took to their boats, two of which were seen to sink. Soon the ship was blazing from stem to stern and on the return journey the fire could be seen from 50 miles away.

A.H.Q. Malta
No. 227 Sqdn.
O.R.Bs. and
Malta D.I.S.
A.H.B./IIJS/113/5/15

On 2 December, three Special Albacores, and eight strike Albacores of the R.N.A.S. and No. 821 Squadron, attacked a convoy which had been sighted at 14.00 hours by a transit Hurricane. As a result two ships, the Puccini of 2,422 tons (carrying 100 tons of miscellaneous material, six men and two guns) and the Veloce of 5,464 tons carrying 1,227 tons of fuel, 61 tons of food, 52 tons of miscellaneous material, 54 men, 60 vehicles, 16 guns and 10 tanks) were badly damaged and set on fire.⁽²⁾ These two ships were subsequently sunk by the surface force (Force Q) from Bone.

A.H.B.
List of Enemy
Shipping sunk,
A.H.B. Malta
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The Fleet Air Arm were again successful on 3 December when they sunk the Palmaiola (1,880 tons) carrying 495 tons of fuel, 180 tons of food,

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- (1) This action is related in the following Section.
(2) A third ship, the San Giorgio of 4,887 tons was also reported in enemy documents to have been set on fire and gutted at the same time. She was carrying 2,306 tons of fuel. This ship - probably the burnt-out hulk - was finally sunk by a submarine while in tow on 21 March 1943.

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119 tons of miscellaneous material, 20 vehicles and 10 guns, and the Minerva (1,905 tons) carrying 2,008 tons of fuel and seven tons of miscellaneous material. The ships were attacked by four Albacores of No. 821 Fleet Air Arm Squadron in a position 44 miles north of Zuara. When a torpedo hit the first ship she was literally blown to bits, smoke and wreckage rising to a great height. The second M/V was hit on the port side by a torpedo which was followed by a bright flash and explosion and the stern of the vessel was immediately enveloped in flames, the fire being visible when the returning aircraft were about 60 miles away.⁽¹⁾

The next sinking by Malta-based aircraft was on 13 December when the 4,500-tons S.S. Foscolo was sunk by Fleet Air Arm Albacores. She was en route from Naples to Sousse carrying 1,413 tons of fuel and 11 guns, when she was located off Trapani by a Baltimore of No. 69 Squadron. A strike of seven Albacores of the R.N.A.S. and No. 821 Squadron was despatched. At 21.50 hours, a convoy consisting of the Foscolo escorted by three destroyers and three M.T.Bs was discovered off Marettimo. At 22.10 hours, a torpedo of one of the R.N.A.S. Squadron aircraft scored a direct hit on the afterpart of the ship. The stern blew up and within two minutes the whole vessel was enveloped in flames, visible from 80 miles away. Another ship, the German S.S. Macedonia of 2,875 tons, was carrying 1,090 tons of fuel, 35 tons of miscellaneous material, 64 vehicles and four guns when she was sunk off Sousse on the same day. She was listed as shared between the Fleet Air Arm and the submarine Umbra.

Ibid

Squadron and
A.H.Q. Malta
O.R.B.s

On the night 13/14 December, in the course of a very destructive raid on Tunis harbour and La Goulette by Wellingtons of Nos. 104 and 40 Squadrons, the German (ex-French tanker) Ste. Bernadette of 1,596 tons was sunk. Another ship, the German ex-French 4,312-ton St. Gerardo

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- (1) The enemy shipping casualty for which there appears to be no British trace is the S.S. Gualdi. According to enemy records she sailed from Taranto for Tunis on 27 Nov. She was carrying 1,549 tons of fuel, 83 tons of food, 102 tons of miscellaneous material, 25 men, 18 vehicles and four tanks. The Gualdi blew up in Palermo harbour on 1 Dec., but there appears to have been no Allied aircraft operating against the port at the time.
- (2) The 2,005-ton tanker Caucaso was also sunk at La Goulette by bombers. Originally this sinking was attributed to the Wellingtons but later the credit for the sinking was given to the U.S.A.A.F.

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was sunk on the following night (14/15 December) in the course of another series of raids by Wellingtons by Nos. 40 and 104 Squadrons.

The Italian ^{S.S. (2633 tons)} ~~S.S.~~ Etruria, which sailed from ^P/_h Palermo on 21 December, was sunk by Fleet Air Arm Albacores while en route to Bizerta. She was carrying 584 tons of fuel, 170 tons of food, 24 tons of miscellaneous material, 69 men and 136 vehicles. She was first located by a Special Wellington on the Marettimo-Palermo patrol in the vicinity of Marettimo Island (off the most westerly tip of Sicily). She was in company with three escort vessels and a number of Siebel ferries and E-boats. ^A The strike was then carried out by three torpedo-carrying Albacores of the R.N.A.S. After two ^{abortive} ~~torpedo~~ attacks, the third aircraft scored a hit on the M/V causing a large mushroom of smoke which rapidly enveloped the ship. Very intense and accurate flak was encountered from the escort vessels and one of the Albacores was badly shot up. // The last ship ^{lost} ~~was~~ sunk in December, by a Malta-based aircraft, was the 2,366-ton Iseo which sailed from Brindisi on 11 December. She was en route to Sousse with 369 tons of ammunition, 105 tons of food, 110 tons of miscellaneous material, eight vehicles and five guns. She was located on the night of 28/29 December by one Special and one torpedo-carrying Albacore of No. 821 Squadron, and two torpedo-carrying Albacores of No. 828 Squadron, 28 miles off Pantelleria. The convoy was attacked down moon at 500 yards, a direct hit being scored on the M/V with an 18-inch torpedo. The Iseo immediately disintegrated in a mass of flames 1,000 feet high, with smoke clouds rising to 5,000 feet and innumerable coloured explosions from her cargo of ammunition.

The U.S.A.A.F. also contributed their share by sinking seven ships totalling 7,256 tons. ^{These} ~~They~~ were mainly the victim of ^{the} ~~concentrated~~ bombing of ports by B.25s (Mitchells).

According to enemy sources, in December 1942 they lost 24,185 tons of supplies out of 84,804 tons despatched by sea to Tunisia. Out of 52,679 tons destined for the German forces, 17,305 tons were lost, 5,402 tons of it fuel. During the same period 17,616 officers and Nave perduti /men

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men and 2,812 tons of material were transported by air to Tunisia.

The Formation of No. 248 (G.R.) Wing, 18 December 1942

No. 248 Wing was re-formed in Malta on 18 December as a Naval Co-operation Wing for liaison with the Navy and to exercise operational control of Naval Co-operation. The squadrons allotted to the Wing were:

	No. 69 Squadron:	Baltimore (G.R.) Flight
	" " "	Special Wellington T.B./A.S.V. Flight
	39 Squadron Detachment:	Beauforts
No. 248 Wing	818 Squadron F.A.A. Squadron:	Albacores
Nos. 69 & 683	821 " "	Albacores
Sqdn. O.R.Bs	Flying Boat Detachment:	one Sunderland

Later in January, two more Special Wellington T.B./A.S.V. squadrons (Nos. 221 and 458) arrived in Malta. There were allotted to No. 248 Wing and No. 458 Squadron absorbed the Wellington Flight of No. 69 G.R. Squadron, which was still further reduced, on 8 February, when the P.R.U. Flight was disbanded and No. 683 Squadron was formed under the command of Wing Commander Adrian Warburton, D.S.O., D.F.C. The Beaufort Detachment of No. 39 Squadron was brought up to squadron strength under the command of Wing Commander M.L. Gains.

Activity of No. 69 Squadron

Throughout December, No. 69 Squadron was active on a multiplicity of duties. The Squadron's Wellingtons carried out a number of shipping strikes. The Baltimores and S.I. Wellingtons were busy, both on protective patrols for convoys and on searches for enemy shipping.

Reconnaissance established at the beginning of December that all the major units of the Italian fleet were in the southern Italian ports, from which they could not only help protect their own convoys, but they also constituted a menace to Allied sea communications. These were the three Littorio battleships and two 6-inch cruisers at Naples (a third, the Attendolo, was almost ready for service, after recent repairs), and the Trieste and Gorizia (8-inch cruisers), the Abruzzi, Garibaldi and another (6-inch cruisers) at Messina. Three battleships of the Cavour class were at Taranto and the Cavour itself was under repair at Trieste.

A.H.Q. Malta
and No. 69
Sqdn. O.R.Bs

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On 3 December, the Attendolo was photographed on trials in the Bay of Naples. On the following day she was sunk at her moorings during a high-level attack by American Liberators from the Middle East. A battleship had lost her funnel while another had had a near miss. Naples was immediately vacated for safer anchorages at Leghorn and La Spezia. An outstanding reconnaissance was made by a Mosquito of No. 1 P.R.U. which landed at Malta on 23 December having photographed all the principal Adriatic ports. The most valuable aspect of this sortie was the light it threw on Italy's principal ship-building yards at Trieste, Fiume and Ancona.

Attacks on Enemy Harbours, December

Reconnaissance aircraft from Malta also made numerous sorties over Tunisian ports in order to locate targets for bombing attacks. In spite of adverse weather, ⁽¹⁾ the Wellingtons of No. 238 Wing (Nos. 40 and 104 Squadrons) operated on all but seven nights and made 364 sorties and dropped 514 tons of bombs. The main target was Tunis and La Goulette, Bizerta being left to Algerian-based squadrons. Scusse was a secondary target and on the last two nights of the month heavy and successful raids were made on Sfax. When the weather was unsuitable for raids on Tunisian targets, the bombers were switched to Palermo, a port of assembly for Africa-based convoys. Reconnaissance showed that the enemy-occupied ports in Tunisia had sustained severe damage from these intensive raids. Large fires were started among the petrol stocks at La Goulette, and warehouses, port and railway installations at all the harbours were hit repeatedly. Particularly severe damage was done to railway installations and rolling stock at Sfax. The enemy strengthened the A.A. defence at Tunis and La Goulette, as a result of these raids, and aircraft had to contend with flak from 6 - 8 batteries. Seven Wellingtons were lost in the course of these operations.

A.H.Q. Malta
O.R.B. and
D.I.S.

A.H.B./ISJ/12/5/15

Fighter Activity from Malta, December

No serious daylight bombing raids were attempted by the enemy on Malta in December, and there was only one heavy night attack. This

/freed

(1) December 1942 was abnormally wet. Rainfall was 70 per cent above average with frequent thunderstorms in the latter half of the month.

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freed Malta's fighter forces for other duties. Apart from the cover which the Spitfires and Beaufighters gave to the incoming and outgoing convoys, the fighter effort was concentrated largely against the enemy transport aircraft and their fighter escort employed on ferrying duties between Sicily and North Africa.

The main air transport route was Naples, Trapani and El Aouina (Tunis) or Sidi Ahmed (Bizerta). On the way back, the transport aircraft usually refuelled at Palermo in order to avoid depleting the stocks of aviation petrol in Africa. The Germans also continued to send airborne supplies to Rommel's forces in Tripolitania. These travelled via Reggio or Catania and passed to the east of Malta.

The Malta-based Spitfires and Beaufighters made repeated sweeps to the west and east of Malta to intercept this air reinforcement traffic, while intruder aircraft patrolled the airfields in the west of Sicily to intercept the transport aircraft as they were landing and taking off. Altogether, 27 Ju.52s were destroyed during December, nearly all of them within the orbit of Malta-based fighters. Malta's operational losses for the month amounted to 17 aircraft (four Spitfires, six Beaufighters, five Wellingtons, 1 Albacore, 1 P.R. Spitfire). Altogether 13 crews were lost.

Axis Strength in the Mediterranean, December.

At that time, (10 December 1942) the Germans had a strength of 820 operational aircraft in the Mediterranean (440 serviceable) with a fleet of over 500 transport aircraft (300 serviceable).

Fliegerfuhrer Tunis had 185 aircraft (127 serviceable); All, with the exception of 18 ^{five -} bombers were S.E. fighters and 46 of these were F.W.190s. ~~Two~~ Fliegerkorps II had 324 aircraft (169 serviceable) based on Sicily, Sardinia and southern Italy. A further 174 aircraft (75 serviceable) were under the control of the ^X Fliegerkorps, based on Crete and Greece.

The Italians had 1,230 aircraft (660 serviceable) operational in the Mediterranean theatre. Of these 415 were based on Sicily (200 serviceable) 159 on Sardinia (118 serviceable) and 245 in the Aegean and Greece (126 serviceable).

/Malta's

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Malta's Strength and Serviceability (11 December 1942)

The Weekly State of Aircraft for A.H.Q. Malta on 11 December was as follows:-

		<u>Cat. A</u>	<u>Cat. B</u>
<u>Fighter:</u>	Spitfire	104 *	25
	Hurricane	6	6
	Beaufighter	22	13
<u>Medium Bomber:</u>	Wellington	17	13
<u>Torpedo Bomber:</u>	Beaufort	5	-
	Wellington VIII	7	2
<u>G.R./L.P.</u>	Baltimore	7	3
		<hr/> 168	<hr/> 62

* Excludes P.R. Spitfires Cat. A: 6
Cat. B: 2

Return of Wellingtons of No. 238 Wing (Nos. 40 and 104 Squadrons) to Egypt, January 1943

In January, shortly before the fall of Tripoli, on the 23rd of the month, the Wellingtons of No. 238 Wing (Nos. 40 and 104 Squadrons) returned to Egypt. In spite of bad weather, prior to their leaving the island on 21 January, they made 179 sorties and dropped a total of 270 tons of bombs. They started the month with attacks on Palermo, which was the main Sicilian port of assembly for Tunis-bound Axis shipping, but as in December their principal targets were the North African ports. During the first week, both Tunis and Sousse were heavily attacked. However, with the renewed advance by the Eighth Army, the Wellington bombers of No. 238 Wing concentrated their attacks on shipping in Tripoli harbour, on its port installations and, in order to impede Rommel's retirement and dislocate his supply lines, on the road junctions to the east of the town. The port of Sousse was also attacked. As bombers from the Middle East and North Africa were repeatedly attacking these same targets almost daily, it was difficult to assess the results, but photographic reconnaissance showed that it was considerable.

A.H.Q. Malta
& Wing O.R.Bs.

separately

/Enemy

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Enemy Supply Situation in Tunisia, January - May 12, 1943

By January 1943, it was obvious that any chance Malta might have had, in the early stages of the 'Torch' landings, of preventing a rapid build-up of enemy forces in Tunisia, had passed. ~~January in fact proved to be the most successful month the Axis powers had had for passing material across~~

La Marina
Italiana

~~by sea to North African ports.~~ Out of 88,933 tons despatched by sea, 70,193 tons arrived, the figures for the German forces in Tunisia being 53,680 tons despatched and 41,557 arrived. A further 4,047 tons of stores and 14,257 personnel were carried, at the same time, by air to Tunisia.

A.H.B. 6
Returns by
Q.M.G.

Every kind of craft was ^{passed} into service for the urgent task of transporting military stores and equipment across to Tunisia. In this traffic, during January, 35 M/Vs were used together with 42 destroyers, 20 Siebel Ferries, five I-boats, 32 ferries and five auxiliary sailing vessels.

A.H.B. List
of Enemy
Shipping
sunk in the
Mediterranean.

The total of enemy shipping sunk by Allied air action during January amounted to 41,605 tons⁽¹⁾ with a further 6,107 tons shared with the Royal Navy out of a combined tonnage of 101,498 tons sunk from all causes.

The first of the month's successes was on the night of 15/16 January when Tripoli was bombed by 14 Wellingtons of Nos. 40 and 104 Squadrons.

In the course of this raid, the 8,329-ton Italian M/V, the Agostino Bertani was set on fire.⁽²⁾ On 19 January the 6,107-ton Edda was hit by an Albacore of No. 821 Squadron and was seen to heel over. She was

A.H.Q. Malta later sunk by the submarine Unbroken. This success was scored as a result of a series of attacks by Malta-based aircraft. She was carrying 567 tons of ammunition, 285 tons of food, 90 tons of general cargo, 102 vehicles,

A.H. 135/113/5/15

10 tanks and 15 guns.

Another important enemy ship sunk by Malta-based aircraft in January was the 5,594-ton Ruhr carrying 1,332 tons of fuel, 50 tons of food, 166 tons of miscellaneous material, seven armoured cars and 179 vehicles. The Ruhr was first sighted on the night 21/22 January and shadowed by a Special Wellington of No. 69 Squadron which was searching for enemy shipping in the vicinity of Zembra Island. A strike of one Beaufort

- (1) Of this, the considerable total of 34,617 tons was sunk by the U.S.A.A.F.
- (2) There is some confusion over this ship as she was also claimed by the U.S.A.A.F.

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A.H.B./IHK/
67/20 &
D.I.Ss.
A.H.B.-/IJJ/113/5/18

Beaufort of No. 39 Squadron, one Special and three torpedo-carrying Albacores of No. 821 Squadron was despatched from Malta. They located the Ruhr escorted by two destroyers 36 miles from Cape Bon.

The Beaufort dropped one torpedo which ran true, but no hit was seen. This aircraft was badly damaged by flak. After one of the Albacores had unsuccessfully attacked the Ruhr with bombs, two others dropped their torpedoes. The results of this attack could not be seen as the aircraft were taking violent evasive action in order to avoid the heavy flak. One of the Albacores was lost. No claims were made but it is now known from enemy documents that as a result of one or other of these attacks the Ruhr sank with the complete loss of her valuable cargo.

On the night of 23/24 January, a south-bound convoy was attacked by six Special Wellingtons of No. 221 Squadron and four Beauforts of No. 39 Squadron, in a position north-north-west of Ustica. The Verona of 4,459 tons carrying 623 tons of ammunition, 305 tons of food, 232 tons of /general

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general cargo, 27 vehicles and five guns, was hit by a torpedo from a Wellington. She immediately broke in two and sank. A second ship, the Pistoia of 2,448 tons, carrying 453 tons of fuel, 110 tons of food, 28 vehicles and five guns, was hit amidships, first of all by a torpedo from a Wellington and later by another torpedo from a Beaufort, and sank.

An unusual success occurred on 14 January when a Beaufort (aircraft 'Q') of No. 39 Squadron, while on anti-submarine patrol ahead of an outgoing friendly convoy, in a position 136 miles south-east of Malta, sighted the conning-tower of the 810-ton Italian submarine Narvalo which was six miles ahead of the convoy and heading towards it. The aircraft attacked, diving from 1,500 to 250 feet and released four 250-lb depth charges. These blew the bows of the submarine clean out of the sea and caused it to stop and settle, with a list to starboard. The crew assembled on the conning-tower and decks with a white flag. Thereupon the aircraft contacted the destroyers Hursley and Packenham which came up and immediately sank the submarine with shell-fire. It was afterwards discovered that there were 12 Allied prisoners aboard the submarine, all officers, six of whom were rescued, together with some of the Italian crew. According to the Naval account - but not reported in the Squadron O.R.B. - at the same time as the submarine displayed the white flag, she opened fire on the aircraft.

A.H.B. 6 &
Naval perduto.

In the following month of February, out of 77,781 tons of stores despatched to Tunisian ports, 17,743 tons were lost en route.⁽¹⁾ The German forces received 36,303 tons out of 47,634 tons despatched. A further 4,953 tons of material and 12,803 personnel were sent by air. The total of enemy shipping sunk in February in the Mediterranean amounted to 92,459 tons, the total of 44,433 tons being sunk by aircraft (31,394 tons by the R.A.F. and 13,039 by the U.S.A.A.F. There were no Fleet Air Arm sinkings.).

/During

(1) To transport these stores the enemy employed 25 M/Vs., 22 destroyers, 28 Siebel Ferries, 29 I-boats, three K.Ts. and six auxiliary sailing vessels. (K.T. was a small auxiliary transport vessel of just under 800 tons)

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During February the squadrons operating from Malta under No. 248 Wing achieved a marked success; they sank 31,327 tons of shipping. The first sinking was on the morning of 1 February, when the Pozzuoli (5,345 tons) was attacked by a Wellington of No. 221 Squadron 15 miles south-west of Marittimo. The Pozzuoli, escorted by two destroyers and three M.T.Bs. had been shadowed for several hours, while a strike-force was prepared. By the time it had arrived on the scene, the enemy destroyers had managed to envelop the whole of the convoy in a thick smoke screen. However, at approximately 01.45 hours, a Wellington of No. 221 Squadron (F/O. R. Kenyon) entered the smoke screen and aimed a torpedo at the convoy. Two of the shadowing Wellingtons saw an orange flash in the midst of the smoke screen and a large mushroom of smoke but no definite results were claimed. It is now known from enemy records that the Pozzuoli was sunk. Nothing is known of her cargo but it is obvious that she was a valuable ship from the unusual strength of her escort.

No. 221 Sqn.
O.R.B.

The next sinking occurred on the night 15/16 February, when the ← 3,149-ton Capo Orso was sunk by another Wellington of No. 221 Squadron. She was carrying 1,021 tons of fuel, 312 tons of food and 19 vehicles. Another enemy source states she was also carrying 500 Italian soldiers. The Capo Orso was first sighted by a P.R.U. Spitfire at 11.30 hours on 15 February in convoy with two other M/Vs., escorted by five destroyers and five aircraft. Other reports were later received from Special Wellingtons of No. 221 Squadron and a Mosquito of No. 23 Squadron. A strike force of seven torpedo Wellingtons, and two Wellingtons carrying bombs, of No. 221 Squadron, seven torpedo Beauforts of No. 39 Squadron and one Special and three strike Albacores of No. 821 Squadron (F.A.A.) were thereupon despatched to locate and attack the enemy shipping. A Wellington of No. 221 Squadron (Sergeant Frazer) dropped a torpedo at 600 yards from 60 feet, scoring a hit amidships. The Capo Orso was immediately enveloped in flames from stem to stern. The Wellington was later hit in the rear turret and fuselage by flak and the rear gunner (Sergeant Wilcox) was badly wounded.

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Losses.

The next sinking was the Col Di Lana of 5,891 tons which was sunk on the night 17/18 February on her return voyage to Italy. Two Special Wellingtons and two torpedo-carrying Wellingtons of No. 221 Squadron were engaged on an armed search for enemy shipping, between Cape Marettimo and Cape Gallo, when the Wellingtons sighted the Col Di Lana escorted by destroyers, 25 miles to the north-west of Trapani. At 00.50 hours a Wellington piloted by Wing Commander Hutton ^{light} attacked the M/V which was clearly silhouetted against the ~~dark~~ ^{light} water. He released an 8-foot contact torpedo at 60 feet from 600 yards. The torpedo ran true and hit the M/V in the stern. A vivid red flash was seen and the Col Di Lana began to sink by the stern, leaving a large patch of oil. It would appear that the enemy ships were ^{caught} ~~not~~ completely off their guard, as there was no opposition until the attack was actually being made.

The most important shipping strike of the whole month was undoubtedly the sinking of the 9,955-ton German (ex-Norwegian) tanker Thorsheimer, on the night of 21 February. She was carrying 5,410 tons of fuel. She was first sighted by a reconnaissance Baltimore at *Attempts had been made to disguise her with the addition of a dummy funnel.* 08.12 hours on 20 February south of Naples. That night a mixed strike of Wellingtons, Beauforts and Albacores was despatched. The tanker was located some 40 miles to the north of Trapani. Weather conditions were very bad, the sea was rough and visibility was restricted. However, several torpedoes were fired ^{and} possibly because of damage the tanker delayed its attempt to cross until the following night. The Thorsheimer was found almost stationary and without escort at 20.10 hours, about half-way between Trapani and Cape Bon, by a strike of six Beauforts of No. 39 Squadron. Three of the Beauforts attacked simultaneously, each dropping a torpedo from 60/80 feet at 600/800 yards. All torpedoes ran straight and true and hit amidships. A tremendous explosion followed and flames enveloped the whole ship. As the tanker was still afloat at 21.12 hours, another Beaufort dropped a torpedo which hit the blazing hulk amidships and finally sank her. A reconnaissance

/aircraft

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aircraft from Malta later reported that only a few pieces of the tanker's framework were visible in a huge patch of burning oil.

Three days later, the 6,987-ton Italian M/V Alcamo (ex- St. Francois) was located in convoy with one other M/V and two destroyers by a Special Wellington of No. 458 Squadron which was on a shipping search to the north of Marettimo. The convoy was shadowed and flares were dropped to illuminate for three Beauforts of No. 39 Squadron which attacked through intense flak at 00.55 hours. The Alcamo was hit by a torpedo on the port side and immobilized. Another torpedo hit and damaged one of the escorting destroyers. A Beaufort was shot down.

Ibid.

A strike of Wellingtons of No. 458 and 221 Squadrons was despatched from Malta and at 03.10 hours a hit was scored on the stationery M/V with a bomb which started a fire. A torpedo-Wellington of No. 458 Squadron failed to return. Shortly afterwards a Beaufort of No. 39 Squadron which had been sent, together with two other Beauforts, to locate the convoy, discovered the Alcamo low in the water. Aircraft 'T' (Flying Officer Muller-Rowland), after two dummy runs, scored a hit amidships. A flash of orange flame was observed and the ship sank by the stern within five minutes. Another Beaufort failed to return from the second strike. Thus two Beauforts of No. 39 Squadron and a Special torpedo-Wellington of No. 458 Squadron were lost. Another torpedo-Wellington (No. 221 Squadron) crashed on landing at Luqa and was written off.

As a result of these and other successful attacks on enemy shipping, an increasing use was made by the enemy of Siegel Ferries and 'F'-boats. ^bMalaga was the principal base for the Siegel Ferries, where no less than 22 were located on 17 February, together with 12 motor-boats.

Sqdn. O.R.Bs.
and D.I.S.

R.H.B./DJ-5/113/5/15

By March, enemy shipping losses on the Tunisian route had risen alarmingly and were approximately double the February figure. Out of 84,193 tons of cargo despatched to Tunisia ports 34,832 tons were lost. The enemy employed on this transport of supplies and equipment to the /ports

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Losses.

ports of Tunis, Bizerta and Sousse 13 M/Vs., 24 destroyers, 47 ⁶Sie~~tel~~
Ferries and 88 other ferries and small auxiliary naval craft. There
were also 11,756 personnel and 7,650 tons of material sent by air.
The German forces in Tunisia suffered particularly severely and lost
approximately 20,000 tons of stores and equipment out of 49,000 tons
despatched. The total tonnage of shipping sunk during March amounted
to 107,832 tons, of which 46 ships of 68,776 tons were sunk by aircraft.
The really significant fact about the March total is the way in which
the air attacks by the U.S.A.A.F. - mainly daylight bombing - dominated
the picture. They sank 39 ships totalling 47,405 G.R.T. out of
68,776 tons sunk by air, the balance being by the Royal Air Force and
Fleet Air Arm from Malta.

A.H.Q. Malta
O.R.B.

During March, bad weather hampered both reconnaissance and shipping
strikes from Malta. While Naples still remained the principal supply
port for Tunisia, the majority of the large M/Vs destined for Tunisia
were routed in the direction of Sardinia and thence south to avoid
coming within range of Malta-based aircraft. It was also noted that the
enemy followed a principle of dispersal, which had already been begun
in February. The ships loaded ^{at} ~~in~~ Naples were immediately moved to the
small adjoining ports of Torre Annunciata, Torre del Greco and Pozzuoli
before moving south in convoy.

The first important strike of the month of March 1943 was against
the 10,495-ton Italian tanker Sterope on the night 12/13 March. She
was first sighted by two Special Wellingtons of No. 221 Squadron to the
south of Spartivento, having apparently come from the Adriatic. She
was in convoy with three other M/Vs and escorted by four destroyers and
a number of M.T.Bs. A strike force of six Beauforts of No. 39 Squadron
828 F.A.A. ^{WdJ} and three torpedo-carrying Albacores of No. ~~39~~ Squadron ~~were~~ despatched,
while the Special Wellington continued to shadow the convoy. When the
^{strike} aircraft arrived, the convoy was located in the Gulf of Castellamare,
^h the ships being well in shore heading ~~westwards~~, in line astern, with
the destroyers formed up in a protective arc to seawards. At 21.25 hours

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the Beauforts attacked and two scored hits on two of the ships, one being a tanker. During the attack, two of the Beauforts were shot down and one of those which had scored a hit on the Sterope (F/Sgt. L.T. Garland) was badly damaged by flak. Twenty minutes later one of the Special Wellingtons sighted a tanker down by the bows and listing to port.

It was then that the strike Albacores came into the picture. One located the convoy and attacked from the south, aiming its torpedo at the tanker from a height of 40 feet at a range of 500 yards. The torpedo ran true and struck the tanker amidships, causing it to turn to starboard. Another strike force of Albacores and Wellingtons was despatched from Malta but owing to the bad weather failed to locate the convoy.

Altogether two Beauforts and an Albacore were lost in the course of these operations and a Beaufort and an Albacore damaged. The seriously damaged tanker crawled into Palermo and was still there a fortnight later. In 1945 she was found sunk in Genoa harbour and assessed as a structural loss.

A.H.B. List of
Enemy Shipping

The following night, 13/14 March, another successful attack was made on a convoy to the west of Marettimo when the 4,048-ton (German ex-French) Caraibe carrying 778 tons of ammunition, 443 tons of food, 167 tons of general cargo, 30 vehicles and five guns, was sunk. She was located in convoy by two Special Wellingtons of No. 221 Group on a search off the west coast of Sicily. A mixed force of 12 Wellingtons and Albacores, which were already airborne, was ordered to attack the convoy. At 02.15 hours the Albacores discovered a convoy of four M/Vs and five destroyers seven miles west of Marettimo. At 2.40 hours one of the Albacores scored a hit on the Caraibe causing a violent explosion followed by a shower of exploding red, white and green tracer. The M/V burst into flames from stem to stern, the fire being visible 40 miles away. One Albacore of No. 828 Squadron was shot down and another damaged. A Wellington of No. 458 Squadron was also damaged by flak.

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The last successful astrike of March 1943, by a Malta-based aircraft, was on the night 21/22 March, when the 4,550-ton Italian M/V Manzoni was sunk by a Wellington of No. 221 Squadron. She was on her return journey to Naples when she was located and shadowed by a Special Wellington of No. 221 Squadron. A small force of torpedo-carrying Wellingtons of the same squadron happened to be on a shipping search and strike in ^{that} ~~the same~~ area. On receiving the report of the sighting, they were able to locate the convoy in a position five miles to the south of Carena Point in the Bay of Naples. There she was attacked by a Wellington (Sgt. H. Cobb) and was hit on the stern. The Manzoni stopped and the destroyers circled around her. She was later located immobilised in the lee of the cliffs of Capri, with two destroyers to seaward, by a second Wellington. This aircraft made three attempts to attack from between the coast and the ships, but was prevented by intense A.A. gun fire from the destroyers. It is now known that the Manzoni sank as a result of the attack, but she was not claimed as a sinking at the time.

A claim for which no confirmation can be found in enemy records, yet was made much of at the time, occurred on 17 March. Nine Beauforts of No. 39 Squadron, escorted by nine Beaufighters of No. 272 Squadron, attacked a convoy off Cape San Vito, Sicily, in daylight. While the Beaufighters engaged the air escort of Me.110s and Ju.88s, the Beauforts attacked in waves of three. At least three hits were scored on a ship followed by a column of water and large clouds of smoke from the stern and the deck of the vessel. A series of combats developed in which a Beaufort and a Beaufighter were shot down and a Beaufort and Beaufighter damaged. A Baltimore of No. 69 Squadron later discovered a large patch of oil a quarter of a mile in diameter in the precise area of the attack.

It so happened that the British submarine Splendid had sunk the 3,300-ton Italian (ex-Yugo-Slav) tanker Devoli from the same convoy a short time before the arrival of the R.A.F. aircraft. This is borne out not only by the log of the submarine Splendid but also enemy records.

Admiralty
and A.H.B. 6

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The Devoli was in convoy with the Velino and it is probable that it was the latter ship that was severely damaged by the Beauforts but not actually sunk. The Velino was sunk on 20 June 1943 in Messina harbour to which she probably had been towed. Only rarely are details of damaged ships available in enemy records.

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and A.H.B. 6

In April 1943, the last complete month of enemy operations in North Africa, the tonnage of cargo reaching the enemy forces in Tunisia was the lowest recorded. Only 28,623 tons arrived out of 48,703 tons despatched, some 13,000 tons ^{of this} loss being stores and equipment destined for the German forces. A further ^{4,247} ~~4,057~~ tons of material (1,405 tons of ammunition, 1,945 tons of fuel and 897 tons of equipment) arrived by air, together with 64 vehicles, 107 guns, ² ~~20~~ armoured cars and 18,128 men. The total tonnage sunk in the Mediterranean amounted to 116,535 tons, divided as follows:-

<u>Air</u>	<u>Air/Navy Shared</u>	<u>Navy</u>	<u>Mine</u>
63,020	11,904	40,947	664

The Air total sub-divides again and gives the following remarkable U.S.A.A.F. figure of sinkings:-

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Enemy Shipping
Losses

<u>R.A.F.</u>	<u>R.A.F./U.S.A.A.F.</u>	<u>F.A.A.</u>	<u>U.S.A.A.F.</u>
4,950	5,119	424	52,527

Bad weather conditions again affected air shipping strikes from Malta in April. It was not until the night of 11/12 April that the first of the month's sinkings occurred. She was the 2,943-ton Italian M/V Fabiano (ex-French Mayenne) carrying 1,094 tons of fuel, 108 tons of general cargo, 60 tons of food and 30 vehicles. A strike of four Beauforts of No. 39 Squadron and three Special Wellingtons of No. 458 Squadron, all carrying torpedoes, were engaged in an armed reconnaissance for enemy shipping between Marsala, Marettimo and Cape Gallo, during the night 11/12 April, when the Fabiano was located escorted by a destroyer to the north-east of Cape San Vito. She was attacked by a Wellington of No. 458 Squadron (Flying Officer Hailstone), the torpedo being released from a height of 50 ^{feet} ~~yards~~ and at a range of 700 yards, heading up moon. The Fabiano was hit just aft of the bridge. The ship blew

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up and sank within ten minutes. The aircraft noticed that although survivors were still struggling in the water, the escort vessel made for Palermo harbour at high speed.

The Monginevro of 5,324 tons was sunk during the night of 16/17 April as a result of a combined strike, first by an Albacore of No. 821 Squadron and finally by an M.T.B. between the islands of Zambretta and Zambra. The Albacore was piloted by S/Lt. Marchant. The Monginevro was homeward bound and is in the "shared" category.

Another "shared" sinking was the German ex-French Mostaganem of 1,942 tons. She was located on the night 18/19 April to the north of Marettime by a Special torpedo Wellington of No. 221 Squadron. The sighting was reported to base, but the aircraft failed to return. Another Wellington of No. 221 Squadron, carrying bombs, intercepted and followed up the sighting report. She attacked the Mostaganem at 01.05 hours with seven 250-lb G.P. bombs. A direct hit was scored on the ship's stern causing her to turn sharply to port and stop. Two boats left the M/V which was seen to be down by the stern at an angle of 45°. The base of the funnel was awash and she was listing to port. She was later sunk by a submarine.

The Aquino (ex-French Elkantara) of 5,079 tons had already been damaged and set on fire by the U.S.A.A.F. when she was torpedoed during the night 23/24 April off Marettime by a Beaufort of No. 39 Squadron. Another strike was arranged with two Beauforts of No. 39 Squadron and three Special Wellingtons of No. 458 Squadron, all carrying torpedoes, and the blazing hulk was finally sunk by one of the Beauforts.

(1)
The surrender of the Axis forces in Tunisia on 13 May deprived Malta of the many shipping targets formerly found in the Sicilian Narrows. Although A.H.Q. Malta claimed 17,000 tons of enemy shipping sunk or damaged during May and it is certain that a number of ships were badly damaged, there is no evidence from enemy records that any ships of an appreciable tonnage were sunk by Malta-based aircraft. Only during the first eight days of May were cargoes being carried to the enemy forces
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- (1) The main enemy forces capitulated on 12 May, when Von Arnim was captured. General Messe and his Italians in the more inaccessible hill country, north of Saouaf did not surrender until the following day.

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Shipping
Losses.

in Tunisia. Out of 14,416 tons despatched only 3,359 tons arrived. An additional 570 tons of material and 292 men were sent by air.

The losses inflicted on enemy shipping in May 1943, which totalled 119,001 tons, were the highest of any month throughout the whole of the Mediterranean campaigns. Of this total 101,086 tons were sunk by air and over three-quarters (79,782 tons) by the U.S.A.A.F. The American ~~total~~ ^{largest} was the ~~highest~~ single total, either Navy or Air, and was due almost entirely to the effectiveness ~~by~~ ^{of} their daylight bombing of ports with heavy bombers.

Enemy Air Activity against Malta, January to 12 May 1943

By January 1943, the enemy air forces were far too preoccupied with events in North Africa to be able to sustain even a limited air offensive against Malta. Throughout January, although a number of hostile aircraft crossed the coast, no bombs were dropped on the island. There were not more than seven alerts throughout the first four months of the year and these were either for high flying reconnaissance aircraft or else other aircraft which did not venture to cross the coast. With the surrender of the Axis forces in Tunisia on 13 May, there was an increase in the number of fighters based on Sicily. This led to greater offensive activity against Malta.

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Enemy fighters crossed the coast eleven times but only on two occasions, 21 and 31 May, were bombs actually dropped. The raid on 21 May was the first effective one since the previous December. A force of 36 F.W.190 fighter-bombers escorted by Me.109s approached Malta from the north at 19,000 feet early on the morning 21 May. Twenty Spitfires were scrambled (eight of No. 229, four of No. 249 and eight of No. 1435 Squadron). One section of Spitfires intercepted the raiders at 06.20 hours 50 miles to the north of the island

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causing them to break formation. Another interception took place ten miles north of the island, but some of the raiders managed to cross the coast and dive-bomb the airfields of Hal Far and Ta Kali.

Six bombs burst on Hal Far, destroying a Spitfire in its pen, and due to what was subsequently described in the report as "negligent dispersal", three Fleet Air Arm Albacores were burnt out. Two naval ratings were badly injured. Four bombs also fell on Ta Kali damaging a Beaufighter. A raid on 31 May was again carried out by a force of 36 F.W. 190s, but this time the raiders approached the island at dusk. Only one of the fighter-bombers managed to penetrate the defensive screen of Spitfires. A single bomb was dropped on Valletta causing slight civilian damage.

Malta-based Fighters go over to the Offensive

With the slackened tempo of the enemy air offensive against Malta, it was possible to switch the island's fighter force to offensive action. Beginning in January, Spitfire bombers escorted by Spitfires carried out daily attacks against suitable ground targets on Sicily and in southern Italy. From photographic reconnaissance it was confirmed that in January the chemical factory at Marsemi had been put out of action and a direct hit scored on Cassibile power station, both in Sicily. Other hits were scored on a factory at Porto Empedocle, the airfields at Gela and Comiso and warehouses at Ispica. Lampedusa airfield, where many Italian transports were seen, was bombed. Many attacks were also made on ~~made on~~ railway stations and

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engine sheds and 14 locomotives were either destroyed or seriously damaged. Mosquitoes of No. 23 Squadron and Beaufighters of No. 89 Squadron were ~~also~~ active at night over North Africa, their principal target being the coast road and railway from Tunis via Sousse, Sfax and Gabes to Tripoli. Intruder operations were also carried out by Mosquitoes of No. 23 Squadron and Beaufighters of Nos. 227 and 272 Squadrons against enemy airfields in Sicily. ⁽¹⁾ These attacks helped to provide protection for the aircraft engaged on shipping strikes.

Throughout February, Spitfire-bombers and fighters continued their offensive against ground targets in Sicily. The offensive against the enemy's rail ~~and~~ traffic was maintained by Mosquitoes, Beaufighters and Spitfighters.

Palermo was second only in importance to Naples as a ^{supply} ~~special~~ base for North Africa. From both Taranto and Naples the railway follows the coast line southwards. The two tracks meet opposite the Messina ^{ferry} ~~ferries~~ ^{from where the road} ~~which~~ leads westwards along the north Sicilian coast to Palermo. There, in one month, 30 locomotives were either destroyed or damaged. The Beaufighters also scored hits with 250-lb bombs on the railway bridge, track and sidings at Termini and Cefalu and the railway junctions at Nicastro and Marina di Gioiosa.

During the month of March, operations by fighter aircraft were greatly hampered by adverse weather conditions. Nevertheless, the offensive against Italian and Sicilian railways was continued with considerable success by Mosquitoes by night and Spitfires by day.

Ibid.

Altogether 74 locomotives were either destroyed or damaged. On one occasion, a Mosquito patrolling the electrified west coast railway almost reached the environs of Rome and attacked four trains there. Numerous attacks were also made on goods yards, warehouses and station buildings at Metaponto, Amantea and Lamezia in southern Italy and Castellamare,

//Lentini

(1) No. 23 Squadron equipped with Mosquitoes began intruder operations from Malta on the night 29/30 December.

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Lentini and Cefalu in Sicily. Many fires were started, one of which at Metaponto could be seen for 40 miles. Excluding attacks on railway targets, the Spitfire bombers carried out 60 offensive sorties. These were directed largely against the airfields at Lampedusa and Comiso and other objectives in Sicily. Sheds south of Avola were demolished and hits scored on factories at Sampieri and Pozzallo.

Ibid

In April, due to the improved weather conditions, there was an increase in the number of operations carried out by fighter aircraft from Malta. Altogether a total of 191 sorties was flown by Spitfire bombers, the main targets being Lampedusa and Pantelleria together with airfields and industrial objectives in Sicily. Damage was caused to the seaplane base at Syracuse, the power stations at Porto Empedocle and Cassibile and factories at Marzemini and Calbernado. Attacks were continued on the railway system, and sidings and rolling stock in Sicily and southern Italy were bombed. The airfields attacked included Biscari, Comiso, Pantelleria and Lampedusa. Mist and sea fog hampered the operations of the Mosquitoes which, however, made a total of 124 sorties, 106 on intruder patrols, 12 in co-operation with shipping strikes and six on attacks against ground targets. Due to the fact that events in North Africa were reaching a climax, it was noticed that enemy bombers and transport were less active than in previous months.

The Axis forces in North Africa surrendered on 13 May. This led to an intensification of the day and night offensive by fighters, fighter-bombers and intruder aircraft against important targets in Sicily and southern Italy. The concentration of enemy fighters in Sicily, after the evacuation of airfields in Tunisia, also heightened enemy air operations against Malta. Enemy fighters crossed the coast eleven times and on two occasions, 21 and 31 May, bombs were dropped, fortunately with but little effect. During a fighter sweep on 5 May, a Me.109G was hit in the engine by A.A. fire and force-landed at

/Luqa.

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Luga. The pilot was taken prisoner, and as the aircraft was only slightly damaged, its examination provided much useful information.

Many sweeps were flown over south-eastern Italy in some cases as a diversion ^{for} ~~in~~ bombing raids by ~~German~~ aircraft of the North West African Air Force. It was noted that when encountered, the enemy fighters avoided combat. Spitfires flew 188 sorties, 112 of them by Spitfire bombers, in ten successful raids, two of them against Lampedusa and the balance against Sicilian targets. As a result of these attacks, direct hits were obtained on railway bridges, a factory was damaged and a number of fires were started on Comiso airfield. Long-range Spitfires made numerous sweeps off the west and east coasts of Sicily. Goods trains, signals boxes and motor transport were attacked and left in flames.

Ibid.

In May, Beaufighters of No. 272 Squadron flew 90 sorties in escort patrols over shipping and on armed reconnaissance. A number of small coastal craft were set on fire. When no shipping could be found, trains in the toe of Italy were attacked, the airfield at Licata was bombed and three transport aircraft were destroyed. Night Beaufighters were also active on interception patrols over Malta and to the east and south-west of Sicily. Although hampered on several nights by bad weather, the Mosquitoes of No. 23 Squadron made 78 sorties on intruder patrols. No enemy aircraft were encountered but 19 trains were attacked and a number of locomotives damaged. A large petrol store at San Cataldo exploded when attacked and burst into flames and a fire was started at a W/T Station near Metilli in Sicily which was visible for 50 miles. The Mosquitoes also attacked and damaged 11 coastal vessels.

Malta's Air Strength, Spring 1943

During the last phase of the "Torch" invasion, from the New Year until the final surrender in North Africa on 13 May 1943, the total strength of aircraft on Malta was always fewer than 200. In January there were 199 (¹⁷⁹ ~~197~~ serviceable), in February ¹⁸¹ ~~184~~ (162 serviceable),

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in March 179 (156 serviceable), and in April 185 (131 serviceable). Including reconnaissance aircraft, the strength in fighters was in the region of 150 and the bombers 50. With the airfield accommodation available, this force (12 squadrons) was the largest that could be operated at the time, although for the invasion of Sicily, with the fulfilment of important plans of airfield construction, it was possible to extend the force to the surprising total of ~~87~~ ^{38 1/2} ⁽¹⁾ squadrons. In this case, the establishment of A.H.Q. Malta was not affected. The additional squadrons were "lodger" units during the initial period of the "Husky" operation.

A.H.Q. Malta
Weekly Strength
Returns
AHE/VB/9/1

Throughout the first five months of 1943, the force under the command of the A.O.C. Malta varied very little in basic structure as a comparison between strength in January and May shows:

<u>Type</u> (*)	<u>January 1943</u>		<u>May 1943</u>	
	<u>Strength</u>	<u>Serviceable</u>	<u>Strength</u>	<u>Serviceable</u>
<u>Fighter</u>				
Beaufighter	27	24	25	23
Hurricane	9	7	2	2
Mosquito	14	11	11	6
Spitfire	92	89	99	69
<u>Bomber/Torpedo Bomber</u>				
Baltimore	16	13	8	3
Wellington	28	23	22	12
Beaufort	13	12	12	12
	<u>199</u>	<u>179</u>	<u>179</u>	<u>127</u>

(*) Includes reconnaissance aircraft, but excludes the following Communications Flight and Air/Sea Rescue aircraft:

	<u>Serviceable</u>	
Kittyhawk	1	1
Swordfish	1	1
Walrus	2	1
Blenheim	1	-
Harvard	1	1
Totals	<u>6</u>	<u>4</u>

/The

(1) Includes airfields on Gozo and Pantelleria, together with F.A.A. and U.S.A.A.F.

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The operational strength in May 1943 was approximately twice the figure for May 1942, when there were 85 aircraft, 74 of them fighters, A.H.Q. Malta's peak strength in 1942 was reached at the end of November when there were 256 operational aircraft on the island, 188 of them fighters (including reconnaissance aircraft).

Malta a Separate Air Command under Mediterranean Air Command (M.A.C.)
18 February 1943.

The Casablanca Conference, known as Operation "Symbol" opened at Anfa, near Casablanca in French Morocco, on 15 January 1943. The Prime Minister, President Roosevelt, and the Combined Chiefs of Staff were present at the Conference which was also visited by Generals Eisenhower, Alexander and Air Chief Marshal Tedder. At the Conference, among other things, a decision was made to reorganise the chain of command in North Africa with a view to setting up a unified command of the Allied naval, land and air forces. This was to be set up when von Arnim's forces, in Tunisia, and those under Rommel, effected a juncture.

Middle East
Campaigns
Vol. IV.

The agreed proposals authorised the formation of a Mediterranean Air Command under an Air Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean, comprising three subordinate commands:

North-West African Air Force
Middle East Command
Malta

It was agreed that Air Chief Marshal Tedder should be the new Air Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean, with his Headquarters at Algiers. Middle East Command was to be placed under the control of Air Chief Marshal Sholto Douglas as A.O.C.-in-C. Malta was to become a separate command under M.A.C., with Air Vice-Marshal Park remaining as A.O.C. Finally, the third command under M.A.C., the North-West African Air Force, was to be commanded by Major-General Spaatz.

These proposals were put into force on 17 February 1943 under General Eisenhower's General Order No. 20. For the purpose of R.A.F. administration, the effective date was 18 February. Malta was ^{put} under _h /the

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the operational control of M.A.C. but it continued, together with the Desert Air Force, to be administered by H.Q. R.A.F. Middle East.⁽¹⁾

The role assigned to the air forces under the command of A.V.M. Park was:

- (a) Maintain local air superiority and thereby contain the enemy air forces in Sicily.
- (b) Provide general and photographic air reconnaissance for Allied Air Forces and the Royal Navy.
- (c) Continue the torpedo strikes against enemy shipping.
- (d) Provide protection for friendly shipping against aircraft and submarine attacks.

The Command position at Malta was complicated on 16 March by a Directive to the Governor in which his status as Governor and Commander-in-Chief Malta was reaffirmed. Malta was to be included in the sphere of the Minister of State and Lord Gort in his capacity as Governor was to deal direct with the Secretary of State for the Colonies. As Commander-in-Chief he was still Supreme Commander in the island, and where, in his judgment, the safety of the island was endangered, he would exercise this authority. In general, however, he was to be guided by the policy laid down by the Middle East Defence Committee. He retained the right to communicate direct with the Chiefs of Staff and the Commander-in-Chief Allied Forces in North Africa. // From the point of view of the Air Officer Commanding Malta the most important part of this Directive was that, subject to the above-mentioned abnormal conditions - which, incidentally, were never to arise again - the Service Commanders on Malta still remained under the command of their respective Commanders-in-Chief. They were, however, to keep the Governor fully informed of any important signals which might be exchanged with their respective Commanders-in-Chief.

Defence of
Malta A.H.B./
ILJ1/165/129(E)

On receipt of this Directive, the Middle East Defence Committee pointed out that as the centre of gravity of operations in the Mediterranean ^{had} ~~was~~ shifted to the centre, they might not be in a position

- /to
- (i) A.H.Q. Malta adopted the title of Malta Air Command, and then because of likely confusion with Mediterranean Air Command (M.A.C.) reverted to A.H.Q. Malta.
- S E C R E T

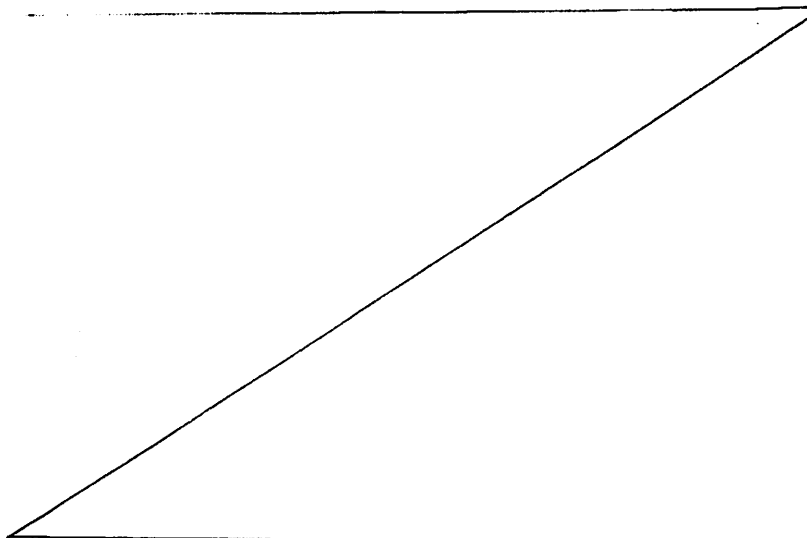
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to exercise guidance on operational matters. Mediterranean Air Command also expressed the view that this revised Directive was not consistent with the existing Command organisation in which the Air Officer Commanding Malta came under the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief Mediterranean for operations. Moreover, offensive operations from Malta came under the Supreme Commander Allied Forces North Africa and not under Middle East.

A revised Directive was issued on 26 May 1943 in which it was stated that in the case of a conflict of priorities between Service Commanders or Civil and Military requirements which could not be resolved locally, the matter was to be referred to the British Chiefs of Staff. ^{This would avoid} ~~Thereby~~ these relatively domestic matters ^{being} ~~would not~~ submitted for arbitration to the Supreme Commander, who ^{was} at that time ^{was} an American. The Governor of Malta was to consult with the Commander-in-Chief Allied Forces in North Africa, or other authorities in the Mediterranean, as might be necessary. Subject to this, the Naval and Air Force Commanders were to remain under their respective Commanders-in-Chief which, in the case of the Air Officer Commanding Malta, was ^{he} Air Commander-in-Chief Mediterranean.

On 10 January 1944, with the altered situation in the Mediterranean, A.H.Q. Malta was placed under the operational and administrative control of M.A.C.A.F. (Mediterranean Allied Coastal Air Force). The A.O.C. Malta remained responsible to the Governor of Malta for the defence of the island.



/ Aerial

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Aerial Reconnaissance from Malta, January to May 12³, 1943

Throughout the last four and a half months of the "Torch" operation, from January until 12³ May 1943, when the enemy forces in North Africa capitulated, Malta continued to be ^{an invaluable} ~~a valuable~~ base for reconnaissance both for the Royal Air Force and the Royal Navy. During January, No. 69 Squadron fulfilled all Malta's reconnaissance requirements with the available resources of P.R.U. Spitfire, A.S.V., Wellington and Baltimore aircraft. On 1 February, however, as has already been noted, the Wellington Flight ceased to be part of No. 69 Squadron on being attached to No. 458 Squadron. On 8 February, No. 683 Squadron P.R.U. was formed at R.A.F. Station Luqa from No. 69 Squadron P.R.U. Flight of Spitfires Mk. V.

No. 48 Wing,
69 and 683
Sqn. O.R.Bs.

During January, No. 69 Squadron suffered heavy casualties with the loss on the 8th of a Wellington, on the 11th a Spitfire, the 19th a Baltimore and another Baltimore on the 29th. These losses involved 14 of the Squadron personnel, but the crew of a Baltimore were later ^{been} known to have taken P.O.W. Two more Baltimores were lost in February, one in March and another in April. By the end of May, the total serviceable strength of No. 69 Squadron amounted to only three Baltimores.

No. 69 Sqn.
O.R.B.

The main duty carried out by Malta-based reconnaissance aircraft, in the Spring of 1943, was the location of the enemy convoys and units of the Italian fleet. As the main naval bases in southern Italy were also the principal ports of supply for the Axis forces in North Africa, it was possible, weather and serviceability permitting, to maintain a close watch on all Axis shipping in the Central Mediterranean.

H.Q. Malta
O.R.B. and
D.I.S.
A.H.B./HJS/113/5/15

In January the three Littorio battleships were located at La Spezia after having been driven out of Naples by a severe attack by heavy bombers of the U.S.A.A.F. in the previous month. With them were the damaged Bolzano and ^a Regolo class cruiser which, minus ^{her} ~~the~~ bows, had ^{her} ~~her~~ left Palermo in November. Regular reconnaissance was made of Taranto /and

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Doria

and Messina, the bases of the battleships Doria and ~~Doria~~ and the three 6-inch cruisers Abruzzi, Garibaldi, and another, thought to be either the Savoia or Duca d'Aosta.

Naples and Palermo continued to be the principal loading ports for convoys bound for Tunis and Bizerta, with Trapani used as a subsidiary base for the escort of naval vessels, F-boats and Siebel ferries. ⁽¹⁾ To a far less important extent, the Egadi Islands to the west of Sicily were used for the same purpose, as protective anchorages.

Photographic reconnaissance aircraft of No. 69 Squadron were the first to remark the demolition pits on the principal ^{quays} ~~ways~~ and jetties of the port of Tripoli, on 6 ^{January} ~~Jan~~, prior to the evacuation by Rommel's forces. By 12 January, only one ship, the S.S. Sabbia of 5,700 tons remained. ⁽²⁾ A succession of tugs, schooners, Siebel ferries, coasters and other small craft ^{was} ~~were~~ later photographed along the Tunisian coast. Those vessels still remaining in the harbour were ^{scuttled} ~~sabotaged~~ and used as block ships. The last photo reconnaissance of Tripoli from Malta showed a tall column of smoke rising from the end of the shattered and deserted Spanish mole.

In January, extensive photographic reconnaissances were also made ~~of~~ ^{of} Sicilian airfields, and ~~of~~ ^{of} the Italian ones south of Rome. A close watch on the strength of enemy aircraft throughout that area was maintained. In Sicily it was noted that whilst three-quarters of the German bombers were based on airfields in the south-eastern part of the island, their fighter strength in the same area was only 55 which was inadequate to provide the necessary cover for large-scale raids on Malta.

Ibid.

In Italy, 33 airfields were covered in January, many of them for the first time. The total number of aircraft photographed was 1100 of all types. The most interesting of the aerial photographs taken by P.R.U.

- (1) Messina Roads were used as a protective anchorage for these ships, the permanent defences there with their batteries of naval guns being tremendously effective, as was to be experienced six months later during the German evacuation of Sicily.
- (2) The Sabbia was attacked and claimed as a sinking by an aircraft of No. 458 Squadron when she left Tripoli on 18 January. Probably she was then damaged. She was finally sunk in Civita Vecchia harbour on 4 July 1943 after having been torpedoed and set on fire by a Dutch submarine 8 miles south of Cape Linaro. After having been raised, the Sabbia was bombed on 3 August. She was finally dismantled in January 1947.

*list of Enemy
shipping losses in
the Mediterranean
from O.R.B.*

11-inch

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S E C R E T

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P.R.U. aircraft of No. 69 Squadron was of the airfield at Foggia. It was evidently the main base for Ju.87s and no less than 96 of these aircraft were counted there. Another interesting reconnaissance of the airfield of San Pancrazio in the heel of Italy revealed the largest concentration of gliders ever photographed from Malta. This airfield was almost wholly devoted to gliders and 34 of them were counted there. No information has been discovered from enemy records for the presence of so many gliders on this remote Italian base.

After further heavy bombing by the U.S.A.^{A.}F., the three 6-inch cruisers lying at Messina dispersed during the night 31 January/1 February. One of these cruisers was promptly located by Malta-based P.R.U. aircraft at Naples and the others in Taranto, where they had joined the Cavour-class battleships Duilio and Doria which had been in port there since September 1942. A further 6-inch cruiser which had been under repair at Castellamare di Stabia arrived in Naples between 17 and 19 February. Heavy bombing by the Americans had therefore compelled the Italians to give up using Messina as a cruiser base and also Palermo which had been the most important supply port for North Africa after Naples.

Trapani still remained a base for destroyers used for convoy escort work across the Sicilian Narrows. Its inferior facilities for handling merchant shipping had to some extent been overcome by the use of F-boats and Siebel Ferries which could take on deck cargo of guns and vehicles without the help of cranes. Reconnaissance had also located numbers of these small craft at the smaller harbours of Marsala and Termini Imerese. Their ease of handling and comparative immunity from air attack made them invaluable for the task of transporting supplies across to North

A.H.Q. Malta
O.R.B. and
D.I.S.

Africa.

A.H.Q. 113/5/15

The most interesting photographs of the month which led ultimately to the sinking of the 9,955-ton tanker Thorsheimer were taken by a Wellington of No. 69 Squadron on 20 February. The tanker had already been observed taking on its cargo of 5,410 tons of fuel at Naples.

/The

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The Wellington's photographs later showed her with a dummy funnel ^{three - castle} amidships, in an attempt to disguise her as an ordinary type merchant ship. This camouflage, however, did not save the ship from attack and two nights later on 21 February, as has already been related, the Thorsheimer was sunk by a strike of Beauforts of No. 39 Squadron.

Experiments were also carried out during February to improve the quality of night photographs of shipping strikes and extend them in the way that had already been applied to bombing land targets. The close watch on enemy shipping and the dwindling numbers of tankers and merchant vessels of appreciable tonnage in the Mediterranean enabled the movement of individual ships to be ^{plotted} ~~expected~~, even when they passed from the area of one P.R.U. to another. However, the enemy shipping position in the Mediterranean had been temporarily eased (and for the P.R. Units further complicated) by the Axis gain in merchant shipping as a result of the occupation of ports in Vichy, France.

During February, a marked increase in enemy air transport activity was noted. A concentration of 159 single-engined German fighters was photographed on the airfields of north-west Sicily. This force was being used almost exclusively as escort to the transport aircraft. In March, some 650 German and Italian fighters based on Sicily were being employed on the same duties. Elsewhere on the island a further 300 transport aircraft were located, bringing the combined total of Axis aircraft on Sicily up to nearly 1,000.

Nos. 69 and
683 Sqn.
O.R.Bs.

For the remainder of this period, reconnaissance from Malta followed the familiar pattern of shipping searches by the Baltimores of No. 69 Squadron and reconnaissance of enemy ports and airfields by the Spitfires of No. 683 (P.R.U.) Squadron. Among the most important photographs brought back were those obtained by Wing Commander Warburton, and other P.R.U. pilots, of Sicilian airfields, harbours and general coast-line. On these special tasks, Warburton frequently flew over well-defended

/areas

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~~drums~~ taking photographs from as low as 200 feet. A number of Mosquito crews were also attached to No. 683 Squadron for this purpose. A detachment of Advanced Unit 3 Photo Group U.S.A.A.F. arrived at Luqa in March. They were equipped with Lockheed Lightnings (^{P.}~~P.~~ 38s). Unfortunately, the Officer Commanding, Captain Richardson, was reported missing over Sicily, after the Unit's first sortie from Malta on 28 March.

Malta's Contribution to Operation "Strangle"/"Retribution"

Throughout the last phase of the fighting in North Africa one of the main preoccupations in the minds of the Allied Commanders was how to prevent an Axis "Dunkirk". The Royal Navy and the Allied Air Forces were determined to stop any large-scale evacuation of North Africa, which still held, hemmed in in the north-easterly part of Tunisia, a quarter of a million men with all their vast accumulation of equipment and stores.

The Gulf of Tunis and the Gulf of Hammamet, which lies directly across the Cape Bon peninsula from Tunis, afforded many miles of beach~~s~~ suitable for shallow-^{draught}~~draft~~ vessels. From aerial observation it was noted that the jetty at Hammamet had been lengthened since 13 March and photographs showed a considerable increase of stores at the shore-end of the jetty.

It was obvious that in any attempt at mass evacuation, the Germans would try to use not only air^{transport} and sea transport by merchant ships, but also the smaller Siebel ferry and F-boat type of craft. Consolidation of P.R.U. and Intelligence reports showed that the Axis, at the beginning of May, had some 72 Siebel ferries and 63 F-boats available. This *fleet*

A.H.Q. Malta
O.R.B.
D.I.S. and
Sqdn. O.R.Bs.

would be capable of evacuating between twenty to twenty-five thousand troops at a time.

P.R.U. aircraft from Malta were busily employed, during this period, noting any significant development in both beach-head facilities for evacuation and the concentration of suitable craft. Wing Commander Warburton, Commanding Officer of No. 683 P.R.U. Squadron, brought back from one of these trips an interesting record of the last stages of ~~the~~ fighting in Tunisia.

/As

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Para. // As it so happened, Operation "Strangle" or "Retribution", as it was variously termed, the combined naval and air plan to prevent any mass evacuation from North Africa, was so effective that out of close on a quarter of a million ^{Axis} troops in North Africa, only 683 made good their escape to Sicily. This was due almost entirely to the conditions of air supremacy which the Allied Air Forces had gained over the North African beach-heads and the Sicilian Narrows. During this phase, in addition to reconnaissance, aircraft from Malta intervened by attacking and shooting down a number of enemy transport and communications aircraft. They also helped by attacking any small craft they could locate, the movement of merchant vessels of any appreciable tonnage having entirely ceased.

Protection of Convoys

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Vol. III r
444. Notes ORB.

After the successful passing of the "Stoneage" convoy through to Malta, similar supply operations became almost a matter of routine. By that time the Axis air forces had become far too preoccupied with events in North Africa and the increasing weight of the offensive by the Allied Air Forces on their bases in Sicily and Sardinia to do more than make sporadic attacks on the Malta convoys. Nevertheless, the threat was always there that the enemy might divert some of their still considerable strength to the kind of anti-shipping operations in which they had ~~formerly~~ been so successful, as late as August, 1942.

Risks could not be taken with the valuable convoys employed in bringing war material to the island. Enemy submarines were still active and Malta-based aircraft were kept busy on area searches and in providing convoys with close cover against submarines. Although a few sightings and attacks on submarines were made, no definite results were obtained. From October 1942 until the end of the fighting in North Africa on ¹³ May, Malta-based aircraft flew 770 sorties on the protection of friendly shipping. Beaufighters provided long-range cover and Spitfires took over when the convoys arrived within effective range. As a result of these precautions, the damage sustained by Malta convoys during this period, through enemy attack, was negligible.

/Collaboration

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Collaboration with American Heavy Bombers from North Africa

On three occasions during May, Malta-based Spitfires collaborated with heavy bombers operating from Africa against targets in Sicily. On the 6th May, 16 Spitfire Vs (eight of No. 229 and eight of No. 1435 Squadrons) carried out a sweep over the Comiso area of Sicily, as a diversion for a bombing raid on the docks at Reggio di Calabria. They saw no enemy aircraft, but four other Spitfires which were providing withdrawal cover, engaged four Me. 109s, damaged one of them and drove them off. The Liberator raid was most successful. In addition to the extensive damage to the port and installations, three ships, the

D.I.Ss., A.H. &
 44E Malta
 and Sqdn.
 O.R.Bs.

St. Sauveur of 1,396 tons, the Giuseppina of 735 tons, the ferry Villa of 932 tons, together with a motor landing craft, were sunk.

On 11 May, 47 Spitfires of Nos. 126, 185, 229 and 249 Squadrons escorted two waves of IXth Bomber Command Liberators in a bombing attack on Catania. The four squadrons of Spitfires made rendezvous with the first wave of Liberators over Cape Passaro and, with the second wave 20 miles to the west of Syracuse, provided escort at between 20 and 24,000 feet to and over the target until the bombers were some 50 miles away on their return journey. Considerable damage was caused in the dock area and on the railway. The 4,425-ton M/V Partenico, together with two motor landing craft, were sunk. One Spitfire was lost and a Liberator which had been badly damaged by A.A. gun fire was escorted back to Luqa, where it crash landed.

Referring to this operation, the Officer Commanding IXth Bomber Command signalled: "Sincere thanks for the fighter escort on 11 May which is the first time in the history of this Command that we have received such support. All crews were enthusiastic and said that the presence of your fighters gave them confidence and contributed to the success of the mission."

Two days later, on 13 May, similar protection was given by 50 Spitfires of Nos. 126, 229, 249 and 1435 Squadrons to more of IXth Bomber Command's Liberators when attacking the Sicilian port of Augusta.

/Several

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Several enemy aircraft were sighted but only two of them - Me.110s - attempted to attack the bombers. These enemy fighters were intercepted and damaged. The Spitfires saw the bombs bursting in the target area, along the jetties and moles. A large oil fire was also started with smoke [;]bellowing to many hundreds of feet. All the attacking aircraft, together with their escort of Spitfires, returned safely.

Responsibilities for the Air Defence of Malta

The change of Air Officer Commanding at Malta in July 1942 led ultimately to a redefinition of ~~the~~ responsibilities for the Air Defence of Malta. On 1 October, A.V.M. Park addressed a letter to the Governor, General Gort, stating that when he took over from A.V.M. Lloyd he was told that the Air Officer Commanding Malta was also the Air Defence Commander and that the C.R.A. (Commander, Royal Artillery) was the local ~~Anti-Aircraft~~ Defence Commander. He asked if this system, which was in force in the United Kingdom and had been adopted in Egypt, met with the wishes of Lord Gort as Commander-in-Chief Malta.

Combined
Defence
Policy in
War
A/HB/IIJ5/101/
3A and B

This request by the A.O.C. Malta stimulated the C.R.A., Major-General C. T. Beckett, into writing a lengthy memorandum which concluded:

"I consider that the function of Air Defence Command must remain in the hands of His Excellency as ~~Fortress~~ Commander." The C.R.A. was supported in this view by Major-General R. M. Scobie, his Army Commander at Malta, who also stated that A.V.M. Lloyd had never, in fact, been appointed Air Defence Commander of Malta. A.V.M. Park was evidently surprised by the strength of the reaction his letter had evoked from the Army Commanders at Malta and stated, in his reply, that he had merely requested information on the subject. He asked the Governor to give his decision as to who was the Air Defence Commander Malta. Lord Gort replied through the Naval Captain who held the somewhat grandiloquent appointment of Chief of Staff to the Governor and Commander-in-Chief Malta. In a ~~somewhat non-~~ ~~committal~~ letter dated 28 October, he said that the Governor saw no reason "to alter the existing arrangement whereby the A.O.C. and the C.R.A. used

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the forces at their disposal to the best advantage of the Fortress by maintaining a close and happy liaison between the two Services. In the unlikely event of the three Services competing for the support of the anti-aircraft artillery, the ultimate ^{decision} ~~position~~ must remain in his hands as Supreme Commander-in-Chief."

On 24 November, the Governor signalled the Chiefs of Staff saying that with the altered situation in the Mediterranean, due to the victory in North Africa, and the safe arrival of ^{'sledge'} ~~"BOMBERS"~~ and other Malta convoys, the system of command in the island should be the one laid down by the Prime Minister on 7 May:

In your capacity as Commander-in-Chief you will be Supreme Commander in the island. Where in your judgment the safety of the island is endangered you will exercise this authority in any manner which appears to you to be necessary. In general, however, you will:

- (a) be guided by the policy laid down by the Middle East Defence Committee;
- (b) refer to Middle East Defence Committee any specific question of importance if time permits.

In the event of an invasion you will command all Sea, Land and Air Forces located in or operating from Malta.

Subject to above, Service Commanders in Malta will remain under the command of their respective Commanders-in-Chief in Middle East. They will, however, keep you fully informed of all important signals exchanged with their respective Commanders-in-Chief.

Ibid. The Chiefs of Staff agreed this on 1 December 1942 and circulated an instruction that the Service Commanders in Malta were to be, from 2 December, "under the Command of the respective Commanders-in-Chief Middle East, except for the defence of the island." This led, on 31 January 1943, to the circulation to all Commanders-in-Chief and Flag Officers Abroad, by the Chiefs of Staff, of important principles for the operational control of air defence overseas. The case of Malta came within the scope of the second paragraph, "bases within the limit of a developed air defence system."

It was laid down in this paper from the Chiefs of Staff that in the case of bases situated within the limit of the day and night

/fighter

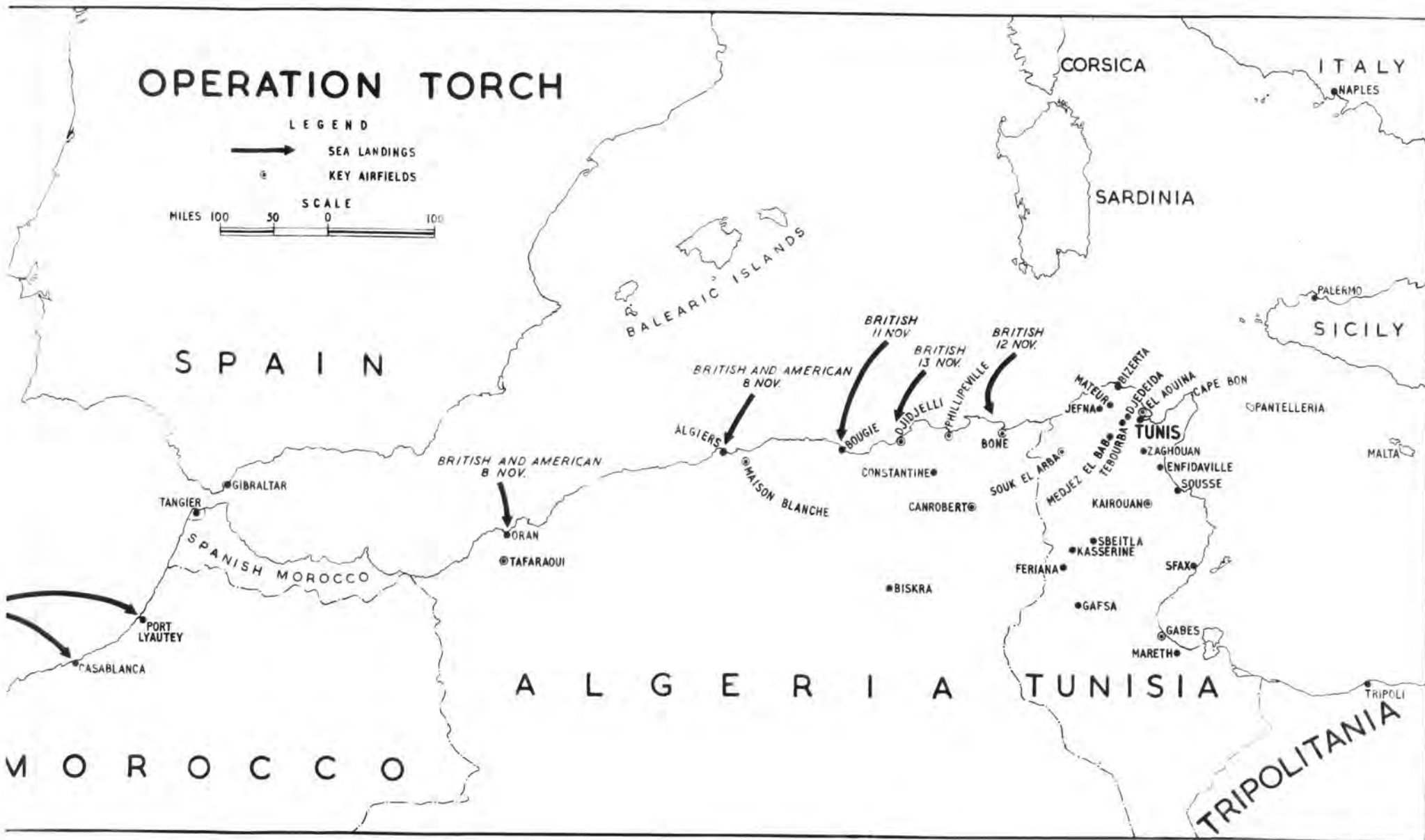
SECRET

OPERATION TORCH

LEGEND

→ SEA LANDINGS
● KEY AIRFIELDS

SCALE
MILES 100 50 0 100



Fighter defence lay-out, the Royal Air Force Commander would exercise operational control over the following elements of the air defence system:-

- (i) A.A. guns and searchlights allotted for the defence of bays or rear areas.
- (ii) Balloons
- (iii) Smoke screens
- (iv) Decoys
- (v) Issuing of air raid warnings.

^{An}~~The~~ immediate result of the Chiefs of Staff Instruction was that Malta's Defence Committee agreed to the appointment of the A.O.C. as an Air Defence Commander. There was also an improvement in the lay-out of light A.A. guns to give better protection to airfields, concerning which there had been some dispute between the A.O.C. and the C.R.A. (1)

A.V.M. Park signalled his personal thanks to Air Marshal Slessor who had apparently been largely responsible for this improvement in the status of the A.O.C. Malta.

Operational control of Air Defence at Malta was transferred to the A.O.C. on 8 February 1943. The move was timely. Ten days later in the reorganisation of command in the Mediterranean, Malta became a separate Air Command. This recognition of the A.O.C. Malta as the island's Air Defence Commander was also in keeping with the important role Malta-based aircraft were to play five months later in Operation "Husky" for which plans were already being prepared.

/ Chapter 19

(1) ^mThe Deputy Governor, Vice-Admiral Leatham, decided to refer the matter to Lord Gort who, the Admiral pointed out, had previously appointed himself Air Defence Commander and might wish to discuss the matter with the Chiefs of Staff whilst he happened to be in London for an operation. As it so happened Lord Gort agreed with the Chiefs of Staff.

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CHAPTER 19

THE PART PLAYED BY MALTA IN OPERATION "HUSKY"

Planning

The decision to launch the invasion of Sicily was taken at the "Symbol" Conference ⁽¹⁾ which was held at Anfa near Casablanca in January 1943. The Prime Minister, President Roosevelt, and the Combined Chiefs of Staff were present at the Conference which was also attended by General^S Eisenhower and Alexander and Air Chief Marshal Tedder.

Agreement was reached on 19 January for the conquest of Sicily with the object of:

- (a) making the line of Allied communications in the Mediterranean more secure;
- (b) diverting as much German strength as possible from the Russian front;
- (c) intensifying the pressure ^{on} ~~upon~~ Italy.

Combined
Chiefs of
Staff papers

On the assumption that the Tunisian Campaign would be finished by the end of April, the invasion was tentatively planned for the favourable period of the ^{July} ~~Italian~~ moon. Not until the third week in May were the final plans for Operation "Husky" set out in A.H.Q. Malta's own Operation Instructions Nos. 1 and 2. •That the Operation took place as originally conceived, at the "Symbol" Conference six months earlier, is all the more surprising when it is realised that plans for "Husky" were laid in Headquarters as far apart as Cairo, Algiers, and Oran, and the Allied assault was launched from bases in Middle East, Algeria, /Tunisia

(1) Also known as the Casablanca Conference. It began on 14 January 1943 and continued until the 24th. It was at this Conference that the decision for reorganisation of Command in the Mediterranean was also taken.

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of
Tunisia, Morocco, ^{the} United Kingdom, and the United States. ⁽¹⁾
~~Malta's role in the invasion of Sicily~~
The Governor of Malta was instructed by the Commander-in-Chief Middle East, on 23~~rd~~ February, that in order to meet the requirements of "Husky", certain preparations in Malta were to be given priority "subject only to the requirements of the security of the island and the successful conduct of current operations." First priority was to be given to the expansion of airfields (e.g. extension of runways, hard standings and approach roads, construction of pens and underground Control Rooms) in order to "receive, operate and maintain" a total of 24 squadrons by 1 May.

"Husky" Malta
A.H.B./VD/
119/102

Also, by 1 June, Valetta^hharbour had to be cleared "to allow of the freedom of manoeuvre and working of the maximum number of warships and merchant ships that can be accommodated." A force of two Army brigades embarked in 15 ships, together with their escort vessels, would have to be received and maintained. Subsequently this force would have to be embarked in 115 landing craft. Malta would also have to refuel, water and ammunition a large proportion of the Naval forces operating with the Eastern Task Force. This heavy commitment was later extended still further when it was decided that Malta should accommodate the Eastern Task Force Headquarters and so become the main ^{offensive} ~~defence~~ base for the invasion.

By 8 March, the administration plan for what was known in Malta as "the Summer Offensive" was circulated. ⁽²⁾ Malta's primary operational role was to obtain and maintain air superiority over Sicily, as well as over Malta. A secondary role would be reconnaissance, shipping strikes and day bombing. ⁽³⁾ To fulfil these tasks, Malta's air strength was to /be

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- (1) Altogether over 2,700 vessels of all kinds were employed on the operation on the first day. Some 218 landing craft were commissioned in the United States by 70,000 British officers and men and had crossed the Atlantic under their own power. During the first 48 hours they put ashore 7,000 vehicles, 300 tanks and 700 guns.
 - (2) This Administration Instruction was issued under the heading "Malta Air Command" which obviously from its initials was likely to lead to confusion with Mediterranean Air Command. There appears to have been no official sanction for the use of this title. Later it was dropped and the term A.H.Q. Malta revived.
 - (3) Malta's main non-operational role, apart from providing a convenient base for the Headquarters directing the invasion of Sicily in its early stages, was to act as an advanced radar base for shipping and landing craft.

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S E C R E T

be reinforced up to $24\frac{1}{2}$ squadrons.⁽¹⁾ This force was to consist of 12 Spitfire, 4 Kittyhawk, 2 Baltimore, 3 Lightning, 1 Mosquito, 1 G.R. (Composite), 1 Communications (Composite) and $\frac{1}{2}$ Beaufighter Squadron.

Ibid.

The scale of effort by this force of approximately 400 aircraft was assumed to be equivalent to ten weeks' sustained air effort. Arrangements were made for a Command Reserve to be laid down at Malta equivalent to the estimated requirements for two months.

The disposition of the force was:

Valetta Headquarters and Operations Room.

Hal Far 1 Kittyhawk Squadron
3 Spitfire Squadrons
1 Composite Squadron
(A.S.R. and Comm. Flight).

Luqa 2 Baltimore Squadrons
1 Mosquito Squadron
3 Lightning Squadrons
1 G.R. (Composite) Squadron
3 Kittyhawk Squadrons.

Ta Kali 4 Spitfire Squadrons
 $\frac{1}{2}$ Beaufighter Squadron

Krendi 3 Spitfire Squadrons.

Safi 2 Spitfire Squadrons.

The airfields would have their own Maintenance Wing Detachment with an additional one at R.A.F. Station Kalafrana. There were also 10 A.M.E.S. Stations.

Wastage, it was thought, would be very high, as all operations would take place either over the sea or over enemy territory. It was assumed to be 10 aircraft and engines a month (or 66.6 per cent) for every squadron of 16 I.E. For the whole fighter force this was estimated at 170 a month with an aircrew wastage of 127 a month.

Ibid.

The expansion of Malta's airfield capacity, in preparation for "Husky" was most remarkable. ³¹ At the beginning of May the A.O.C. Malta was able to inform the C.A.S. that the original plan for the expansion of airfield accommodation for 24 squadrons had been completed. Moreover,

/by

(1) This planned figure of $24\frac{1}{2}$ was subsequently raised until, with the U.S.A.A.F. and Fleet Air Arm squadron, Malta finally operated $38\frac{1}{2}$ squadrons.

S E C R E T

S E C R E T

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"Bigot" A.O.C. -
in-C.
Personal
File
A.H.B./IIJ4/183/
160(F)

by the middle of May, Malta would be able to take 27 squadrons which was the maximum they would be able to operate with reasonable efficiency from their five airfields.

The naval programme was held up, due to the heavy salvage work necessary on the quayside and approaches and the lack of suitable salvage plant. Later on, however, the situation was eased when the considerable labour force and plant which had been employed on the airfield were transferred to the docks.

In June at Gozo a sixth landing ground was constructed by the Americans in under three weeks from which later on five fighter squadrons operated.

Re-siting of the Operations Room

In preparation for "Husky", A.V.M. Park called a meeting on 11~~th~~ February to discuss the re-siting of the R.D.F. Filter Room. The existing Filter Room had become too small for the demands made on it, and by January 1943 was only operating at approximately two-thirds of its required capacity. It was also too far away from the Fighter Operations Room.

"Husky"
Malta
A.H.B./VD/
119/102

A.V.M. Park explained at the meeting that with the expansion of the island's Fighter strength the volume of work for the Filter Room was going to be more than doubled. There was, however, a large excavation in what was known as the Lascaris Tunnel which had been constructed in order to provide all three Services with office accommodation underground, in the event of a resumption of heavy air attacks. The A.O.C. thereupon suggested that the Lascaris Tunnel should be used to house all the Operations Room facilities, including the Filter Room, Fighter Operations Room and the combined No.248 Wing and Naval Operations Rooms. After inspection of the proposed new site, it was agreed to go forward with the construction of the Operations Room and this was quickly put in hand.

/Headquarters

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Headquarters
A.H.Q. Fighter Command were of great assistance in the preparation of this improved Fighter Ops. Room. On receipt of an urgent request from Malta, they immediately flew out diagrams of "TOTE" Air Raid Display Boards, together with certain items of equipment which could not be obtained locally ⁱⁿ ~~from~~ Malta.

A. 2. Malta
C.R.B.

The new Fighter Control Room was finished by the Royal Engineers in June. A month later during the assault phase of Operation "Husky", A.H.Q. Malta controlled from it 30 squadrons of day and night fighters. From this Control Room it was possible to obtain a picture of Allied and hostile aircraft movements to a distance of 100 miles and of shipping convoys to within 50 miles of Malta. In addition to fighter operations it controlled all air/sea rescue, balloon barrages, smoke screens and air-raid warnings.

The provision of this new underground Operations Room was only part of the extensive programme of tunnelling undertaken at Malta. Until November 1942, almost the whole of the specialised ^{labour} ~~naval~~ forces employed in the tunnelling had been engaged in providing Malta's civilian population with adequate bomb-proof shelters. When this work ^{on 7 October} had been finished the Governor proposed to the Chiefs of Staff that the following additional work should be undertaken:-

- (a) Underground workshops in the dockyard area.
- (b) An underground Supply Depot for the Army.
- (c) Underground generating plant for electricity.
- (d) Underground flour mill.
- (e) Storage for white oils.
- (f) Underground hangars for aircraft.
- (g) A new Army magazine.
- (h) Bomb-proof shelters for submarines.

"Husky"
Operations from
Malta. A.H.B./
ID3/2157.

The Middle East Defence Committee later extended this programme to include:-

/(a)

S E C R E T

- (a) Underground stores for fuel and supplies, both military and civilian, on a basis of a four-month safe storage of all essential commodities.
- (b) The expansion of underground accommodation for military and civil hospitals.
- (c) Additional underground workshops in the dockyard.
- (d) Underground Control Rooms and workshops for the Royal Air Force.

The total priority requirements at the end of January 1943 amounted to over half a million cubic yards of excavation work.

Initially, there was something in the nature of a sharp competition between the three Services for this very specialised labour force. Once, however, the policy had been laid down by the Chiefs of Staff along the line of certain fixed priorities, the work proceeded without undue friction. The Commanders-in-Chief Middle East were particularly generous in the help they gave to Malta at this time in providing additional personnel and equipment for mining and tunnelling.

Operation 'Husky': The Operational Air Plan

During the opening phase of the invasion of Sicily the Air Officer Commanding Malta, A.V.M. Park, was to be subordinate to the A.O.C. Tactical Air Force, A.V.M. Coningham, who was to control from his Operational Headquarters at Valetta all air forces operating from Malta, Gozo, and Pantelleria.⁽¹⁾ Before the actual assault, these forces would co-operate with the air forces based on North Africa in operations designed to reduce the effectiveness of the enemy air forces based on Sicily and Southern Italy. During the assault the task of Malta's Air Force would be:-

- (a) To afford maximum protection against air attack to our naval and military forces.
- (b) To locate, shadow and report any hostile surface forces which might threaten the Allied expedition.

/Once

(1) The Italian fortified island base of Pantelleria was captured on the morning of 11 June.

Malta Air
Plan. A.H.B./
IIJ5/83/42.

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l.c. h
Once air force control had been established ⁱⁿ over Sicily, selected ^a units would be despatched from Malta to operate under the Air Officer Commanding Desert Air Force. Aircraft would be controlled through the normal Fighter Control Channels and Fighter Controllers would be located in Headquarters' ships which would accompany the assault forces. ⁽¹⁾
The Fighter Control ships ^{have to} would be equipped with R.D.F. and V.H.F. for communication with the fighter patrols. The Fighter Controllers in these ships would take over the local control of fighters detailed to their area and then direct the fighters for the interception of enemy aircraft.

A.H.Q. Malta
Operation
Order No. 52
A.H.B./ILJ5/
83/65.

Fighters flying between Malta and Sicily were to be routed in such a way as to cover the Allied shipping lanes. Fighter escort would not be provided for shipping proceeding to and from the assault area^s, the exception being certain selected convoys, during D-1, while within 50 miles of Malta. Daily reconnaissance sorties were to be made to locate the major units of the enemy fleet, determine the ^{disposition} ~~possibilities~~ of his air forces, undertake such strategical reconnaissance as might be required by the Military Commander and also record bomb damage. Baltimores would stand by to locate and shadow any units of the Italian Fleet which might venture out to sea. Wellingtons would carry out "block" patrols of Messina and Taranto. ^A Tac/R Squadron would be included in No. 248 Wing to operate under the instructions of the Army Commander.

6020 /
The force assembled on the airfields at Malta, ² Gozo and Pantelleria from D-5 to D + 1 was to consist of 35 squadrons comprising 602 aircraft. As will be seen the figure eventually reached (including Fleet Air Arm and U.S.A.A.F.) was 38 $\frac{1}{2}$ squadrons or 670 aircraft.

/Instructions

(1) H.M.S. BULOLO and LARGS, U.S.S. ANGON and MONROVIA

SECRET

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- Instructions were given that by day ships were not to fire on
- (a) single-engined aircraft unless identified as hostile, or apparently of hostile intent;
 - (b) any aircraft in combat.

Ships were to engage all multi-engined aircraft not recognised as friendly. Merchant vessels were not to fire by day or night, unless the target had first been engaged by Naval ships. The ^{horizontal} ~~hostile~~ danger area ^{around} ~~of the~~ ships extended to 12,000 yards, in the case of cruisers, and to 1,500 yards in the case of merchant vessels.

Ibid

Preparatory Phase

By the beginning of June, preparations were sufficiently far advanced to permit the arrival of the squadrons scheduled for Operation "Husky". The Spitfire strength was increased by the arrival of Nos. 239, 244, 322 and 324 Wings, while the strength in night fighter and intruder aircraft was augmented by No. 600 Squadron (Beaufighters) and No. 256 Squadron (Mosquitos). This increased Malta's single-engined fighter forces from five to 23 Spitfire squadrons.

During the month, the reinforcement squadrons were busy training and acclimatising themselves to operating over the sea and the terrain where the battle was to be fought. This was a gradual process, every squadron being given on an average one sortie a day. Throughout June increasing fighter sweeps were made and protection given to the convoys carrying invasion material and personnel to Malta. // The enemy made repeated attempts to obtain photographs of shipping in the harbour at Valetta. Usually they were in formations of six aircraft which when over Malta split into a section of two reconnaissance aircraft, while the remaining section of four acted as high cover. These tactics met with but little success and losses were heavy. According to R.A.F. claims, the enemy had nine aircraft destroyed or damaged between the 1st and 10th June by which time their losses temporarily discouraged them from further attempts at reconnaissance.

/Escort

A H.Q. Malta and
a . Sqn.
O.R.Bs. and
D.I.Ss.

A.H.B./HJS/113/5/16

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Escort and diversionary sweeps by Malta's fighters were again provided for the heavy bombers of the U.S.A.A.F. IXth Bomber Command. On 9 June 40 Spitfires of Nos. 229, 249, 185 and 126 Squadrons acted as escort to Liberators bombing Gerbini and Catania and drove off 20 enemy aircraft which attempted to attack the bombers. They then safely escorted the Liberators back to Malta. These included three with engine trouble and two which had been badly damaged by flak. One of the latter crash-landed at Malta, the crew being injured. On 10, 11 ~~11/14~~ and 12 June, Spitfire bombers successfully attacked factories and marshalling yards at Pozzallo and Marzamini.

A period of heavy bombing by aircraft from North Africa, with Malta fighters providing the escort, followed. On 21 May, 120 Spitfires made a series of sweeps over the airfields of south-east Sicily. This challenge, however, failed to bring the enemy fighters to combat. Towards the end of the month, these airfields which were so important a part of the invasion plans, were repeatedly attacked by Spitfire bombers, in order to assist still further in the reduction of the enemy air forces. ⁽¹⁾

Beaufighters made numerous sorties on free-lance and interception patrols over southern Sicily and also intruder patrols against road and rail communications. The main task of the Mosquitos was intruder work against Sicilian airfields, but sorties were extended as far north as Foggia. There was very little activity on the Sicilian airfields, mainly due to the intensive day bombing. Wing bomb-racks had been introduced on the Mark VI Mosquito, thus increasing the offensive armament. During the moon period, attacks were concentrated on the railways and installations in southern Italy, ~~as far north as Foggia~~, and also in Sicily where 40 bombing attacks and 54 machine-gun attacks

Ibid.

/were

(1) Throughout the period March to June the enemy had been active extending the airfield facilities in Sicily and Sardinia. In March these were estimated to total 19, but by the end of June the number had risen to at least 30.

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were made. Seven locomotives were hit. Bombing attacks were also carried out on the docks and harbour installations at Milazzo and Termini Imereze, a factory at Trebisacce, a power station at Marine di Catanzaro and a W/T station.

A.H.B. List of
Enemy Shipping
Losses in the
Mediterranean.

Attacks on shipping at sea by Malta-based aircraft, during June, were few due to the paucity of targets. Supplies to Sicily were carried out either by the Messina train ferry, or coastal vessels which kept well inshore. Out of the 37 ships totalling 80,734 tons sunk during June, 19 ships of 31,418 tons were sunk by Allied aircraft. Of this total, 13 ships of 27,346 tons were sunk in harbour by U.S.A.A.F. heavy bombers. The most successful attack by Malta-based aircraft was when the ⁿNaval tanker ^(1339 tons)Velino was sunk, on the night 19/20, by an Albacore of No. 828 Squadron which managed to penetrate the very considerable harbour defences of Syracuse.

Reconnaissance established that there had been a sharp drop in the number of aircraft in Sicily, due to the withdrawal to southern Italy of transport aircraft and bombers. Although, on the other hand, there had been a slight rise - in the region of 10 per cent - in the number of fighters based on Sicily.

Q.
A.H. Malta
and squadrons
O.A.B.S.

The work of No. 683 Reconnaissance Squadron based on Malta was supplemented by No. 682 Squadron which operated from La Marsa in Tunisia. It was noted that the Italian Fleet was being prepared against the possibility of invasion. The three ^cLittorio-class battleships were at La Spezia, with a supporting squadron of three six-inch cruisers at Genoa. Two heavy eight-inch cruisers and one six-inch were undergoing repairs and the conversion of the liner Roma into an aircraft carrier was seen to be continuing, under a heavy camouflage of netting.

During the first nine days of July, Malta-based aircraft again co-operated very closely with aircraft of the North-West African Air Force^{s.} For weeks past, the chief objectives of the Spitfire bombers had been the Sicilian airfields. During the period immediately

/preceding

S E C R E T

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A.H.Q. Malta
O.R.B. &
D.I.S.s.
A.H.B./II JS/113/5/15

preceding the invasion, the bombing attacks were intensified and combined with sweeps and escort to the bombers from North Africa. During the first three days of July, Spitfire bombers concentrated their main attacks on the important enemy airfield at Biscari. From the 4th to the 9th they also provided escort for North African Mitchells, Marauders and Fortresses, helping them in their task of preventing the build-up of enemy military resources in Sicily and reducing their fighter force. The effectiveness of this escort work was apparent in the way which the enemy fighters were prevented from interfering with the bombers.

A.H.B.6 & H.Q.
Middle East
Weekly Service-
ability State
A.H.B./VB/9/1.

From the 1st to the 9th July, Malta Spitfires claimed 47 enemy fighters destroyed or damaged. In these and subsequent operations, however, it is impossible to separate the effects of Malta's air effort from that made by aircraft of the rest of the Mediterranean Air Command. The result of this preparatory Allied air action was evident in the low level of enemy aircraft serviceability. This dropped to well under 50 per cent compared with Malta's average Spitfire serviceability of 88 per cent.

A.H.Q. Malta
O.R.B.

Another important effect was the decline in enemy morale. Not only did the Axis fighters refuse consistently to press home their attacks, but aircrew taken prisoner complained of their life in slit trenches, their food and nomadic existence which compelled them to operate in turn from the south of France, from Sardinia and then southern Italy. Thus it is seen that the ordeal of very concentrated air attack to which Malta had been subjected for so long was now being avenged in good measure.

Final Preparations for the Invasion

By July, the 33rd ^{Fighter} ~~Bombardment~~ Group U.S.A.A.F. (Kittyhawks) had been moved to Pantelleria and the 31st ^{Fighter} ~~Bombardment~~ Group U.S.A.A.F. (Spitfires) to the recently completed airfield on the island of Gozo. By 3 July all the Spitfire Units had been transferred to Malta. On D-4, the Air Officer Commanding N.A.T.A.F., Air Vice-Marshal Coningham, accompanied the 15th Army Group Headquarters to Malta from where he directed the

/ air

SECRET

~~Air Force~~ through the Air Officer Commanding Malta. A.V.M.

Cunningham remained on Malta until D + 6, when he returned to the Allied Command post at La Marsa. (1)

A.H.Q.
Malta
O.R.B.

Day Fighters
Night Fighters
Night Intruders
Tactical Reconnaissance
Fighter Bombers
Fighter Escort to Shipping
Air/Sea Rescue
Balloon Barrages
Smoke Screens and Air-raid Warnings

By D-Day, the force assembled on the islands of Malta, Gozo and Pantelleria, including Fleet Air Arm and the U.S.A.A.F., comprised 381 squadrons or 670 aircraft, located as follows:-

	<u>Squadrons</u>	<u>Aircraft</u>
Hal Far (No. 324 Wing)	6	95
Luqa (No. 244 Wing)	11½	185
Ta Kali (No. 322 Wing)	7½	110
Safi	4	64
Krendi	3	48
Kalafrana	½	3
Gozo (31st Group U.S.A.A.F.)	3	75
Pantelleria (33rd " ")	3	90
<i>Total</i>	<u>38½</u>	<u>670</u>

By types, this force was made up of:-

/R. A. F. Squadrons

(1) Five days before the invasion the Commander-in-Chief Mediterranean, Admiral Sir Andrew Cunningham, transferred his H.Q. from Algiers to Malta.

R. A. F. Squadrons

	<u>Type</u>	<u>Squadrons</u>
A.H.Q. Malta O.R.B. Appendices.	Spitfire	20
	P.R.U. Spitfire	1
	Tac/R Spitfire	1
	Hurricane	$\frac{1}{2}$
	Kittyhawk	3
	Mosquito <i>fighter</i>	$1\frac{1}{2}$
	Night/Beaufighter	$1\frac{1}{2}$
	Baltimore G.R.	$\frac{1}{2}$
	Night Reconnaissance	
	Torpedo/Bomber	$\frac{1}{2}$
	Air/Sea Rescue/ Communications	1
	Catalina	$\frac{1}{2}$
	■ Albacore	$1\frac{1}{2}$
		<hr/>

32 $\frac{1}{2}$

U.S.A.A.F. Squadrons

Spitfire	3	
Kittyhawk (P40)	3	6
		<hr/>

38 $\frac{1}{2}$

■ No. 826 Squadron and No. 815 Squadron Fleet Air Arm.
The half squadron of No. 815 was non-operational.

Para. // By early July the air offensive with N.A.A.F. bombers, escorted mainly by Malta-based Spitfires and directed against the Sicilian airfields, quickly increased its momentum. On 1 July, 20 Spitfire bombers attacked Biscari, on 2 July, 63 Spitfires carried out ~~invasion sweeps~~ ^{offensive sweeps}, on 3 July six Spitfire bombers attacked Biscari and 35 Spitfires acted as ~~escort~~ ^{escort} to N.A.A.F. bombers. On 4 July the number of Malta-based Spitfires providing escort to Fortresses and Mitchells bombing Gerbini and Catania had risen to 177.

A.H.Q. Malta
O.R.B. and
T.S.
A.H.B./IIJS/113/5/15

A similar programme was carried out on 5 July by 176 Spitfires acting as escort to Mitchells and Fortresses of N.A.A.F., bombing the airfields at Comiso, Biscari and Gerbini. On 6, 7 and 8 July, a daily average of 250 Spitfires escorted N.A.A.F. bombers, which on 6 July totalled 611 aircraft, against the same targets. On 9 July, according to the planned programme, the emphasis had shifted to the protection of the invasion fleet which absorbed 324 out of a total of 503 offensive fighter sorties.

575

S E C R E T

During these first nine days of July preceding the invasion Mosquitos were also active on intruder patrols over Sicily. They frequently found that their efforts were baulked by the raids by the bombers from North Africa. The P.R.U. Spitfires of No. 683 Squadron were also busy on reconnaissance not only over Sicily and Sardinia but over the whole of the southern part of Italy. In this way a complete mosaic of the invasion beachheads was built up, and a daily check ^{also} was kept on the disposition of the enemy air and naval forces.

Axis Air Strength at the Time of the Launching of Operation "Husky"

The concentrated air offensive on the Axis air bases on Sicily and Sardinia had a marked effect on the strength and efficiency of the German Air Force. After the collapse of Axis resistance in North Africa, and faced with the prospect of invasion in either the Central or Eastern Mediterranean, a general strengthening and reorganisation of the G.A.F. operational commands had been carried out. ~~There~~ Luftflotte 2 which had been centralised under Kesselring was divided into two separate commands, both of Luftflotte status. With the new reorganisation Luftflotte 2 now covered only Italy and the Central Mediterranean. The other command, Luftwaffe Command South East, covered south-east Europe, including Greece, Crete and the Balkans. The Luftwaffe H.Q. staff was strengthened by the transfer of experienced commanders from Russia. Von Richthofen, promoted Field Marshal in February 1943, took over the command of Luftflotte 2. Under him, and in command of Fliegerkorps II, was General Buelowis. ^a /u Tactical Command in Sicily was given to General Mahncke. At the same time, General Galland, Inspector of Fighters and Ground Attack Aircraft, was detached to the Mediterranean in order to accelerate the supply of fighter pilots and aircraft and so help restore efficiency and morale. No effort was spared to strengthen the German Air Force in the Mediterranean and, between the end of the fighting in North Africa and 3 July the strength of units in the Mediterranean rose from

/820

S E C R E T

A.H.G. 6 r
"Rise and Fall of
the German Air
Force"

ibid.

A.H.B. 6 and
"Rise and
Fall of the
German Air
Force"]

820 aircraft to 1,280 or by more than 50 per cent. The allocation of single-engined fighters to the Mediterranean amounted to more than 40 per cent of the total German production.

In spite of the overall strengthening of the G.A.F. in the Mediterranean, the decline in the strength of the Luftwaffe units based on Sicily and Sardinia, due to the all-out air offensive against their bases, was most dramatic. On 20 May, there was a force of 460 German aircraft on Sicily, 260 of them serviceable. However, by 10 July, the first day of the "Husky" invasion, there were only 221, of which 92 were serviceable. All the bombers, of which there had been 82 (47 serviceable) on 20 May, had been forced to evacuate Sicily in favour of bases in central and southern Italy where the force had risen from 56 aircraft (27 serviceable) on 20 May to 514 (326 serviceable) on 10 July. The bomber force in central and southern Italy rose from 19 aircraft (12 serviceable) to 304 (185 serviceable).

A.H.B. 6

The decline was not so marked for the Luftwaffe units on Sardinia, where there was a force of 166 aircraft on 20 May (106 serviceable) which had dropped gradually to 148 (101 serviceable) by 10 July. The German bombers had been driven from Sardinia by the second week in June, but on Sicily their numbers had been largely made up by an increase in the number of fighters and fighter-bombers. Part of the bomber force, 63 in all (56 serviceable), was also located in southern France.

The overall picture of the G.A.F. in the ^central and ^southern Mediterranean (Sicily, Sardinia, north-west, central and southern Italy, and southern France) showed a marked increase from a total force of 683 aircraft of all types (394 serviceable) on 20 May to 986 (596 serviceable) on 10 July. It is thus apparent that although by D-Day there was a very considerable Luftwaffe force available, ~~for operations against the invaders,~~ due to the constant pressure maintained by the Allied Air Forces, the enemy were never able ~~to~~ adequately to deploy these forces against the invaders. In spite of the severe losses

/sustained

sustained during the last phase of the fighting in North Africa, at the beginning of Operation "Husky", there was still an air transportation fleet of 149 aircraft^{mainly Ju. 52s} to assist in the sudden switch of air strength throughout the theatre.

On 9 July the Italians had only four bombers on Sicily, none of them serviceable, and 159 fighters, of which only 39 were serviceable. On Sardinia they had 17 bombers (10 serviceable) and 130 fighters (84 serviceable). The Italian Air Force strength in Sicily, Sardinia, central and southern Italy on 9 July amounted to a total of 159 bombers (56 serviceable) and 380 fighters (217 serviceable). However, there is ^{no} ~~very little~~ evidence that the Italians took any very active part in the fighting.

Between the close of the Tunisian Campaign and the invasion of Sicily (14 May to 9 July 1943) Luftflotte 2 lost 435 aircraft, 103 not by enemy action, in the Western and Central Mediterranean. In those three months, therefore, Luftflotte 2 had lost from operational causes approximately one half of the force of 683 aircraft with which on 20 May they had started this phase of the War in the Mediterranean. ⁽¹⁾

Phase II: ~~III~~ Protection of "Husky" Convoys

It was planned to launch the attack on the south-eastern and southern coasts of Sicily in three separate^{but adjoining} sectors stretching for about 100 miles from Syracuse to Licata. The assault on the south-east corner of the island was made by the Eastern Task Force (British) and that on the south coast by the Western Task Force (American).

Altogether, well over 2,700 vessels of all kinds were employed in the operation on the first day. The general plan was to use two-thirds of the available fighter effort ^{on close} ~~with escort~~ /escort of convoys when they came within 50 miles of Malta. The remaining third was employed on giving escort to bomber formations in their attacks on enemy airfields in Sicily.

/Each

"War at Sea"
Vol. IV

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- (1) After the occupation of the Sicilian airfields, nearly 1,000 enemy aircraft (were counted) which had been abandoned for various reasons. They comprised mainly German fighters and a large number of Italian Macchi 200s and 202s.

Each squadron was required to fly two squadron sorties during the day. To help protect the convoys after dark, fighter intruders operated over enemy airfields in Sicily and southern Italy. Beau-fighters and Mosquitos, equipped with A.I., were also employed throughout the night as a screen between the enemy airfields and the advancing convoys. These aircraft were controlled by the G.C.I.

A.H.Q. Malta stations on Malta and those ~~which were~~ carried in Tank Landing Craft.
O.R.B.

The seaborne invasion, timed to begin at first light on 10 July, was preceded by an airborne ^{assault} ~~escort~~, Operations "Ladbroke" and "Husky I". During the night 9/10 July, Malta provided visual and radio aids to navigation for the 450 transport aircraft and gliders involved in the two airborne assaults, the one on the south-east and the other on the south-west coast of Sicily. ~~A screen of A.I. night fighters and night intruders provided protection.~~ Hurricane cannon fighters led the airborne formations across the coast of Sicily and attacked enemy searchlights whenever they exposed their ^{beams.} ~~beings.~~ Although two Hurricanes failed to return, no enemy reaction was reported.

Phase III: The Assault

General Galland, Inspector of Fighter and Ground-Attack Aircraft, was reported to have joined Field Marshal Kesselring, Commander-in-Chief South, and Field Marshal Richthofen, Commander of Luftflotte 2 in the Central Mediterranean at German Air Force Headquarters in southern ^{Sicily} ~~Italy~~, on 7 July. On the following day, Axis reports stated that Allied preparations were complete and that a landing was probable within 48 hours. But they were not certain ~~where~~ where the blow would fall.

A.H.Q. Malta
O.R.B. and
Monthly Int.
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.H.B./ILJ5/
113/5/16

One of the most surprising lapses on the part of the enemy was their failure to reconnoitre Malta during the eight days preceding the invasion. An enemy report provides ~~somewhat~~ interesting information on this subject. In the Central Mediterranean area, ^{on 30 June,} ~~the~~ Luftwaffe's reconnaissance force consisted of six Ju. 88s (three serviceable) at Frosinone, southern Italy, and eight Ju. 88s (six serviceable) and

/four

SECRET

four Me.410s (three serviceable) at Trapani. By 10 July, the date of the invasion, there were five Ju.88s at Frosinon^e, three of them serviceable, and at Trapani 11 Ju.88s (five serviceable) and four Me.410s (three serviceable). According to this report the Allied fighter strength prevented the use of the Ju.88 A-4. The Me.410 was alone used and these machines, even when operating from Sicily, could cover no more distant target than Algiers or Tripoli. These machines were also subject to engine failure.

A. "B-6

In mid-June the reconnaissance unit 1(F)123 with eight Ju.88 Ts was transferred from Buc near Versailles to Frosinon^e. This particular Mark of Ju.88 had a ceiling of 9,500 metres and was considerably faster than the Ju.88 A-4 and, as it was fitted with the G.M.I. boost, the aircraft's speed could be increased from between 50 to 70 kilometres at a height of over 21,000 feet. At first these aircraft were able to bring back useful photographic cover of all the North African harbours and of Malta. However, the heavy losses these aircraft sustained caused the enemy to revise their ideas. The Gruppe then requested the delivery of Ju.88s with apparatus for night photography, together with trained crews. These were in turn a failure as the crews had had no experience of operational flying and "usually failed to find their target through faulty navigation." There was also a large number of technical failures in the photographic apparatus. However, the basic reason for the enemy failure to reconnoitre Malta during this important period was undoubtedly the island's formidable strength in single-engined fighters.

Also in spite of the heavy concentrations of shipping there was no serious attempt to attack the island. On 2 July an alert was sounded from 15.40 to 15.55 hours for ^{plus} 7~~4~~ enemy aircraft which crossed the coast and made a fast high-flying sweep over the island. At 15.40 hours six Spitfires of No. 23 Squadron were airborne to intercept, but they failed to locate the enemy aircraft. There was, however, ~~also~~ ^{also} considerable /uncertainty

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uncertainty about Allied concentrations of shipping at this time as reconnaissance Ju.88s patrolled the whole of the Mediterranean between the North Algerian coast and the south^{east} approaches to Greece and Crete. It was reported by prisoners of war that at 16.00 hours on 7 July a reconnaissance Ju.88 based at Frosinone^e took off from an advanced landing ground at Crotone to search for invasion units to the north and east of Malta, but it crashed into the sea to the east of Malta due to engine trouble. The loss of this particular aircraft is confirmed by enemy records.

A.H.B.6

A.H.R.

A.H. Malta

O.R.B. Appendixes.

The primary task of the fighter forces under the command of the A.O.C. Malta was to afford the maximum fighter cover to shipping lying off the beaches and to assist the airmen to get ashore. The distribution of the fighter forces from Malta, Gozo and Pantelleria to the five landing areas was:-

<u>Landing Area</u>	<u>Fighters</u>	<u>Base</u>
GENT	5 R.A.F. Spitfire Sqdns.	Malta
BARK	do.	"
ACID	do.	"
JOSS	33rd U.S.A. Fighter Group.	Pantelleria
DIME	31st do.	Gozo

As there were insufficient fighters to provide patrols to all five beaches throughout the 16 hours of daylight, an elaborate programme of fighter patrols was drawn up.

- (i) At least one or two of the landing areas was to be given cover throughout the 16 hours.
- (ii) Fighter patrols were made at squadron strength.
- (iii) All five beaches were given continuous fighter patrols during the first one and a half hours of daylight and the last hour of the daylight.
- (iv) Additional fighter patrols were also given at fixed intervals (i.e. between 07.30 and 08.30, 11.30 and 12.30 and 16.00 and 17.00 hours) which were times when it was anticipated that the enemy might attack in strength.
- (v) The Reserve Spitfire Wing was kept at a high standard of readiness to reinforce any of the landing areas that required help.

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A.H.B.6 The contemporary estimate was that, on Sicily, the enemy had 200 fighters evenly divided between the south-eastern and north-western airfields. From enemy records there were on Sicily, excluding reconnaissance, 194 German fighters (79 serviceable) and 159 Italian fighters (39 serviceable). On Sardinia, there were a further 130 German fighters (89 serviceable) and 130 Italian fighters (84 serviceable). The majority of the enemy attacks were made against shipping off Licata and Gela, where the American ships were lying some six miles off the beach. The British ships lay close in to the beaches in the south-east of Sicily and the fighter patrols were thus able to give more adequate protection to the beaches and the small craft plying between the ships and the beaches. At the beginning of the day the fighter squadrons patrolled at heights between 5,000 to 8,000 feet. However, our aircraft were engaged so often by the A.A. guns of the ships that squadrons were driven up to between 10,000 feet and 14,000 feet. But, even at that height, they were still frequently engaged by the ships' A.A. guns.

A.H.Q. Malta On D-Day, fighters under the control of A.H.Q. Malta flew
O.R.B. and 1082 sorties on beach patrols. A further 37 were flown by the reserve
D.I.Ss. Spitfire Wing in providing fighter cover to N.A.A.F. medium bombers
A.H.B. /IIJS/113/5/15 attacking the airfields in the south of Sicily. P.R. Spitfires flew
14 sorties and Baltimores and Wellingtons two each. Mosquitos and
Beaufighters flew 27 sorties. There was also one sortie by an Air/Sea
Rescue aircraft. Thus the sorties on D-Day totalled 1165.
Malta Spitfires saw only 57 enemy fighters during the day. Usually
the fighters avoided combat, but claims were made of 10 enemy aircraft
destroyed (six German and four Italian). German aircraft destroyed on
10 July totalled 19, the cause of the loss of 13 of these being either
"not reported" or "unknown". The Italians, whose exact losses are
unknown, concentrated on the standing patrols in the Catania area. The
only time they ventured further south three Macchi 200s were shot down.
A very high

/level

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level of protection was afforded convoys by the Malta-based fighters, and it is extraordinary that on D-Day, out of this vast invasion fleet, only one ship, the hospital ship Talamba, was sunk. She was fully lit, three miles clear of the main anchorage of Acid beach, with no other shipping within three miles, when at 22.00 hours she was bombed and sunk by a solitary Ju.88. Casualties were considerable.

Throughout D-Day the P.40 fighter-bombers of No. 239 Wing (No. 3 R.A.A.F. 112, 250, 260 and 450 R.A.A.F. Squadrons) were kept at readiness to answer calls for close support from the Eighth Army but no requests were made.

A.H.Q. Malta
O.R.B.

The Enemy Air Force Dominated

During the assault on D-Day and ^{plus} D+1, the Malta-based fighter squadrons averaged three sorties a day. By the fifth day of the invasion, however, the enemy air ^{opposition} ~~operations~~ had been completely broken. Squadrons were moving forward from Malta, and Malta's effort had been reduced to one task for each squadron a day. The strength of patrols was reduced from 12 to eight fighters and standing patrols in the south of Sicily were discontinued. As the enemy attacks on the beaches and shipping decreased by day, they rapidly increased by night. Fortunately, enemy attacks were confined to the ports of Augusta and Syracuse and shipping along that part of the coast.

Night fighters from Malta were, therefore, well-positioned to counter these attacks and were sent out throughout the night to operate under the control of G.C.I. stations located in south-east Sicily. When the density of enemy raiders was high, these forward G.C.I. stations were able to place the night-fighter Beaufighters and Mosquitos directly in the flow of the attacking enemy aircraft. They were helped by the conditions of bright moonlight and good visibility, and thus succeeded in inflicting heavy losses on the enemy bombers. It is impossible to separate enemy losses of day bombers ^{from night bombers.} The R.A.F. claimed 13 destroyed on one night and 53 destroyed in the first week of the invasion.

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The German night bombers were particularly active throughout the night 12/13 July when they first adopted the policy of switching to night attacks. There were approximately 110 Ju.88s, He.111s and Cant. ^{1007s} ~~1007s~~ operating from bases in southern Italy. These bombers were later strengthened with a force of 30 torpedo-carrying Ju.88s and He.111s which arrived at Grosseto ⁺ from the south of France to take part in the attacks against Allied shipping.

Enemy air losses mounted rapidly, ^{first} within the ~~next~~ week of the "Husky" invasion. G.A.F. operational losses in the Western and Central Mediterranean totalled 268 aircraft. These included 59 by bombing raid, 30 destroyed on the ground by their own forces and three by sabotage. Initially in their bombing raids the ^{German} ~~German~~ used Ju.88s but after they had suffered heavily these aircraft were replaced mainly by F.W.190 fighter-bombers. On the 12th and 13th July a number of Ju.87s were introduced but these proved a ^{costly} ~~ghastly~~ failure. (1)

Later in the month, the enemy turned their attention to ^{the} shipping concentrations at Malta. During the night 19/20 July a force of approximately 25 Ju.88s and He.111s from the Viterbo ^b / Practica di Mare area operated over the Grand Harbour. A.A. and naval guns engaged the raiders and four Beaufighters and a Mosquito were promptly ^{as} airborne but no success ^{es} were claimed. Bombs were dropped in the Grand Harbour and on Valetta, Floriana, Sliema, St. Julians and St. Paul's Bay. No damage was done to military installations or Service personnel, but civilian property was hit and there were a number of casualties. The second big night raid on Malta was on the night 25/26 July when another 25 Ju.88s and He.111s tried to bomb shipping off the Grand Harbour. Again, no damage was done to Service property and there were no Service casualties. Beaufighters of No. 108 Squadron and Mosquitos of No. 256 / Squadron

A.H.Q. Malta
and Sqdn.
O.R.Bs. and
D.I.Ss.

A.H.Q. 115/113/5/15

- (1) On 13 July the Spitfires claimed to have destroyed five out of a formation of 12 Ju.87s, the remaining seven having suffered damage. These were principally Italian-manned and there is no trace of the use of these obsolete dive-bombers by the Germans during this particular period.

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Squadron which were out on interception patrols over Sicily were vectored on to the raiders to the north of Malta. Claims were made of ^{six} ~~this~~ aircraft shot down either by night fighters or A.A. gunfire.

The Switch of Squadrons from Malta to Sicily

87 The force assembled on Malta for the invasion was, as has already been noted, composed almost entirely of single-engined fighters, but as airfields were captured in Sicily the fighter squadrons were sent forward from Malta. The first to go on 13 July were Nos. 1, 92 and 145 S.A.A.F. and 601 Spitfire Squadrons which were transferred from Luqa to Pachino, and Nos. 43, 93 and 243 Spitfire Squadrons from Hal Far to Comiso on 14 July. Nos. 72 and 111 Spitfire Squadrons went from Hal Far and Safi respectively to Comiso on 15 July. No. 417 R.C.A.F. Squadron left Luqa for Pachino on 16 July and the whole of No. 322 Wing (Nos. 81, 152, 154, 232 and 242 Spitfire Squadrons) left Ta Kali for Lentini between the 20th and 22nd July. ^{The 2nd Desert Fighter} ~~No. 33~~ ^{Desert} ~~Desert~~ Group U.S.A.A.F. left Pantelleria for Licata on 14 July and ^{The 1st Desert Fighter} ~~No. 31~~ ^{Desert} ~~Desert~~ Group U.S.A.A.F. moved from the island of Gozo to Licata and Ponte Olivo on 15 July.

A.H.Q. Malta
O.R.B. ~~and~~
Int. Sums.

87 To replace the single-engined fighter squadrons, Malta called forward fighter-bomber squadrons from Africa. These comprised the whole of No. 239 Wing (No. 3 R.A.A.F., 112, 250, 260 and 450 R.A.A.F. Squadrons). Then, as additional airfields became available in Sicily, these fighter-bomber squadrons were sent forward to operate under the Desert Air Force in Sicily. Malta then called in the two light bomber Wings and a U.S.A.A.F. Group of T.B.F., Nos. 3 S.A.A.F. and 232 Wings and the 47th Group ^{Squadron} ~~Wing~~ U.S.A.A.F. comprising Nos. 12, 21 and 24 S.A.A.F., 55, 23, 84, 85, 86 and 97 Squadrons ^{U.S.A.A.F.} ~~which~~ ^{to Sicily} which were transferred between 20 and 23 July. Only five Spitfire Squadrons were retained in Malta for the protection of shipping and local air defence.

Some delay was experienced in bringing the airfields in the Gela-Licata area into use due to the fact that supplies for the Air Force were not being moved forward quickly enough from the beaches. In turn,

/this

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this delayed the move of certain of the fighter squadrons from Malta. Delay was also caused by the Eighth Army's failure to capture the Gerbini airfields as quickly as had been forecast. Generally speaking, however, the move of squadrons from Malta to Sicily and North Africa to Malta proceeded according to plan.

H.Q. Malta
J.R.B. App.E

By the end of July, Malta-based aircraft had flown 9,950 sorties, the two periods of peak activity being the first two days of the invasion (10 and 11 July) when 1,165 and 1,032 sorties were flown, respectively.

Close Support for the Eighth Army from Malta

After the occupation of the airfields to the south of Gerbini by the Eighth Army it was found that the surfaces were in such poor condition from the concentrated bombing that it was ~~found~~ necessary to provide close support from Malta for rather longer than had been originally planned. Although there were five fighter-bomber squadrons in Malta, few direct calls on their services were received from the Eighth Army. On 12 July, the advance from Syracuse to Augusta was held up near Priolo and the Malta Kitty bombers were called on to attack enemy gun positions there. Other targets attacked, in default of close support targets, were railways, ~~and enemy gun positions~~. Before moving into ^{Sicily} ~~Sicily~~, these fighter-bomber squadrons made a total of 270 sorties. H.Q. N.A.T.A.F. made a number of calls on heavy bombers but only a few targets were found to be suitable and for this reason these requests were usually disallowed. On occasion the heavy bombers were sent into the battle area without Malta having been informed. It was thus impossible to provide either fighter escort or cover. // A.H.Q. / Para. 1

Malta also complained that the medium bombers were being detailed to attack targets by night without Malta being advised. This was in the area of the enemy bombers' maximum activity, where Malta's night-fighters were being continuously employed. This had the result that the night-fighters were frequently vectored to intercept friendly aircraft, when they might have been engaging the enemy. There was

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also, of course, the attendant risk that bombers might be shot down by our own night-fighters. Prior to the "Husky" Operation, H.Q. N.A.T.A.F. had always kept Malta fully informed of their night-bombing programme.

Operations by Malta-based Light Bombers

As has been noted, No. 3 S.A.A.F. Wing, 232 Wing and the 47th Group U.S.A.A.F. were transferred to Malta between 20 and 23 July. The light bomber offensive by these Desert Air Force formations developed rapidly and in a way that had a considerable effect on the current land operations. They began on 22 July with attacks by 95 Bostons and ^{on} Baltimores ~~at~~ targets at Troina, Adrano, Paterno and Misterbianco. A very concentrated series of raids was carried out on 26 July when the impressive total of 210 Bostons and Baltimores attacked communications at Regalbuto. Beginning at 08.00 hours they continued throughout the day at fixed intervals with formations of 12 aircraft. Within eight days the number of sorties carried out by the night bombers amounted to 930, their main target being enemy communications and defended positions.

Malta O.R.B.
and D.I.S.
R.H.B./IIJ5/113/5/15

Anti-Shipping Operations July 1943: Sinking of the Italian Submarine Romolo 17/18 July

While the Spitfires and Beaufighters from Malta were continuing to provide escort to the large convoys sailing to and from southern Italy, others were busy keeping a close watch on enemy shipping and naval units off southern Italy. Suitable targets for anti-shipping strikes from Malta were, however, scarce. During the month, ^{out of} a total of 83,661 tons of enemy merchant shipping sunk, aircraft accounted for 36,288 tons, the Navy 44,937 tons, and mines 2,436 tons. In spite of numerous attacks ^{of enemy merchant vessels} there were no sinkings ^{other than} by Malta-based aircraft, ~~except of~~ ^{of} vessels of very small tonnage.

List of Enemy
Shipping
sunk in the
Mediterranean.

Malta's main success during July was the sinking of the Italian submarine Romolo of 2,200 tons. The Romolo and the Remo ~~were~~ ^{had been} commissioned in the previous year, but were actually in service for only

/a

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Bragadin
"Che ha fatto
la Marina?"

a few days when they were both sunk. They were ocean-going craft and designed especially for journeys to Japan in order to obtain much-needed raw materials. Both the Remo and Romolo were endeavouring to make the passage of the Straits of Messina from east to west, passing from the Ionian to the Tyrrhenian Seas. On 15 July the submarine United sank the Remo in the Gulf of Taranto with two torpedo hits.

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No. 221 Sqdn.
O.R.B.

On the night 17/18 July, two Wellingtons of No. 221 Squadron Detachment were out on anti-shipping patrols when what was described as a "large Italian submarine" was sighted about 40 miles to the east of Augusta (37° 19' N. 16° 41' E.). Two attacks were made on the submarine, one by Wellington MP.617 (F.O. W. Lewis) with five ^depth-charges, which straddled the submarine, one of them exploding under the hull. She was also attacked with gun fire. After the attack the Romolo stayed on the surface, circling as if out of control with fumes and smoke coming from the conning-tower. The second Wellington, HZ.116 (P. O. E. Austin), ^{located} ~~attacked~~ a submarine estimated to be about 1,000 tons in much the same position. She was attacked with five depth charges one of which again exploded under the hull. The submarine remained stationary for half an hour and then steered an erratic course, leaving a great quantity of oil in her wake. No claim of a sinking was made and at the time it was thought that two separate submarines were involved. Enemy documents have established that she was in fact the Romolo. The loss of both these large ocean-going submarines within three days was undoubtedly a serious blow to the Italian Navy.

The Fall of Mussolini, 25 July

The resignation of Mussolini which was announced on 25 July followed a meeting of the Fascist Grand Council at which a resolution to ask the King to assume command of the armed forces was carried by nineteen votes to seven. Marshal Badoglio then issued a proclamation

/that

that by the King's order he had assumed the Military government. Two days later, after forming a new Cabinet, the Fascist Party was dissolved.

Operations by Malta-based Aircraft up to the Fall of Sicily

(i) Fighters

⁸⁴
At the beginning of August, the Axis forces in Sicily had been driven into the north-east corner of the island, bounded by the Catania in the south and San Stefano in the west. During ^{these} ~~the~~ seventeen days of August before the final occupation of Sicily on the 17th, Malta-based aircraft followed much the same pattern of air operations as during the preceding month. The fighters were still employed on the protection of the Allied convoys bound for Sicilian ports, light bombers were attacking gun positions and communications and twin-engined fighters were operating as intruders against the southern Italian airfields, and systematically attacking the railways.

Although driven from their bases in Sicily and subjected to heavy losses, the Axis air forces had managed to withdraw a considerable air fleet to more secure bases in Italy. At the beginning of August, the Luftwaffe units in central and southern Italy comprised 566 aircraft with 340 serviceable. Of these, 346 were bombers (199 serviceable) and 141 single-engined fighters (95 serviceable). They had a further 73 aircraft on Sardinia (45 serviceable). In central and southern Italy they had ¹⁰¹ ~~101~~ transport aircraft (57 serviceable). At the same time, the Italians had in the Italian ~~area~~ ^{area} (including Corsica) 1,078 operational aircraft with a serviceability of approximately 50 per cent. However, in spite of these surprisingly high figures, the conditions of air supremacy obtained by the Allied air forces at the beginning of the Sicilian campaign were never seriously challenged, and

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A.H.Q. Malta
C.I.B. A.R.B.

A.H.B. 6

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the policy of concentrated bombing forced a ^{system} ~~policy~~ of wide dispersal.

M.E. State of
Aircraft
A.H.B./VB/9/4.

Malta was no longer the same important advanced base it had been during the early days of Operation "Husky". Already it had entered the closing phase of military operations with the fighting moving inexorably northwards. The Spitfire strength, had dropped to fewer than 100. It was still more than adequate to deter the enemy from any attacks on the considerable concentrations of shipping in the harbour. Out of six attempts at reconnaissance only three enemy aircraft managed to cross the coast. Of these, two were shot down and the third damaged by Spitfires. After 7 August, the high level of interception prevented any further enemy reconnaissance of the island.

(ii) Bombers

Bostons and Baltimore of Nos. 3 S.A.A.F. and 232 Wings escorted by Malta fighters continued to operate from Hal Far and Luqa respectively in giving support to the Eighth Army, as they had done in the fighting in North Africa. With the development of the offensive along the whole line from Catania to San Stefano, the light bombers were given an increasing number of targets in front of the advancing troops. After heavy air attacks on the road junction at Adrano on 3, 4 and 5 August, the position was finally captured on the 6th. The strongpoint of Bronte, from which Lord Nelson had derived one of his titles, was captured on 8 August after concentrated air attack by the light bombers. Further bombing in which 150 tons of bombs were dropped assisted the Eighth Army in their capture of Randazzo on 13 August. In addition to gun positions, the light bombers also attacked communications and port installations in the rear of the enemy.

A.H.B. Malta
O.R.B. and
D.I.S.
A.H.B./257/113/5/15

Between 10 and 12 August, No. 232 Wing and the 47th Group U.S.A.A.F. moved forward to Sicily, but No. 3 Wing (S.A.A.F.), consisting of two squadrons of Bostons and one of Baltimore, continued to operate from Malta

/for

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for another ten days, carrying out armed reconnaissance by night over roads in the toe of Italy. By the end of the campaign in Sicily the light bombers operating from Malta had made 1,956 sorties, in the course of which they dropped ^{1,150} ~~4,000~~ tons of bombs.

(iii) Intruder Operations

By the end of August, Mosquitos of No. 23 Squadron had completed 1,000 sorties since their arrival in Malta in December 1942. Their most important successes were scored against locomotives and it was estimated that they had destroyed or damaged 172.

During the first week in August, the Mosquitos made their intruder patrols over the toe of Italy and around Taranto and the Lipari Islands. There was little air activity, as the enemy bombers were operating from airfields further to the north. The last ten days of the Sicilian campaign coincided with the moon period. The Mosquitos carried out an intensive campaign against railways in southern Italy. Large fires were started at Siberi marshalling yards, where an ammunition train blew up. A large petrol fire was started at Pisticci and explosions were caused in the marshalling yards at Margherita Savoia. Fires were started at a number of railway stations and at a factory at Mandurya. A number of attacks were also made on coastal shipping.

Ibid

(iv) Protection of Shipping

P.R.U. Spitfires and Special Equipment Wellingtons kept a close watch on enemy naval and air bases. It was noted that all the major Italian naval units in southern Italy remained in port. Some 50 Italian torpedo-bombers were still based in the ^{heel} ~~south~~ of Italy. In spite of the ^{political} ~~Italian~~ situation these aircraft still constituted a menace to Allied shipping, but no attacks developed. Spitfires and Beaufighters continued to provide anti-submarine patrols and no attacks were reported while convoys were under the protection of these aircraft. There were, however, a number of attacks by German bombers, both by /night

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night and day, on Sicilian harbours, F.W.190 bombers being used in the day^etime, and Ju.88s and Do.217s by night. Shipping in the harbours of Augusta and Syracuse ^{was} ~~was~~ raided on the night of 9/10 August by 30 German bombers, and Malta-based Beaufighters destroyed a Ju.88 and Do.217. The next night, 35 German bombers attacked Lentini and Agnonsⁱ airfields. The mere presence of the Beaufighters caused a number of the enemy aircraft to jettison their bombs. There was also a slight recrudescence^c of Italian air activity after Marshal Badoglio^o assumed command, and on the night of 29/30 August they took part in an attack against Augusta. No damage to shipping was caused. Throughout this period the Malta-based Mosquitos and Beaufighters used the Sicilian airfields as advanced landing grounds.

The Beaufighters also attacked coastal shipping and seaplane bases in the eastern Adriatic. Eight Beaufighters with bombs, on an armed reconnaissance in the Corfu area on 2 August, damaged four schooners and destroyed a transport plane. On 12 August, they attacked the seaplane base at Corfu where they set ^{4 seaplane} ~~an seaplane~~ on fire, destroyed a Do.18 and started a fire on a trawler. Five days later they attacked the seaplane base at Argostoli, where they damaged a number of aircraft and left a schooner listing.

(v) Reconnaissance

During the last phase of the fighting in Sicily, Malta continued to provide invaluable reconnaissance facilities. A close watch on enemy naval and air bases was maintained by P.R.U. Spitfires and Special Equipment Wellingtons. It was noted that, apart from two sorties of a 5.3-inch cruiser from Taranto on 24 and 27 August on firing practice, major naval units in southern Italy remained in port.

No. 69 G.R. Squadron's Baltimores were busily employed in providing anti-submarine patrols in conjunction with destroyers of the Royal Navy which were escorting the numerous Allied convoys and shipping. ^{independent} ~~convoys~~.

/Altogether

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Altogether they flew 528 hours in August. One Baltimore of this Squadron, on a reconnaissance block patrol of the Messina Strait on 1 August^s, was intercepted by two Me.109s to the south of the Toe of Italy. One of the 109s dived to attack and opened fire from 800 yards. In ~~the end~~^{turn}, the rear gunner of the Baltimore, Flight Lieutenant L. J. Longhurst, D.F.C., opened fire and shot one of the Me.109s down. The second Me.109 then turned away.

No. 69 Sqn.
O.B.

No. 683 Squadron, which was still based on Luqa, kept a detachment in Sicily at Francesca from where all reconnaissances to fulfil Army requirements were being flown. This was mainly photographic cover of the heel and toe of Italy which, as the Squadron noted in their O.R.B., was "a notable sign of things to come." Reconnaissance by the Squadron was carried as far north as Naples and Foggia and during the month 200 operational sorties were flown, involving a total of 587 hours' flying time.

No. 683 Sqn.
O.R.B.

It is surprising that during the time the Axis forces were evacuating Sicily, no particular emphasis was placed on reconnaissance of the Messina Strait. The Army had at their disposal^{al} the above-mentioned detachment which operated from Francesca and on occasion from Lentini. Reconnaissance of the ~~toe~~^T of Italy was certainly carried out, but it is obvious that nothing like the intensive coverage to obtain vital information on enemy movements across the Strait was demanded. It was an oversight that was to enable the German forces to carry out their evacuation unobserved for three days.

The Axis Evacuation of Sicily (3 - 17 August 1943)

The occupation of Sicily was completed on 17 August, when first American and then British troops entered Messina. The capture of Sicily had thus taken 38 days from the initial invasion. As has been noted, intensive reconnaissance of the Messina Strait, under Army direction, in order to forestall Axis attempts at evacuation, was lacking. Reconnaissance was, however, limited to some extent by problems of visibility and the prohibitive enemy anti-aircraft defences.

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A.H.B. Narr. It was also impossible to distinguish visually between normal supply
"The R.A.F. in
Maritime War", traffic from Italy into Sicily and the same machinery set in reverse.
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On 3 August, the day the Italian evacuation actually began,
General Alexander notified Mediterranean Air Command and the Naval
Commander-in-Chief from Headquarters 15th Army Group that there were
indications that the Germans were making preparations for withdrawal.

A.H.B. ILL1/
90/15

They were, therefore, to be prepared to take immediate advantage of
such a situation by using the full weight of naval and air power.

"I, for my part, will watch the situation most carefully," the message
~~concluded~~
~~quoted~~ "so as to let you know the right moment to strike and this may
come upon us sooner than we thought." The next day, the Joint

JIC(A)1143/
AFHQ.

^{present}
Intelligence Committee produced a paper in which it was stated, "At the
time there is no sign that the enemy intends an evacuation of Sicily
and there is evidence that reinforcements still continue to reach this
island."

On 8 August the evacuation plan of the Hermann Goering Division,
dated 2 August, was captured by the Army. On the afternoon of
13 August, the Air Officer Commanding Tactical Air Force directed that,
"The evacuation is ~~set~~^{held} to have begun" and that "all fighter and
fighter/bomber missions are to be stepped up and directed against
ships, barges and beaches. T.B.F. are to be taken off land targets

A.H.Q. NATAF
O.R.B.

and put on to evacuation vessels and targets. Effort is to be
maximum." Yet, in spite of the promised direction from 15th Army Group,
it was not until 22.10 hours on 14 August (when the Italian evacuation
had been going on for eleven days and the German for three) that 15th
Army Group considered themselves to be in a position to signal,
"From general information received, it now appears that German
evacuation has really started." A mere three days remained before
the end of the Sicilian campaign.

A.F.H.Q. 6893
Operations
in Sicily.

As has already been noted, the Italian evacuation began on
3 August and continued until 12.00 hours on 16 August, by which time
they had evacuated 62,000 troops. At the insistence of their German

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/Allies

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von
Liebenstein's
Diary

A.H.B. Narr.
"The R.A.F.
in Maritime
War", Vol. VII

Allies the Italians had, however, abandoned almost the whole of their heavy equipment. The major German evacuation began on 11 August and continued until the 17th, during which time their ferry service transported some 52,000 troops (and 13,500 wounded). Thus, altogether, 114,000 troops, 13,500 wounded, 10,000 vehicles and 15,000 tons of supplies were safely transported across the Strait of Messina. Air attacks had the unexpected effect of forcing the Germans to resort largely to crossing the Strait in daylight in which, as far as can be traced, they did not suffer the loss of a single passenger.

The reasons for the failure of the Allied Commanders to stop the evacuation of the Axis forces from Sicily are outside the scope of this narrative and, in any case, are dealt with fully in A.H.B. Narrative "The R.A.F. in Maritime War", Vol. VII. It is apparent, however, that apart from the impression that there was no sense of overriding urgency such as might have been expected at A.F.H.Q. and 15th Army Group, who were absorbed in the tactical battle, from the point of view of Malta, inadequate use was made of their reconnaissance facilities from which a much more accurate intelligence appreciation of the situation might have been obtained. In this respect, A.H.Q. Malta could only fulfil the policy, not initiate it.

Although for political and other reasons the Italians no longer counted militarily, the escape of three first-class German Divisions, together with the greater part of their equipment, constituted in reality a major defeat to the Allies and made the subsequent task in Italy ^{much} ~~infinitely~~ more difficult. The delay^s between General Alexander's assurance on 3 August that he was "watching the situation most carefully" and would inform the Navy and the Air Force "when to strike", the ~~actual~~ ^{capture} of some of the German plans for evacuation, on 8th August, and the signal on 14 August that the evacuation "had really started", ^{is} ~~is~~ ^{as} ~~as~~ inexplicable. ~~It points to most inadequate handling of valuable information by Army Intelligence and faulty staff work which compares most unfavourably with the Germans' own planning and preparations for~~

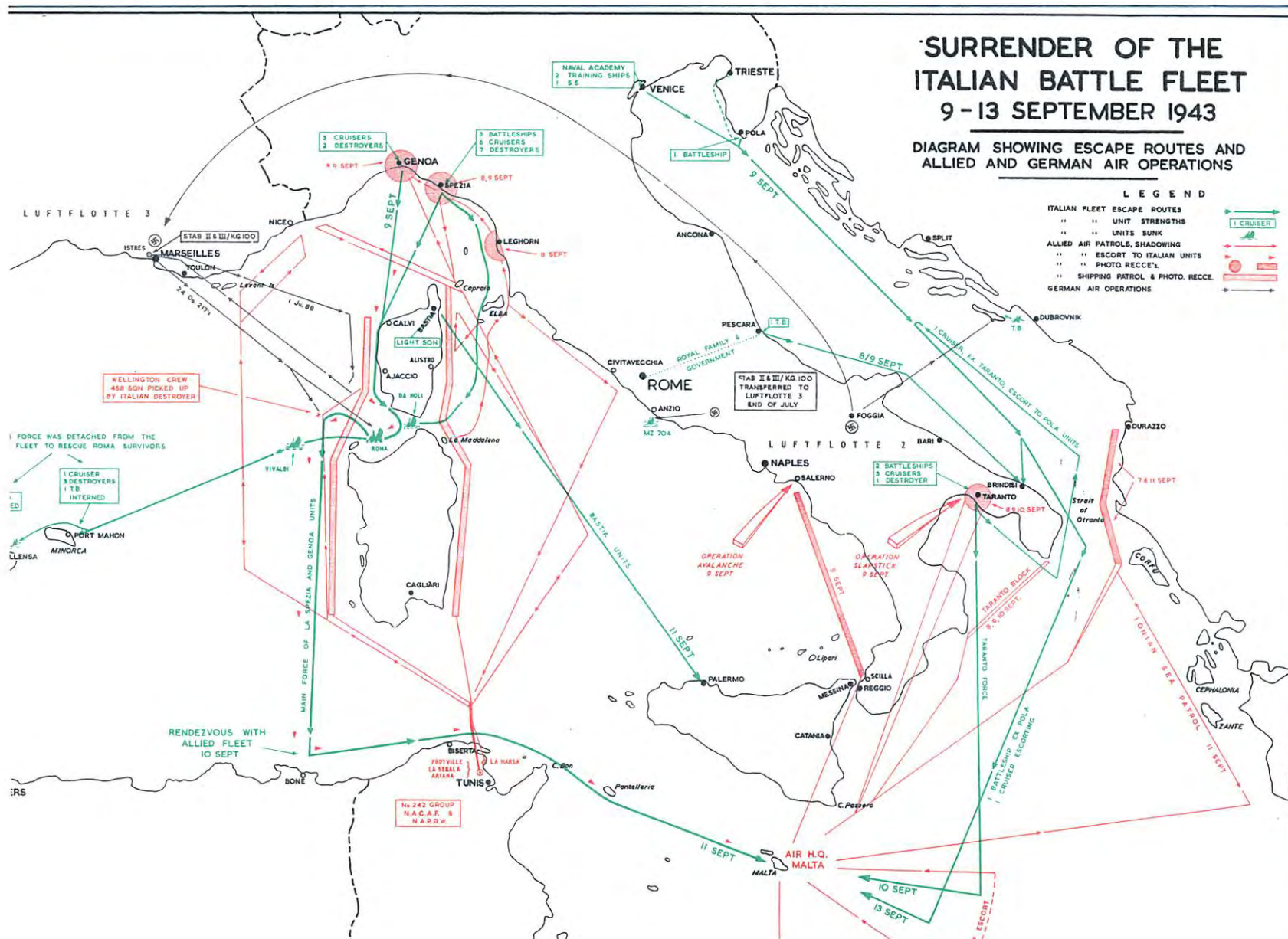
/their

/Explanations

SECRET

DIAGRAM SHOWING ESCAPE ROUTES AND ALLIED AND GERMAN AIR OPERATIONS

ITALIAN FLEET ESCAPE ROUTES
 " " UNIT STRENGTHS
 " " UNITS SUNK
 ALLIED AIR PATROLS, SHADOWING
 " " ESCORT TO ITALIAN UNITS
 " " PHOTO RECCE'S
 " SHIPPING PATROL & PHOTO. RECCE
 GERMAN AIR OPERATIONS



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of
their evacuation, Sicily which was being envisaged as part of Operation
"Achse" / ~~Admiral~~ as early as the latter part of July.]

Experience of withdrawals in North Africa had taught the Germans the lesson of never providing the ^{enemy} Air Force with ^{high density} ~~identity~~ targets and neutralising air and naval superiority in those areas selected for protection by concentrated and highly lethal flak. The Strait of Messina constituted a barrier little more difficult to cross than a wide river and in this case is not comparable with an evacuation of North Africa which ^{incidentally} they did not even attempt. It would appear that the most serious deficiency was not that the Allies did not stop the evacuation, but that they did not make it infinitely more costly and demoralising. This was largely due to the above mentioned lack of ^a sense of urgency at Army Headquarters, the failure to provide adequate intelligence, and above all ^{to} the absence of inter-Service forward planning.

The Surrender of the Italian Fleet, September 1943

The first overtures for peace were made by Marshal Badoglio on 15 August, three weeks after the fall of Mussolini, and an Armistice was signed at Cassibile, near Syracuse, Sicily, on 3 September. The terms were in accordance with the Casablanca declaration of unconditional surrender, and required that the territory and resources of Italy were to be put at the disposal of the Allies for the prosecution of the war against Germany. After considerable vacillation, and only after General Eisenhower had broadcast the announcement of the unconditional surrender and the granting of an Armistice, did Marshal Badoglio make his announcement on Rome radio at 1⁰ 45 hours on 8 September to the effect that his Government had requested such an Armistice "with the object of avoiding further and more grievous harm to the nation."

By the terms of the Short Instrument of Surrender, and in accordance with Operation "Gibbon", Italian warships were to sail after dark for Bône, ^u Augusta or Malta and approach these ports in full daylight, ~~and~~ at a speed of not more than twelve knots and, as far as possible, in formed groups. Submarines were to proceed on the surface. Merchant ships, according to their location, were to proceed to Alexandria, Gibraltar,

/Malta

Operation
"Gibbon" &
"Accolade"
AHB/IIJ1/359/3/1

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Malta, Bone or Algiers.

The news of the Armistice was conveyed to the ^{Royal} Navy by the Admiralty at 20.10 hours on September 8. Within the Mediterranean, action towards the Italian forces was to be governed by the order of the Commander-in-Chief Mediterranean, Admiral Cunningham. Outside the Mediterranean, attacks were to be continued against submarines or other Italian units unless they showed unmistakable signs of surrender. The Commander-in-Chief Mediterranean announced the news to all units under his command and ordered that all operations then in progress were to proceed, but that Italian armed forces, including aircraft, were to be treated as friendly unless they took or threatened hostile action.

The position was complicated by the fact that at the time of the announcement of the Armistice and the terms of the Italian surrender, the landings at Salerno (Operation "Avalanche") which took place at dawn on 9 September and the occupation of Taranto (Operation "Slapstick") which was made on the afternoon of the same day, were proceeding simultaneously.

Immediately after the fall of Mussolini, Hitler ^{had} summoned his ^S ^C Service ^K Chiefs to discuss the changed situation in Italy. Plans to meet the possibility of an Italian defection were prepared and were in the hands of the Commanding General Armed Forces South as early as 1 August, under the code name "Achse". These plans involved among other things the evacuation of Sicily and Sardinia and the transfer of forces from Sardinia to Corsica, and seizing control of all land and naval operations.

A.H.B. Narr.
"The R.A.F.
in Maritime
War", Vol.VII.

^{The Italian} ^{however}
~~[By means of typical Italian duplicity, however, their~~ Government ^{continued}
managed to convey the impression that it was endeavouring to maintain control and crush all talk of peace, while the Italian Navy stressed its will to continue the fight and give evidence of increasing efficiency. Joint Italo-German plans for air/sea co-operation in case of an Allied landing proceeded. However, on the instructions from O.K.W. the Commanders-in-Chief of the German Armed Forces in Italy ~~proceeded~~ ^{continued} with their plans for Operation "Achse". They counted

/on

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on at least 48 hours' warning. The announcement of the Armistice on 8 September thus came as a complete surprise. It was not until 19.50 hours on 8 September, when General Eisenhower's announcement was already two hours old, did O.K.W. issue the code word 'Achse'.

The Italian break-out is described ~~clearly~~ in ~~an~~ A.H.B. Narrative, "The R.A.F. in Maritime War", Vol. VII. Malta's part in it was primarily to provide reconnaissance and to act as a reception base for the Italian Fleet. The Italian mistake was to try to group their major units at La Maddalena, an island off the north-east coast of Corsica, instead of following the instructions in Operation "Gibbon" and making their way independently to the various Allied-held ports. Some of the orders transmitted to the Italian ships were so incomprehensible, particularly for the ships based at Genoa and La Spezia, which, having entered the Gulf of Asinara on an easterly course, were ordered to turn west, that the Royal Navy ^{seem} ~~was~~ justified in their suspicion that these instructions derived originally from German sources. In this way, on 9 September, the Fleet sailed directly into the path of the attacking Do.217s of Geschwader KG.100 from Istres in southern France. The Roma was sunk with a loss of 66 out of her 71 officers (including Admiral Bergamini and his staff and one other Admiral) and over 1,300 men. The Italia was also hit, but not seriously damaged.

The War at
Sea
Vol. IV.

FX 1400

The German attacks were made with the new ~~F.3, H.300 and Ha. 293~~ radio-controlled bombs. The Italians at first were under the impression that they were being attacked by Allied aircraft, and Supermarina sent a message to Malta for the action to be called off. It was then that the Italians were informed by Malta that the aircraft concerned were, in fact, German. The Italians then asked for air cover which, under the circumstances - the long distances and the fact that the Allied Air Forces were preoccupied with other problems - it was impossible to provide.

'che ha fatto la
Mr. 'a' Bagadin.

The destroyers Ugolino Vivaldi and Da Noli which had left Genoa on 9 September were also directed to sail through the Strait of Bonifacio.

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There they were attacked by German shore batteries and also motor launches. The Vivaldi was so badly damaged that she sank while being towed to the Balearics. Survivors were rescued by H.M. submarine Sportsman. The Da Noli struck a mine and blew up. ^{Three} ~~One~~ destroyers which reached the Balearics were refused permission to enter harbour, and Pegaso and Impetuoso which had been damaged by German aircraft scuttled themselves. The third, the Orsa was interned at Pollensa by the Spanish Government.

Malta's air strength at this date comprised five Spitfire squadrons (Nos. 126, 185, 229, 249 and 1435), the two reconnaissance squadrons of No. 248 (G.R.) Wing (Nos. 69 Baltimores and 221 A.S.V. Wellingtons), Nos. 23 and 256 Squadrons (Mosquitos), No. 108 N.F. Squadron (one Flight) Beaufighters, No. 683 (P.R.) Squadron (Spitfires), a Detachment of No. 728 (F.A.A.) Squadron (Defiants and Albacores), one Flight of No. 826 (F.A.A.) Squadron (Albacores), No. 815 (F.A.A.) Squadron (Albacores), and ^{an} Air/Sea Rescue Squadron comprising miscellaneous aircraft.

A.H.Q. Malta
O.R.B. para. //

Photographic reconnaissance by the three Squadrons, Nos. 69, 221 and 683, which had maintained a close watch on the Italian Fleet for so long, was intensified after the Armistice. The position of all the major units was known and their movements traced both by night and day by the Spitfires, Baltimores and Wellingtons. As early as 2 September, six days before the surrender, the daily Taranto "block" patrol noted that two repatriation ships were seen at the entrance to Taranto harbour. No further sightings were made by this squadron until 10 September when aircraft HZ.397 located an Italian Naval Force of two battleships and three cruisers bound for Malta. ⁽¹⁾ Their position was reported and the force was shadowed until Allied destroyers arrived on the scene to

/escort

(1) This was the Taranto squadron which included the battleships Andrea-Doria and Caio Duilio. They left Taranto on 9 September and arrived at Malta at 17.30 hours on 10 September having passed the British Force on its way to occupy Taranto.

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escort them to Malta. On 29 September, the Italian cruiser Scipione Africano which, incidentally, had been detailed to evacuate the King and Government from Pescara but had failed to report, was escorted from 06.15 to 08.25 and brought to Grand Harbour, Valetta, by the same aircraft, ~~the~~ HZ.397.

No. 69 Sqdn.
O.R.B.

On 10 September, the whole of No. 69 Squadron ^{is force} of Baltimores was employed in providing an anti-submarine escort to units of the Italian Fleet from Taranto proceeding south-east of Malta. On the next day, six Baltimores searched for escaping Italian merchant vessels in the Ionian Sea, but without any success. Their efforts were rewarded on 12 September. On the day of the Armistice a message had been sent to all Italian merchant vessels instructing them to proceed to ports under the control of the United Nations. As a result of this, some 80 ships of approximately 210,000 tons came into Allied hands.

A.H.Q Malta
O.R.B.

"War at Sea",
Vol. IV.

One of the most curious incidents in this surrender was the one in which Baltimores of No. 69 Squadron were involved. The submarine Unrivalled entered Bari on 10 September to find that four of the merchant vessels had been wrecked by the Germans. However, there still remained eight ships which the Unrivalled organised into a convoy, with which she sailed that evening, not knowing "where to go, no-one had a signalling lamp, even the names of some of the ships were unknown to the submarine." On 12 September, the strange convoy was located by an aircraft of No. 69 Squadron. The submarine Unruly joined as additional escort and the Bergamot was sent from Malta. Contact was maintained with the convoy until they had safely berthed at Malta. On 14 September, the same squadron provided escort to an Allied convoy which included five Italian destroyers. On the last day of September a Baltimore of No. 69 Squadron searched for an Italian hospital ship to which, after it had been found, a message was passed by Aldis lamp.

On 7 September a Spitfire of No. 683 P.R. Squadron noted that there was considerable activity at Taranto in the outer harbour with about 40 small craft flying between the warships and doubtless preparing them for their break-out. From this time an even closer watch was kept on

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the port. On the 9th, it was ^{noticed} ~~seen~~ that the ^{boom} ~~boom~~ was open and later a cruiser was seen passing through. Subsequently the progress of the Fleet from Taranto was followed right through until their arrival at Grand Harbour.

The Italian Fleet from Spezia and Genoa, under Admiral Romeo Oliva, in the cruiser Eugenio di Savoia, was met by the Warspite, Valiant and three destroyers off Bône. The combined Fleets arrived at Malta at 07.00 hours on 11 September ⁽¹⁾ and at 10.38 hours the Commander-in-Chief Mediterranean signalled to the Admiralty:

Be pleased to inform their Lordships that the Italian Battle Fleet now lies at anchor under the guns of the Fortress of Malta.

Later that day, Admiral Cunningham signalled his thanks to the Fleet and concluded with this generous tribute to the Royal Air Force:

~~"War at Sea"~~
~~Vol. IV.~~

In so doing, I address my words to those whom it is my honour to command, but let us not forget what we owe to the sister Services, in particular to the devotion of those in the R.A.F. to whose loyal help we owe so much for what has been achieved.

According to A.H.Q. Malta's records, five battleships, six 6-inch cruisers, one 5.3-inch cruiser, seven destroyers, 13 torpedo-boats, six Mas. boats, 23 submarines, six escort vessels, one seaplane carrier, one Fleet oiler and 22 naval-craft, arrived at Malta.

A.H.Q.
Malta
O.R.B.

101 merchant ships totalling
After the Armistice, 183,000 tons ~~of Italian merchant shipping~~ came into Allied hands with the capture of Taranto, Bari and Brindisi, although 168 ships totalling 76,000 tons ~~had been scuttled in Bari, and a further 41,000 tons was brought to Malta.~~ ^{to avoid capture by the Germans.}

On 13 October, Italy declared war on Germany and the Allies announced that the Italians were accepted as co-belligerents in the war against Germany. Arrangements had already been made (on September 23) between Sir Andrew Cunningham and the Italian Minister of Marine that certain warships should be kept in service and work in the Allied interest.

Summary
Malta's

(1) The Taranto Squadron had arrived at Malta the previous day.

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Summary of Enemy Air Action Against Malta 10 June 1940 to 30 September 1943

Malta O.R.B. Between Italy's entry into the War on 10 June 1940 and 30 September 1943, it is estimated that the enemy flew 26,000 sorties against the island and dropped some 14,000 tons of bombs. There were 1,192 civilians killed, 1,817 seriously and 1,896 slightly injured by enemy action, a total of 4,905 casualties. The number of offensive sorties flown by aircraft from Malta amounted to 24,211 with the loss of 707 aircraft (547 in the air and 160 on the ground).

Part Played by Malta until the End of Hostilities

A.H.Q. Malta
O.R.B. and
Daily Int.
Sums.
A.H.B./HJS/113/5/15

The surrender of the Italian Fleet and its reception at Naples marked the beginning of the end of Malta as an offensive operational base. It is significant that on the night of 7/8 September, the eve of the surrender, one of the last enemy aircraft was shot down over Malta. It was a Ju.88 which approached the island on reconnaissance, was intercepted by a Mosquito and shot down into the sea. In September a Do.217 was also shot down by Beaufighters which were operating from an advanced landing ground in Sicily.

With the consolidation of the beach-head at Salerno and the capture of Naples on October 1 the fighting rapidly began to move out of range of Malta-based aircraft. The heavy bombing, mainly by Liberators and Fortresses, forced the enemy to withdraw their air forces first to Naples and Foggia, and then to bases in northern Italy and southern France.

Admiralty
Historical
Section.

Because of her geographical position, Malta still had an important part to play for some time to come in the protection of Allied convoys. The Mediterranean was now open to shipping bound to and from the Far East, and although the G.A.F. in Italy had been driven to the north almost to the limits of its range, there was still a threat from the east which, combined with German U-boat activity (there were in September 1943 some 13 German U-boats⁽¹⁾ still active in the Mediterranean) kept Malta's Spitfires, Wellingtons and Baltimores busy.

(1) Between June and September 1943 six U-boats were /On sunk in the Mediterranean, including U 617 on 11 September. This left only 12 inside. On 17 September Dönitz ordered seven boats to enter the Mediterranean. Of these, only one (U 223) got through. One was forced back, two were recalled and three cancelled.

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On 15 October 1943, the Allied Air Forces in Sicily, previously controlled by M.A.C.A.F. were brought under the operational control of Malta. Two fighter sectors were established in Sicily under No. 335 Wing at Catania and Palermo, and together with the Malta sector A.H.B. Malta provided fighter cover for the whole area. G.R. responsibilities O.R.B. were co-ordinated between No. 325 Wing at Borizzo and No. 248 Wing at Malta. In this way, all north-bound convoys to Naples and those south-bound to Malta, Sicily and the southern Italian ports were given anti-submarine protection throughout the whole area. The Air/Sea Rescue organisation was enlarged and marine craft and search aircraft were based at strategic airfields and ports in the area. The number of sorties by G.R. aircraft averaged 18 a day. Some 120 convoys were safely shepherded through the Malta area without either loss or damage.

In November 1943 operations on anti-submarine and convoy escort and protection continued and 625 sorties were flown on these duties out of a total of 1,121 ^{operational sorties} for the whole month. To meet the changed situation in the Mediterranean a reorganisation of the island's airfields took place. R.A.F. Station Krendi was closed down and handed over to No. 5051 Airfield Construction Squadron. R.A.F. Station Safi was also closed down and was maintained as a satellite of Luqa. The Prime Minister visited Malta during November, escort being given to the battle cruiser in which he arrived by Spitfires of the Malta Wing. The Chief of the Air Staff and the Air Commander-in-Chief also arrived. On 8 December, the President of the United States paid a visit to the island. (1)

Ibid

The enemy's ability to strike unexpectedly from the air was demonstrated on 21 December 1943 when four Ju. 88s, taking advantage of showery weather with poor visibility, attacked the north-bound convoy "Mollie" (C.U.S.25) 140 miles to the south-east of Malta. One merchant vessel, the S.S. Alpherat, of 5,700 tons, sustained damage

(1) The First Cairo Conference between President Roosevelt, General Chiang Kai-shek and Mr. Churchill opened on 25 November. / from The Teheran Conference began on 28 November between President Roosevelt, Marshal Stalin and Mr. Churchill. On 4 December the Second Cairo Conference was held between President Roosevelt, Mr. Churchill SECRET and President Inonu of Turkey.

from a near-miss from which she sank. All survivors were picked up. Mosquitos damaged two of the attacking Ju.88s, while one of the Mosquitos was in turn damaged by anti-aircraft gunfire from the ships. During December 1943, Malta aircraft provided escort both by night and by day for 73 "first priority" convoys, in the course of which the Baltimores flew 236 and the Wellingtons 169 sorties.

In the New Year 1944, Malta was still providing convoy protection from Cape Bon to Benghazi and Taranto to Tripoli. Altogether during January, 91 "first priority" convoys were given protection by 666 aircraft from Malta while a further 172 sorties were flown in hunting down enemy submarines. During January, three "Swamp" and one "Broom" operation were put into effect. One enemy submarine, U.81, was sunk by the U.S.A.A.F.

Ibid

Enemy reconnaissance aircraft were active along the convoy routes, and when weather permitted there was at least one daily flight. In order to counter this, pairs of Beaufighters and then Mosquitos were sent out to cover the route followed by the reconnaissance aircraft. On 9 January a Mosquito of No. 256 Squadron destroyed a Ju.88 only 15 miles to the south-east of Syracuse. The next day a reconnaissance Ju.88 appeared over Malta at 28,000 feet. The aircraft was chased for 60 miles and one of the pursuing Spitfires managed to give it a burst before it evaded by disappearing into cloud. On 23 January, two reconnaissance aircraft appeared over Malta. Both were chased and the second one which appeared from the south at 32,000 feet was intercepted 25 miles east of Malta and destroyed.

On 6 January, Air Marshal Sir Keith Park resigned his command to Air Commodore J.R. Scarlett-Streatfield. On 10 January, under the reorganisation of the Mediterranean Allied Air Forces, A.H.Q. Malta was placed under the operational and administrative control of H.Q. M.A.C.A.F. (Mediterranean Allied Coastal Air Force). A.H.Q. Malta retained its

/title

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A.H.Q. Malta
Org. Memo.
No. 5.

title and remained responsible for the administration of all R.A.F. units in Malta and Sicily, but it was left with no more status than a Group.

The Royal Air Force Station at Ta Kali closed on the 1st February 1944. There was another change of command at Malta on 6 February when A.V.M. A.H. Wann became Air Officer Commanding. However, on 29 February the A.O.C. was taken ill with a heart attack and Group Captain Rhys-Jones who was then acting as S.A.S.O. took over temporary command.

In February 144 sorties were flown on escort to shipping, and a further 76 sorties in hunts for submarines. Detachments of Spitfires from Nos. 87, 185 and 229 Squadrons were forward based from Malta at Grottaglie from where they operated along the Albanian and Greek coasts attacking coastal shipping, motor transport, radar stations and trains. No. 256 Squadron's Mosquitos were also on detachment for a short while to Sardinia from where they operated as intruders against southern France. However, this activity was brought to a halt when a ban was placed on aircraft fitted with Mark VIII A.I.⁽¹⁾ flying over hostile territory.

A.H.B. List of
Enemy Warships
Sunk in the
Mediterranean.

On the 28th March Air Vice Marshal R.M. Foster, D.F.C. assumed command of A.H.Q. Malta. During March, Malta-based aircraft flew 300 sorties on convoy escort and submarine hunts. The month was notable for the destruction of five German U-boats, none of them, unfortunately, by Malta aircraft. Anti-reconnaissance patrols on which 80 sorties were flown were extended to cover not merely Malta and Sicily but Italy as far north as Naples, the area to the east of the toe of Italy and the Gulf of Taranto. Mosquitos of No. 256 Squadron destroyed a Ju.88 off Naples during the night 15 March. Operations with forward-based Spitfires continued against a variety of target in Albania and along the Eastern Adriatic and No. 221 Squadron's Wellingtons carried out anti-shipping patrols over the Adriatic and along the Greek coast.

A.H.Q. Malta
O.R.B.

(1) Air Interception - a radar set carried by fighters.

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From April 1944 there was a sharp decline in Malta's operational activity. Only five sorties were flown on a submarine hunt and 31 on anti-submarine escort and sweeps. The enemy lost two U-boats in April but neither of them was due to attack by Malta-based aircraft. During the same month the fighters flew 113 sorties on escort to shipping. Anti-reconnaissance patrols to the north and east of Sicily were frequent and took up 152 aircraft sorties. There were also 72 scrambles, many of them being flown against friendly aircraft.

Ibid

Attacks against targets of opportunity along the eastern coast of the Adriatic were continued by Spitfires of Nos. 87 and 185 Squadrons. No. 221 Squadron's Wellingtons were moved away from Luqa and were replaced by a Detachment of No. 458 Squadron. No. 283 Squadron also arrived at Hal Far equipped with five Warwick aircraft for Air/Sea Rescue duties. These aircraft helped in the "Swamp" hunt for a U-boat which attacked a convoy on the night 19/20 May and sank the Fort Missanabie of 7,147 tons 30 miles north-east of Spartivento, Italy, with the loss of 11 lives. She was the U.453 based on Pola which was brought to the surface with depth charges and sunk by gunfire from R.N. destroyers. Fifty-two survivors, including the C.O. were rescued by the attacking destroyers. Altogether, in May, "Swamp" hunts accounted for four German U-boats.

Attacks against M.T. bridges, coastal shipping and gun positions were continued during May 1944 by Nos. 87, and 185 Squadrons and 228 sorties were flown against enemy recon aircraft. Convoy escort was continued as part of the normal operational routine. In June, the sorties rate dropped to 160 for the whole month. Targets were hard to find. Spitfires of No. 87 ^{Squadron} Detachment operating from Grottaglie on 4 June attacked a road convoy north of Lake Joannina in north Greece and destroyed or damaged 13 vehicles. On the night 24/25 June, Beaufighters of No. 108 Squadron Detachment, on intruder patrol in the Rhone Valley, destroyed one He.177 south of Valence. There were no submarine sinkings in June.

/July

S E C R E T

S E C R E T

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July saw a slight rise in the activity of Malta-based aircraft, but the average was still under six sorties a day. Aircraft of No. 87 Squadron scored two successes by shooting down a Ju.88 on the 22nd, about 100 miles to the east of Malta, and another Ju.88 four days later, 160 miles to the south-east of the island. Accurate fire from the first Ju.88 destroyed one of the pursuing Spitfires. During August the a number of operational sorties dropped to 114 and of these 53 were flown on anti-submarine patrols and sweeps. A surprisingly large number of enemy aircraft - 16 in all - attempted to reconnoitre Malta and eastern Sicily, 10 in daylight and six at night. Although Beau-fighters and Spitfires were scrambled, no interceptions were made.

By September, Malta was flying an average of less than three operational sorties a day due to the fact that U-boats were being rapidly eliminated throughout the whole of the Mediterranean. This phase of anti U-boat operations is covered fully in "The R.A.F. in Maritime War", Vol. VII. On 23 May, the German Naval High Command had ordered the 29th Flotilla to build Schnorchel apparatus into all operational U-boats. The work of the conversion which was taking place at Toulon was accelerated and within a month one U-boat, the U.642, had already been fitted. It was planned to complete the programme by 15 August, and but for the landings in southern France and the tremendous effort devoted to the destruction of U-boats by Allied aircraft, there would undoubtedly have been a dangerous recrudescence of German U-boat activity in the Mediterranean.

At the beginning of June 1944, there were eight U-boats located in the Western Basin of the Mediterranean, three at sea, four in Toulon, and one at La Spezia. In three concentrated attacks on 5 and 11 July and 6 August on the submarine base at Toulon by a total of 666 Liberators, and for a loss of 11 of the aircraft, six of the eight U-boats were either destroyed or so gravely damaged as to be unfit for further operations. At the same time, very extensive damage was done to the docks, cranes, workshops and other installations. Two other U-boats,

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the U.466 and U.230 were scuttled off the south of France on 19 and 21 August respectively, by which latter date the 29th Flotilla Toulon Force ceased to exist.

The only U-boats then left were the U.407, U.565 and U.596, two of them being Schnorchel-equipped. On 18 September the U.407 was detected by a Polish destroyer when "Schnorchelling" in the area south of Milos Island in the Cyclades and was eventually sunk at 05.21 hours on 19 September by destroyers. Six days later, on 24 September, a force of 52 Liberators bombed Skaramanga Harbour, Salamis, and both ^{remaining} U-boats were destroyed. Thus ended the anti-U-boat campaign in the Mediterranean in which Malta had been so deeply involved and for so long a time.

R.A.F.
"The R.A.F. in
Maritime War,"
Vol. VII

In October, Warwicks carried out an intensive U-boat hunt in an area 60-120 miles around Malta due to a false report, although the last U-boat in the Mediterranean had already been destroyed. Sorties for the month totalled no more than 54. On the 20th October No. 210 Group was incorporated in Malta Command. Only 24 operational sorties were flown in November, over half being on Air/Sea rescue missions. Reports of U-boat sightings were still being investigated. December saw an increase in the number of operational sorties to 58, again mainly on Air/Sea rescue sorties. The Warwicks of No. 283 Squadron played an active part in the rescue of some 200 leave personnel from the Yugoslav ship Kumanovo. The ship was wrecked in a storm on the evening of 27 December off the south-east tip of Sicily. The aircraft released dinghies, directed ships to the scene of the rescue and dropped flares to illuminate the survivors while they were being rescued. Only two of the personnel on board the Kumanovo were lost.

Ibid

In January 1945, operational sorties from Malta dropped to 14 for the whole month. They were flown entirely on Air/Sea rescue duties. February saw considerable activity at A.H.Q. Malta due to the visit of the Prime Minister, the President of the United States, and the Allied Chiefs of Staff for Staff talks on their way to the Yalta Conference (Operation "Argonaut") which took place between 4/10 February.

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During March, only three operational sorties were flown, the lowest ever recorded, all on Air/Sea Rescue. In April, a further 22 operational sorties were made by Warwicks of No. 283 Squadron on searches for missing aircraft.

On 24 April, the instrument of surrender was signed at Field Marshal Alexander's Headquarters in the Royal Palace of Caserta. The cease-fire in Italy took place on 2 May 1945. For some considerable time to follow, however, Malta still continued to provide Air/Sea Rescue facilities with the Warwicks of No. 283 Squadron and Wellingtons of No. 38 Squadron, assistance being given not merely to the crews of aircraft forced down in the Mediterranean, but in the search for ships in distress. It was fitting that an island that had played such a vital part in the victory of Allied forces in the Mediterranean theatre should dedicate the last operations of its Air Force, not to destruction, but to humanitarian ends.

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APPENDIX I

COPY

S.43159/S.6

23rd April 1938

Sir,

I am commanded by the Air Council to refer to Air Ministry telegram No. X.603 of the 19th March on the subject of the co-ordination of operations in the Middle East and Mediterranean areas in the event of a major crisis.

2. It will be recalled that when there was a risk of war in the Mediterranean in 1935 the need for a responsible authority to effect this co-ordination became immediately apparent, and a senior officer had to be sent from England at short notice. More recently, arising out of a study of the problem by the Chiefs of Staff, the Council have reached the conclusion that the Air Officer Commanding, Middle East, would, in war, automatically become Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief for the purpose of exercising higher control and direction over all the air forces available in the Middle East, Palestine, Iraq, Aden and Malta Commands. It has also been accepted that the officer who would be called upon to assume the duties of Commander-in-Chief in war should have knowledge and experience of his command in peace.

3. It has accordingly been decided that the appointment of Air Officer Commanding, Middle East, shall be up-graded to the rank of Air Marshal, and that this officer shall be empowered in peace to co-ordinate all preparations, including inter-Command training, for the reinforcement and defence of Egypt, the Sudan, Kenya and Aden. Effect will be given to this decision in due course, but it is desirable that in the meantime all concerned should be made aware of the general principle, and that as much of the new procedure as may be possible should be put into operation without delay. As from the date of the receipt of this letter, therefore, the Air Officer Commanding, Middle East is authorised to correspond direct with the Air Officers Commanding, Iraq, Aden, Palestine and Malta, and to exercise general co-ordination on matters arising out of the Middle East Reinforcement Plan (S.D. 120) which is based upon C.O.S. 691 - "Mediterranean, Middle East and North East Africa Appreciation", notably the measures connected with the reinforcement of Egypt

The Air Officer Commanding,
Mediterranean Command,
Royal Air Force, Valetta,
Malta.

/ from

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from those commands and with the maintenance and operation in war of the reinforcing squadrons. For the time being inter-Command training will be excluded from this arrangement.

4. Although Air Officers Commanding will accordingly deal with the Air Officer Commanding, Middle East, on all important matters arising out of the Middle East Plan, they may correspond with the Air Ministry direct on any points of detail at their discretion, but in this event they will of course keep the Air Officer Commanding, Middle East, informed. I am to add that the approved distribution of C.O.S. 691 is to the Air Officers Commanding, Middle East, Iraq and Aden, to the General Officer Commanding, Palestine, and to the Governor of Malta, and that copies of the documents will be dispatched very shortly. A revised and final edition of S.D. 120 will also be issued to the Command concerned in the near future.

I am, Sir,

Your obedient Servant,

(Sgd) Charles Evans

MONTHLY ORDERS OF BATTLE, MALTA JUNE - DECEMBER 1940

UNIT	LOCATION	AIRCRAFT	I.E.	I.R.	REMARKS
<u>10th June 1940</u> A.H.Q. Malta Fighter Flt. No. 3 A.A.C.U.	Valetta Hal Far Hal Far	Sea Gladiator	4 (Strength)		Formed 4.6.40
<u>30th July 1940</u> A.H.Q. Malta Fighter Flt. No. 830 Sqn. F.A.A. No. 3 A.A.C.U.	Valetta Luqa Hal Far Hal Far	Sea Gladiator Hurricane Swordfish	4) 4) Strength 12 (Strength)		Formed 1.7.40 from No. 767 Training Sqn. F.A.A.
<u>30th August 1940</u> A.H.Q. Malta No. 261 Sqn. No. 830 Sqn. F.A.A. No. 3 A.A.C.U.	Valetta Luqa Hal Far Hal Far	Hurricane Swordfish	8 12 (Strength)	4	Gladiators not established as part of squadron. Disbanded 19.9.40
<u>30th September 1940</u> A.H.Q. Malta No. 261 Sqn. No. 830 Sqn. F.A.A. No. 431 Flt. G.R. No. 228 Sqn. Det.	Valetta Luqa Hal Far Luqa Kalafrana	Hurricane Swordfish Glen Martin Sunderland	8 12 (Strength) 3 (Strength) 3 (Strength)	4	Arrived 19.9.40 absorbed No.3 A.A.C.U. personnel 22.9.40. 3 a/c temporarily established at Malta

APPENDIX No.II

MONTHLY ORDERS OF BATTLE, MALTA. JUNE-DECEMBER 1940 (contd.)

<u>Unit</u>	<u>Location</u>	<u>Aircraft</u>	<u>I.E.</u>	<u>I.R.</u>	<u>REMARKS</u>
<u>30th October 1940</u> A.H.Q. Malta No. 261 Sqn. No. 830 Sqn. F.A.A. No. 431 Flt. G.R. No. 228 Sqn.	Valetta Luqa Hal Far Luqa Kalafrana	Hurricane Swordfish Glen Martin Blenheim Sunderland	8 12 (Strength) 3 } Strength 2 } 3 (Strength)	4	
<u>30th November 1940</u> A.H.Q. Malta No. 261 Sqn. No. 830 Sqn. F.A.A. No. 431 Flt. G.R. No. 228 Sqn. ²	Valetta Luqa Hal Far Luqa Kalafrana	Hurricane Swordfish Glen Martin Sunderland	16 ¹ 12 (Strength) 3 4	1 2	1. Through partial failure of Operation QUICK Aircraft not brought up to established strength until January 1941. 2. 6.11.40 Sqn. permanently established at Malta.
<u>31st December 1940</u> A.H.Q. Malta No. 261 Sqn. No. 830 Sqn. F.A.A. No. 431 Flt. G.R. No. 228 Sqn. No. 148 Sqn.	Valetta Luqa Hal Far Luqa Kalafrana Luqa	Hurricane Swordfish Glen Martin Sunderland Wellington	16 12 (Strength) 4 4 16	4 1 2 4	Formed at Luqa during Dec.

APPENDIX No. II (contd.)

MONTHLY ORDERS OF BATTLE, JANUARY-MAY 1941

UNIT	LOCATION	AIRCRAFT	I.E.	I.R.	REMARKS
<u>31st January 1941</u> A.H.Q. Malta No. 261 Sqn. No. 830 Sqn. F.A.A. No. 228 Sqn. No. 148 Sqn. No. 69 Sqn.	Valetta Luqa Hal Far Kalafrana Luqa Luqa	Hurricane Swordfish Sunderland Wellington Glen Martin	16 12 (Strength) 4 16 4	4 2 4 2	Formed in January from No. 431 Flt.
<u>28th February 1941</u> A.H.Q. Malta No. 261 Sqn. No. 830 Sqn. F.A.A. No. 228 Sqn. No. 148 Sqn. No. 69 Sqn.	Valetta Luqa Hal Far Kalafrana Luqa Luqa	Hurricane Swordfish Sunderland Wellington Glen Martin	16 12 (Strength) 4 16 4	4 2 4 2	Departed for Middle East 19.3.41 Departed for Middle East 9.3.41
<u>31st March 1941</u> A.H.Q. Malta No. 261 Sqn. No. 830 Sqn. F.A.A. No. 69 Sqn.	Valetta Luqa Hal Far Luqa	Hurricane Swordfish Glen Martin	16 12 (Strength) 4	4 2	

APPENDIX No. II

MONTHLY ORDERS OF BATTLE, MALTA, JANUARY-MAY 1941
(contd.)

UNIT	LOCATION	AIRCRAFT	I.E.	I.R.	REMARKS
<u>30th April 1941</u> A.H.Q. Malta No. 261 Sqn. No. 830 Sqn. F.A.A. No. 69 Sqn. No. 21 Sqn. Det. ²	 Valetta Luqa Hal Far Luqa Luqa	 Hurricanes Swordfish Glen Martin Blenheim IV	 16 12 (Strength) 4 6 (Strength)	 4 + 2	 1. (Squadron over established due to reinforcing operations. Departed for Middle East 21.5.41). 2. Arrived 27.4.41 Departed 11.5.41. replaced by No. 139 Sqn. Det. 16.5.41.
<u>31st May 1941</u> A.H.Q. Malta No. 249 Sqn. No. 185 Sqn. No. 830 Sqn. F.A.A. No. 69 Sqn. No. 139 Sqn. Det. No. 82 Sqn. Det. No. 252 Sqn. Det.	 Valetta Luqa Hal Far Hal Far Luqa Luqa Luqa Luqa	 Hurricane Hurricane Swordfish Glen Martin Blenheim IV Blenheim IV Beaufighter	 16 16 12 (Strength) 4 6 (Strength) 6 (Strength) 15 (Strength)	 4 4 2	 Formed 21.5.41. Replaced No.261 Sqn. Formed 12.5.41 from surplus personnel and a/c of No. 261 Sqn. Arrived 16.5.41. Arrived 21.5.41. Arrived 1.5.41. Departed end of May 1941.

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APPENDIX III

SICILY AIR STRENGTHS (I.A.F.)

(taken from the official Strength Returns of the
I.A.F. Superaerea)

10 June 1940

<u>Stormo</u>	<u>Group</u>	<u>Location</u>	<u>Types of A/C</u>	<u>No. of A/C</u>	<u>Serviceable A/C</u>
11		Comiso	S.79	33	
41		Gela	"	18	
34		Catania	"	27	
30		Sciacca	"	27	
36		Castelvetrano	"	32	
96	Autonomous dive bomber Group	Pantellaria ^e	S.85	-	
1st	fighter Stormo	Palermo	C.R.32	25	
			C.R.42	17	
6th	Autonomous fighter Group	Catania	M.C.200	<u>26</u>	
				205	

9 December 1940

30	87	Sciacca	S.79 (Bombers)	14	10
	90	"	"	13	8
34	52	Catania	S.79	14	11
	53	Gerbini	"	<u>14</u>	<u>11</u>
				55	40
1st		Trapani			
	6	Catania	M.C.200 (fighters)	34	24
			C.R.32	1	1
	17	Palermo	M.C.200	27	21
			C.R.42	8	7
			C.R.32	4	4
23rd	Autonomous Group	Comiso	C.R.42 (fighters)	<u>26</u>	<u>23</u>
				100	80

COASTAL COMMAND

83	Group	C Z 501 (Seaplanes)	14	9
		C Z 506	7	2
144	Sqdn	C Z 501	7	3
189	Sqdn	C Z 501	7	3
			<u>35</u>	<u>17</u>

APPENDIX IV

SICILY AIR FORCE LOSSES

From the beginning of hostilities until December 1941
(Extracted from Italian Air Ministry official returns)

<u>DATE</u>	<u>DUE TO ENEMY ACTION</u>	<u>MISSING CAUSE UNKNOWN</u>
10 June - 13 July 1940 *	8 bombers 1 fighter	
14 July - 31 Aug. 1940 *	2 bombers 4 fighters	
1 Sept. - 30 Sept 1940 *	3 bombers 1 fighter	1 bomber 1 fighter
Oct. - Dec. 1940	5 bombers 2 fighters	2 fighters
Jan. - Mar. 1941	5 bombers 5 fighters	3 bombers 4 fighters
April - June 1941	2 bombers 3 fighters	8 bombers 5 fighters
July - Sept. 1941	6 bombers 10 fighters	9 bombers 12 fighters
Oct. - Dec. 1941	1 bomber 2 fighters	3 bombers 5 fighters
	<u>60</u>	<u>53</u>

* 2nd Air Squadron was operating from Sicily during these periods

From Oct. - Dec. 1940 the 2nd Air Squadron and the Sicilian Air Force
were both operating from Sicily

The 2nd Air Squadron moved out of Sicily at the end of Dec. 1940.

APPENDIX V

II I. A. F.
I SQUADRON BOMBERS OPERATIONS (BOMBERS)

10 June - 13 July 1940
(from Italian Air Ministry Statistics)

M A L T A

Target	No. of Missions	A/C Engaged	KG. 250	Bombs Dropped KG. 100 KG. 50		KG. 15	20 incend.
Naval bases and ports	20	⁶ 132	133	539	377	36	117
Airfields and Seaplane bases	18	92	19	508	182	108	27
Naval Units Cruisers off Malta	1	6	15	6			
	39	234	167	1,053	559	144	144
Fighter Escort	16	191					
A/C lost over Malta	S.79 Mo.200	6 1					
	Destroyed in combat	7					

II SQUADRON OPERATIONS (BOMBERS)
14 July - 31 August 1940

Target	No. of Missions	A/C Engaged	KG. 250	Bombs Dropped Kg. 100 KG. 50		20 incend.
Naval bases and ports	2	15	21	56	-	24
Air and Sea-plane bases	6	32	-	198	60	80
Sundry	2	12	-	12	100	32
Fighter Escort	11	162				
Armed Recce	13	146				
	34	367	21	266	160	136

A/C losses
C.R.42

Destroyed in Combat
2

S.79

2
4

APPENDIX No. VI

I.A.F. OPERATIONS AGAINST MALTA

(From Official Italian Sources)

Beginning of hostilities - 13th July 1940

<u>Objectives</u>	<u>Operations</u>	<u>No. of A/C</u>	<u>No. of Bombs</u>	<u>Bombs Dropped</u> (Kgs)
Malta naval base	20	139	1,196	114,888
Calafra Seaplane base	4	24	164	18,316
Hal Far airfield	7	36	349	27,052
Ta Venezia	3	10	108	7,040
Micabba	3	20	175	14,340
Magtab	<u>1</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>48</u>	<u>1,592</u>
	38	231	2,040	183,228

14th July - 31st Aug. 1940

Ports & Naval bases Malta	2	15	101	12,062
<u>Airfields & Seaplane bases</u>				
Hal Far	3	16	174	12,135
Micabba	3	16	164	12,425
Calafra Torpedo Depot	1	6	72	3,740
Marsa Sirocco fuel "	<u>1</u>	<u>6</u>	<u>72</u>	<u>3,468</u>
	10	59	583	43,830

1st - 30th Sept. 1940

La Valetta	1	6	18	5,148
Burmola	1	7	18	5,148
Marsa Sirocco	1	5	5	3,032
Hal Far	1	13	61	6,532
Micabba	<u>3</u>	<u>27</u>	<u>230</u>	<u>16,998</u>
	7	58	332	36,858

Oct. - Dec. 1940

La Valetta	2	3	18	1,815
Burmola	2	12	46	5,311
Calafra	2	6	68	3,664
Ta Venezia	1	3	24	946
Micabba	<u>8</u>	<u>40</u>	<u>340</u>	<u>17,120</u>
	15	64	496	28,856

Jan. - Mar. 1941

Micabba	6	6	58	2,782
Valetta	<u>10</u>	<u>10</u>	<u>105</u>	<u>5,553</u>
	16	16	163	8,335

Apr. - June 1941

Hal Far	13	31	836	15,536
Micabba	28	39	663	18,344
Valetta	<u>32</u>	<u>72</u>	<u>363</u>	<u>47,945</u>
	73	142	1,862	81,825

ROYAL AIR FORCE 201 GROUP

RECONNAISSANCE REPORT

APPENDIX No. VII

R.A.F. Form No. 451

Date 28.6.40.	Ref. No.	Order or nature of duty:- Map or Chart Reference:-						Sea Reconnaissance only	
Unit 230 Squadron	Aircraft S Type S'Land No. L.5804	Pilot F/Lt. W.W. Campbell Crew F/O. D. King F/O P.J. Dundee	Time up 1030 Time down 2015 Total time 9.45	Visibility 3-20'	Weather Fine	Sea Rough	Wind 300 Direction 300 Tru Speed at 1000ft. 16kt Cross out term not applicable		
Place	Serial No.	Time Hrs.	Height (Feet)	Report				Track (True)	
				<p>Sighted submarine periscope at 1405 hours in position 37° 29' N 19° 51' E. Delivered dive bombing attack releasing 2 x 250 lb A.S. simultaneously. Both bombs burst abaft conning tower, the nose of the submarine rose sharply toward the surface but before another attack could be delivered the nose appeared to slide vertically downwards. About 5 minutes later a huge air bubble came to the surface, and smaller bubbles continued to rise for another 10 to 18 minutes. Shortly after the first air bubble arose, oil began to appear on the surface and continued in increasing quantities until I left the vicinity 20 minutes after the attack. I returned to the vicinity 2 hours later and observed a large patch 300 x 500 yards. The tail gunner reported debris floating in the area for several seconds after the explosion but I personally did not see it.</p> <p>I am certain the submarine was destroyed, as the resulting effects of the bombing were identical as in the case when I bombed a submarine and took prisoners.</p>				(Sgd) W.W. Campbell F/Lt.	

RECONNAISSANCE REPORT

ROYAL AIR FORCE 201 GROUP

Date 29.6.40	Ref. No.	Orders or nature of duty:-		SEARCH FOR ENEMY NAVAL FORCES		Sea Reconnaissance only	
		Map or Chart References:-		1800			
Unit 230 Squadron	Aircraft S Type S Land No. L.5804	Pilot F/Lt. W.W. Campbell Crew F/O. D. King F/O. P.J. Dundee	Time up 0830 Time down 1915 Total time 1045	Visibility 6-12'	Weather Fair	Sea Swell	Wind Direction 290 True Speed at 1000 ft. 6-20 knots. Cross out term not applicable.
Place	Serial No.	Time (hrs.)	Height (Feet)	Report		Track (True)	
MARSA SCIROCCO 39° 05' N		0840 1323	1000	Left MALTA. Sighted Italian submarine with conning tower and upper works awash. Dive bombed - released 2 x 250 A.S. bombs. Both bombs burst on submarine "RUBINO" abaft conning tower. Again attacked and released 2 x 250 A.S. bombs again, which burst beside conning. Submarine destroyed. Landed and picked up 4 prisoners, several bodies assumed in vicinity but further search was abandoned due to approaching local storm and rising sea. Survivors uninjured but suffering badly from shock.			
37° 06'N 16° 25'E		1347	1000 1000	On patrol. Sighted "Rubino" class submarine on surface. Having no bombs, machine gunned conning tower and bridge with all guns. Two attacks were made before the submarine attempted to dive, then a very clumsy crash dive took place. The submarine remained at periscope depth for several minutes, either she was disabled or the Captain was mad.			
MARSA SCIROCCO		1915		Landed and handed 2 Lieutenants, 1 Sub-Lieutenant and 1 Petty Officer Italian prisoners over to guard.		(Sgd) W.W. Campbell, F/Lt. \x	

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APPENDIX No. VIII

RAIDS ON ITALIAN TERRITORY AND SHIPPING FROM MALTA

1st November 1940 - April 1941

Sources: M.E.W.I.S. Halpar Station O.R.B. No. 148 Sqdn. O.R.B. Files S.247/37/Air
S.247/37/5/Air

Targets Enemy Ports and Bases
Aerodromes and Landing Grounds
Shipping

Aircraft Employed Heavy Bombers: Wellingtons No. 148 Sqdn.
Torpedo/Bombers: Swordfish No. 830 Sqdn. F.A.A.

November 1940 Mid January 1941

Number of Effective Sorties

			Heavy	Torpedo/Bomber	Totals
Naples	1st	Nov. 1940	10		10
Naples	3/4	" "	3		3
Brindisi	5/6	" "	5		5
Brindisi	7/8	" "	2		2
Naples	9/10	" "	5		5
Taranto	13/14	" "	10		10
Bari	16/17	" "	10		10
Bari	19th	" "	1		1
Bari)	22/23	" "	8		8
Taranto)	22/23	" "	1		1
Brindisi	28/29	" "	6		6
Naples)	2/3	December	4		4
Catania)	2/3	" "	1		1
Augusta)	2/3	" "	1		1
Castel Benito)	7th	" "	11		11
Mellaha)	7th	" "	3		3
Grotone	13/14	" "	1		1
Tripoli	13/14	" "		8	8
Naples	14/15	" "	8		8
Tripoli	20/21	" "		10	10
Castel Benito	20/21	" "	9		9
Tripoli	22/23	" "	9		9
Castel Benito	22/23	" "	1		1
Naples	29/30	" "	7		7
Taranto)	30/31	" "	5		5
Naples)	30/31	" "	1		1
Palermo)	30/31	" "	1		1
Grotone)	30/31	" "	1		1
Tripoli	1/2	January	10		10
Tripoli	5/6	" "	6		6
Tripoli	6/7	" "	6		6
Naples	8/9	" "	9		9
Palermo	8/9	" "	1		1
Messina	9/10	" "	7		7
Palermo	9/10	" "		6	6
TOTALS			163	24	187

Appendix No. VII

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Mid January & February 1941

<u>Target</u>	<u>Date</u>	Number of Effective Sorties		
		Heavy	Torpedo/Bomber	Totals
Catania	12/13 January 1941	12		12
Catania	15/16 "	9		9
Catania	20/21 "	8		8
Catania	22/23 "	3		3
Comiso	22/23 "	3		3
Syracuse	22/23 "	1		1
Shipping	27th "		6	6
Naples	27/28 "	5		5
Catania	27/28 "	3		3
Comiso	27/28 "	1		1
Tripoli	31/1 February	6		6
Castel Benito	2/3 "	7		7
Tripoli	8/9 "		10	10
Catania	11/12 "			
Comiso	11/12 "	4		4
Gela	11/12 "			
Shipping	13/14 "		3	3
Catania	15/16 "	3		3
Comiso	15/16 "	2		2
Catania	20/21 "	4		4
Comiso	20/21 "	2		2
Tripoli	24/25 "	9		9
TOTALS		82	19	101

March & April 1941

Aircraft Employed - Heavy Bombers - Wellingtons of No. 148 Sqdn. Det.

- Torpedo/Bombers Swordfish of No. 830 F.A.A. Sqdn.

<u>Target</u>	<u>Date</u>	Number of Effective Sorties		
		Heavy	Torpedo/Bomber	Totals
Tripoli	18/19 March		9	9
Shipping	12 April		6	6
Tripoli	12/13	3		3
Tripoli	14/15	4		4
Tripoli & Shipping	16/17	7	1	8
Tripoli	18/19	8		8
Tripoli	20/21	8		8
Tripoli	23/24	4		4
TOTALS		34	16	50

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RAIDS AGAINST ENEMY TERRITORY AND SHIPPING FROM MALTA. MAY 1941

Anti-Shipping Operations

Aircraft employed: Wellingtons, Blenheims, F.A.A. Swordfish of No. 830 Squadron

Target	Date	No. of Effective Sorties			
		Heavy	Medium	Misc.	Totals
1 Merchant vessel & 1 destroyer	1 May		6		6
Convoy	2 "		4		4
Eight small merchant vessels	7 "		5		5
Convoy	7 "			4	4
Tripoli harbour	10/11 "	4			4
Convoy	12/13 "			4	4
One merchant vessel	22 "		4		4
One merchant vessel	25 "		4		4
One small merchant vessel	27 "		2		2
Convoy	26 "		6		6
Shipping in Sfax	28 "		2		2
Shipping near Sfax	30 "		3		3
Shipping near Sfax	31 "		3		3
		4	39	8	51

Mine-laying Operations

Aircraft employed: F.A.A. Swordfish of No. 830 Squadron

Target	Date	No. of Effective Sorties			
		Heavy	Medium	Misc.	Totals
Tripoli harbour approaches	2/3 May			2	2
" " "	3/4 "			3	3
" " "	4/5 "			2	2
" " "	5/6 "			4	4
" " "	6/7 "			3	3
" " "	10/11 "			5	5
Lampedusa harbour	25/26 "			3	3
				22	22

RAIDS AGAINST ENEMY TERRITORY AND SHIPPING FROM MALTA. JUNE 1941

Anti-shipping Operations

Aircraft employed: Wellingtons, Blenheims, Marylands of No. 69 Sqdn. F.A.A.
Swordfish of No. 830 Sqn.

Target (Ports & Shipping)	Date	No. of Effective Sorties			
		Heavy	Medium	Misc.	Totals
Convoy	3 June		5		5
Shipping - Tripoli harbour	8/9			7	7
Convoy	11		2		2
Tripoli	12/13			4	4
One merchant vessel	13/14			2	2
One merchant vessel	19		2		2
Convoy	22		6		6
Tripoli	23/24			5	5
Convoy	25		4		4
Convoy	25/26			7	7
Shipping - Tripoli	26		4		4
Shipping - Tripoli	26/27	4		5	9
Tripoli	27	6			6
Convoy	29		3		3
Convoy entering Tripoli	29		2		2
Tripoli	29		9		9
Shipping Tripoli	29/30	4			4
Shipping - Tripoli	30		6		6
		14	43	30	87

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Appendix No. VIII

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RAIDS ON ENEMY TERRITORY AND SHIPPING FROM MALTA. JUNE 1941 (Cont.)

Anti-shipping Operations

No. of Effective Sorties

TARGET (Land targets)	Date	Heavy	Medium	Misc:	Totals
Tamiet l.g.	17 June		3		3
Sormann l.g.	29 June		6		6
			9		9

Mine-laying Operations

Aircraft employed: F.A.A. Swordfish of No. 830 Sqn.

No. of Effective Sorties

TARGET	Date	Heavy	Medium	Misc:	Totals
Sea route, Tripoli - Benghazi	1/2 June			4	4
Tripoli Harbour Approaches	7/8 June			4	4
				8	8

Fighter Operations

Aircraft employed: Hurricanes

No. of Effective Sorties

TARGET	Date	Light bombing	Machine gun	Totals
Syracuse seaplane base	23 June		4	4

RAIDS ON ENEMY TERRITORY AND SHIPPING FROM MALTA. JULY 1941

Anti-shipping Operations

Aircraft employed: Wellingtons, Blenheims, Marylands of 69 Sqn. Swordfish of No. 830 Sqn. F.A.A.

No. of Effective Sorties

TARGET (ports and shipping)	Date	Heavy	Medium	Misc:	Totals
Tripoli	1/2 July	5			5
Shipping outside Tripoli	2/3 "	7			9
Shipping outside Tripoli	3 "		14	2	14
Shipping - Palermo Harbour	6 "		6		6
Tripoli	6/7 "	7		1	8
Shipping - Tripoli Harbour	7/8 "	6		2	8
Tripoli	9/10 "		7		7
Naples	9/10 "	6			6
Naples	10/11 "	7			7
Convoy outside Tripoli	13 "		4		4
Messina	14/15 "	8			8
Convoy	15 "		3		3
Shipping - Tripoli Harbour	15/16 "	4			4
Shipping - Tripoli Harbour	16/17 "			3	3
Cruisers & destroyers - Palermo	17/18 "	5			5
Shipping - Tripoli Harbour	18 "		2		2
Shipping - Tripoli Harbour	18/19 "			3	3
Naples	20/21 "	9			9
Convoy	22 "		4	5	9
Shipping - Trapani Harbour	23 "		3		3
Schooner	28 "		3		3
		64	46	16	126

SECRET

Appendix No. VIII

5.

RAIDS ON ENEMY TERRITORY AND SHIPPING FROM MALTA. JULY 1941 (Contd.)

Operations against Land targets

Target	Date	No. of Effective Sorties			
		Heavy	Medium	Misc:	Totals
M.T. on Coastal Road nr. Homs	2 July		2		2
Zuara L.G.	3 "		1		1
Misurata L.G.	4 "		1		1
M.T. on Coastal Road nr. Sirte	4 "		6		6
Zuara L.G.			1		1
Ragusa	10/11 "	1			1
Zuara L.G.	13 "		2		2
Misurata (M.T. Troops)	14 "		3		3
Baglio Rizzo (Marsala)	23 "		1		1
		1	17		18

Mine-laying Operations

Aircraft employed: Swordfish of No. 830 Sqdn. F.A.A.

Target	Date	No. of Effective Sorties			
		Heavy	Medium	Misc:	Totals
Tripoli harbour approaches	2/3 July			6	6
" " "	6/7 "			6	6
" " "	7/8 "			5	5
				17	17

Fighter Operations

Aircraft employed: Hurricanes, Beaufighters, F.A.A. Fulmars

Target	Date	No. of Effective Sorties		
		Light bombing	Machine-gun	Totals
Syracuse Seaplane base	9 July			
Augusta	12 "	1		1
Gerbini	16 "	2		2
Gerbini	17/18 "	1		1
Augusta	17/18 "	1		1
Catania L.G.	18/19 "		2	2
Syracuse Seaplane base	28 "		2	2
Marsala Seaplane base	28 "		2	2
Catania L.G.	28 "		2	2
Baglio Rizzo (Marsala) L.G.	28 "		2	2
		5	2	13
				20

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S E C R E T

Appendix No. IX

CARRIER - BORNE REINFORCEMENTS

D.O. Ops. Folder,
IIJ5/14/4

The policy of dispatching fighter reinforcements to Malta by aircraft-carrier, was initiated at a meeting at Admiralty on 13th July, 1940. The Air Ministry's decision to establish a fighter flight for the defence of the island had not been acted upon when the War with Italy began. For the first weeks of the War the only fighters on the island were four Fleet Air Arm Sea Gladiators, and although these put up a valiant resistance to enemy raids they were no match for the modern Italian fighter and bomber aircraft. Thus from the very beginning the need for modern fighters was acute and as soon as the achievements of the Gladiators had demonstrated the practicability of fighter defence it was decided to establish Hurricanes at Malta.

A scheme was immediately put forward to dispatch a flight of twelve Hurricanes to the Mediterranean by fast convoy, and the S.S. Glenlochry was chosen to carry the aircraft. Owing to operational difficulties however, the Naval authorities considered it unwise to try to pass a convoy through the Mediterranean in the immediate future and proposed Glenlochry should sail in the Cape to the Middle East whence the Hurricanes might easily be transferred to Malta. This scheme, however, was not compatible with the urgency of the situation at Malta and it was suggested that the Hurricanes should be shipped to Gibraltar, fully erected, on board the aircraft-carrier Argus. The Argus could then proceed into the Mediterranean until the Hurricanes were within range of Malta, when they could be flown off, about five hundred miles from the Island. The chief objection to this plan was that it made no allowance for the shipment of non-flying personnel and essential supplies through the Mediterranean, but this difficulty was overcome by the proposal to use two submarines, Proteus and Pandora for the purpose. Further

/decisions

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S E C R E T

Appendix No. IX (contd)

decisions were made to the effect that the Argus should be escorted from the United Kingdom by two destroyers, and that she should take on board two Fleet Air Arm Skuas to act as escort to the Hurricanes on their flight from the carrier to Malta.

There was, at first, some opposition to this plan. Air Marshal Longmore, A.O.C.-in-C. Middle East considered it most unsound and liable to meet with disaster, and favoured accepting the risk of loss entailed by delivering the aircraft all the way through the Mediterranean by sea. While the A.O.C., Malta was doubtful whether it would be practicable for Hurricanes to take off from the Argus and also objected to the delay of the bulk of other supplies for Malta which would be inevitable if they were shipped round the Cape in the Glenlochry. Air Ministry however had carried out a careful examination of the possible risks of the operation in the light of the naval situation and of previous experience of carrier take-offs by Hurricane pilots who had had no training for them, and it was decided to go forward with the operation which was named HURRY. In point of fact when the selection of the pilots had taken place it was found that all the men chosen had already had Fleet Air Arm training. A further precaution was to detail No. 200 Group (Gibraltar) to order two Sunderlands to rendezvous with the carrier at dawn on the day of the take-off, to act as stand-by leaders for the Hurricanes in case either Skua should fail, and to accompany the aircraft as extra escorts. These Sunderlands also had to make a second sortie to carry equipment which could not be transported by submarine or by the aircraft in the first sortie.

The operation took place as planned, and all the aircraft arrived at Malta on 2nd of August and but for one Hurricane which crashed on landing ~~through unmanoeuvring~~ flying, and one

/Skua

S E C R E T

Skua which was brought in carelessly and crashed, the operation was a complete success.

The second of these operations - WHITE -, which took place on the 17th November, 1940, resulted very differently. Of the twelve Hurricanes and two Skuas which took off from the carrier only four Hurricanes and one Skua arrived at Malta. It was known that two Hurricanes of the first flight had come down in the sea near Malta, and it was believed that the second Skua with it's flight of six Hurricanes also landed in the sea owing to lack of fuel. The facts disclosed were as follows.

Two Sunderlands were detailed to meet the two flights of Hurricanes as extra escorts, but at the last minute one Sunderland was disabled at Gibraltar and a Maryland was sent from Malta to replace it. The Sunderland met the first Skua and six Hurricanes at the selected rendezvous and escorted them on, but two of these Hurricanes ran out of fuel twenty-five miles and thirty-four miles from Malta. The first was observed to crash by the Sunderland but it took half an hour to locate and rescue the pilots. The second Skua with six Hurricanes flew to rendezvous with the Maryland, but contact was not made and very little was known of the second flight after this. Bearings requested by the Skua, however, showed the flight to be southward of the correct course to Malta at 08.46 hours, by which time the aircraft should have been within ten to twenty miles of Malta. The flight was not located by R.D.F. although Malta was in communication with two of the Hurricanes by R/T. In a broadcast on 18th November, Rome Radio claimed that a Blackburn Shark had been shot down off Sicily, and the crew taken prisoner, and as no other losses were reported it was assumed that this was the leading Skua.

At a Board of Enquiry set up to investigate the disaster, the findings were as follows:-

/ (a)

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S E C R E T

Appendix IX (contd)

A.M. File
S8080
9b

(a) The Flag Officer Commanding Force H, ⁽¹⁾ in being ordered to employ H.M.S. Argus in preference to H.M.S. Ark Royal as carrier, was forced, for strategic reasons to employ a flying-off position as far to the west-ward as the safe operational range of the Hurricanes would allow.

(b) With this in view F.O.C. Force "H" asked the C.O., H.M.S. Argus whether a position further west than that already selected was considered practicable.

(c) The C.O., H.M.S. Argus, with no experience of Hurricane aircraft, and acting on data given him in an Admiralty message, proposed a position in 6° 40' East as the limit, always providing an easterly wind was to be expected. This, in effect, added ten per cent to the distance to be flown.

(d) From evidence given by the F.O.C., Force "H", he considered the Air Ministry signal replying to his proposal of 6° 40' East was an acceptance of that proposal.

(e) During the conduct of the operations, enemy intelligence indicated the necessity for caution in proceeding to the Eastward and F.O.C. Force "H" utilised to the full the latitude given him in his interpretation of the Air Ministry's reply, and decided to fly off from the extreme Western position of 6° 40' East.

(f) From the evidence of the senior surviving pilot, the Hurricane pilots had been provided with no data as to the most economical revolutionary air speed ratio for 150 knots, using the de Havilland constant speed airscrew. In consequence they set off with ten per cent added to their flying distance, and, except, as far as was known in one instance, used 2200 engine revolutions, whereas one pilot, who used 1800

(1) Force H. The Naval Force in the Western Mediterranean, which was detailed to carry out the naval part of the operation.

/revolutions,

5

S E C R E T

5

Appendix IX (contd)

revolutions, landed with a fair margin of fuel.

This ignorance of the best revolutionary air speed probably added fifteen per cent to their fuel consumption.

(g) The cumulative error of twenty-five per cent marked up the discrepancy in endurance.

The Board were of the opinion that:

(a) Although the chances of Operation HURRY being successful had called forth grave doubts its actual success obscured the risks to be run.

The carrying out of Operation WHITE was influenced by the success of Operation HURRY but lacked its careful planning of flying details.

(b) The Air planning failed by providing pilots with little or no experience of long-distance flying, at the most economical speed and failed to furnish the pilots with any data on the subject. During Operation HURRY experienced R.A.F. and F.A.A. pilots and observers had taken part.

(c) The observer appointed by Admiralty to act as leader in the second Skua had just qualified, and had never taken part in any operation before. It was probably his bad navigation in failing to contact with the Maryland at the rendezvous which caused the total loss of the second flight.

Finally the Board considered no blame could be placed on the C.O., H.M.S. Argus for the error in judgement and execution of the Operation. He had no technical advisors with any experience of Hurricane aircraft and could only rely on the figures for endurance provided by Air Ministry.

A.M. File
C.S.8550

c

The practice^c of reinforcing Malta with carrier-borne Hurricanes was not resumed until March, 1941 when the urgency of the situation in Malta necessitated the rapid dispatch of additional fighters. In Operation WINCH which took place on 3rd April, the aircraft were taken off H.M.S. Argus at

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Appendix No. IX (contd)

Gibraltar and reloaded on to H.M.S. Ark Royal⁽¹⁾ and measures were taken to ensure the pilots were acquainted with the most economical method of flying Hurricanes with long-distance tanks, and that the aircraft were flown off from a position not West of 6° 30' east, at about four hundred and twenty statute miles from Malta. This operation proved entirely satisfactory and all aircraft arrived safely although one flight failed to contact the escorting aircraft at the rendezvous. The operation was repeated on 24th April (Operation DUNLOP) when twenty-three Hurricanes were flown to Malta. All arrived safely and this time contacts with the escorts were made without difficulty. All the Hurricanes had eighty gallons or more left in their tanks except one which used rich mixture for the whole flight and had fifty gallons left.

In view of the success of these recent operations and the valuable experience gained from them as well as from Operation WHITE, it was decided to continue this method of reinforcement on a much larger scale, and by this means to deliver a large number of Hurricane aircraft awaiting dispatch to Middle East. It was hoped to send up to a hundred and forty-eight Hurricanes and eighteen Fulmar to the Middle East by this means. By the beginning of July the total number of aircraft, which had reached Malta in transit far exceeded the original target. Five operations were mounted; forty-six Hurricanes arrived at Malta in Operation SPLICE in May, and by early July three batches of forty-three, forty-eight and fifty-six respectively had arrived (Operations ROCKET, TRACER and RAILWAY). Out of a total of two hundred and five aircraft

-
- (1) Ark Royal was employed for the Operation in preference to Argus because the former was provided with greater deck space for the take off and for the accommodation of the aircraft. This meant (a) the operation would be less dependent on wind conditions. (b) the Carrier had room to take some of her own fighters on board, and with their protection could advance further Eastward than the Argus, without undue risk.

/embarked

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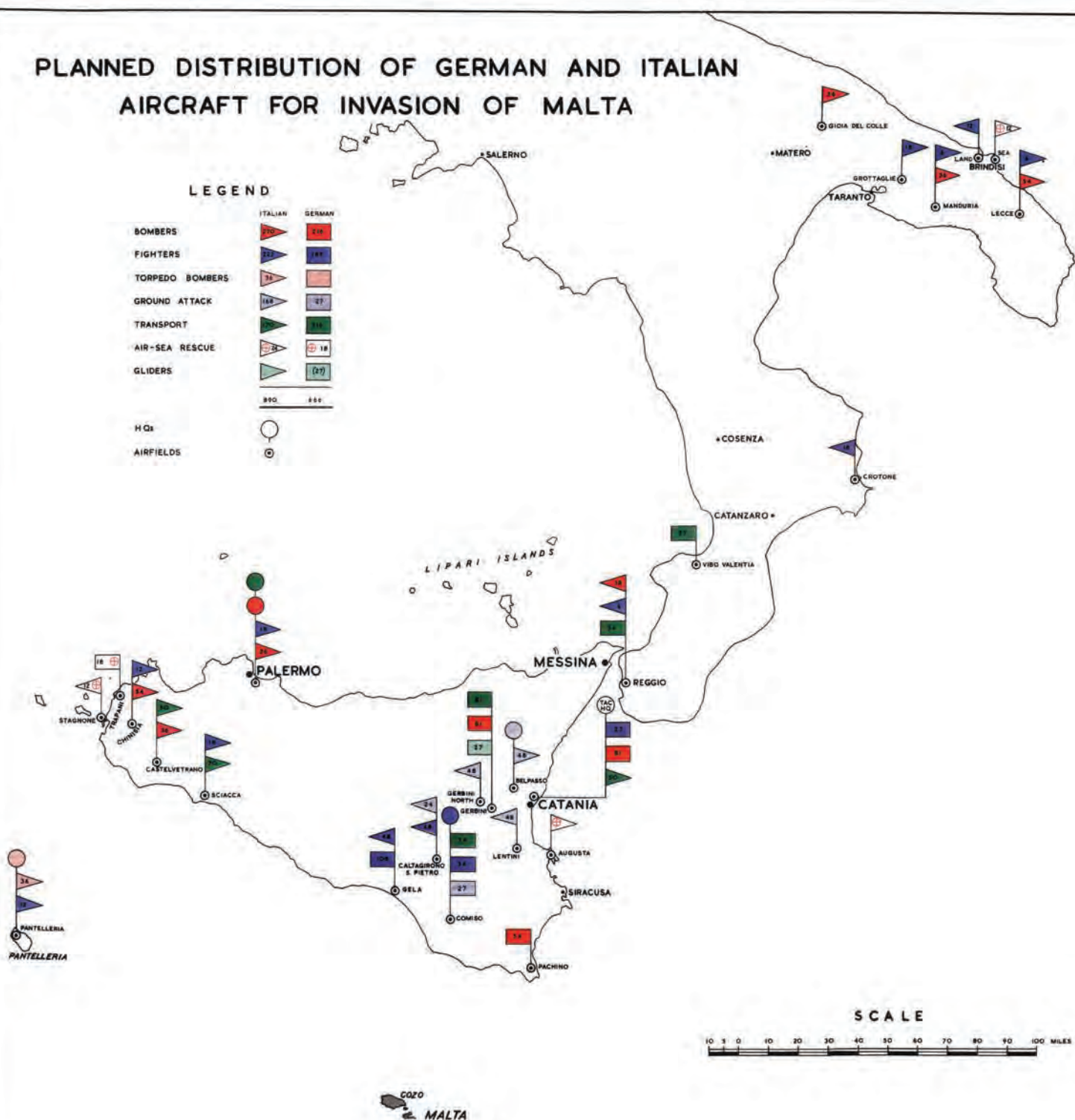
PLANNED DISTRIBUTION OF GERMAN AND ITALIAN AIRCRAFT FOR INVASION OF MALTA

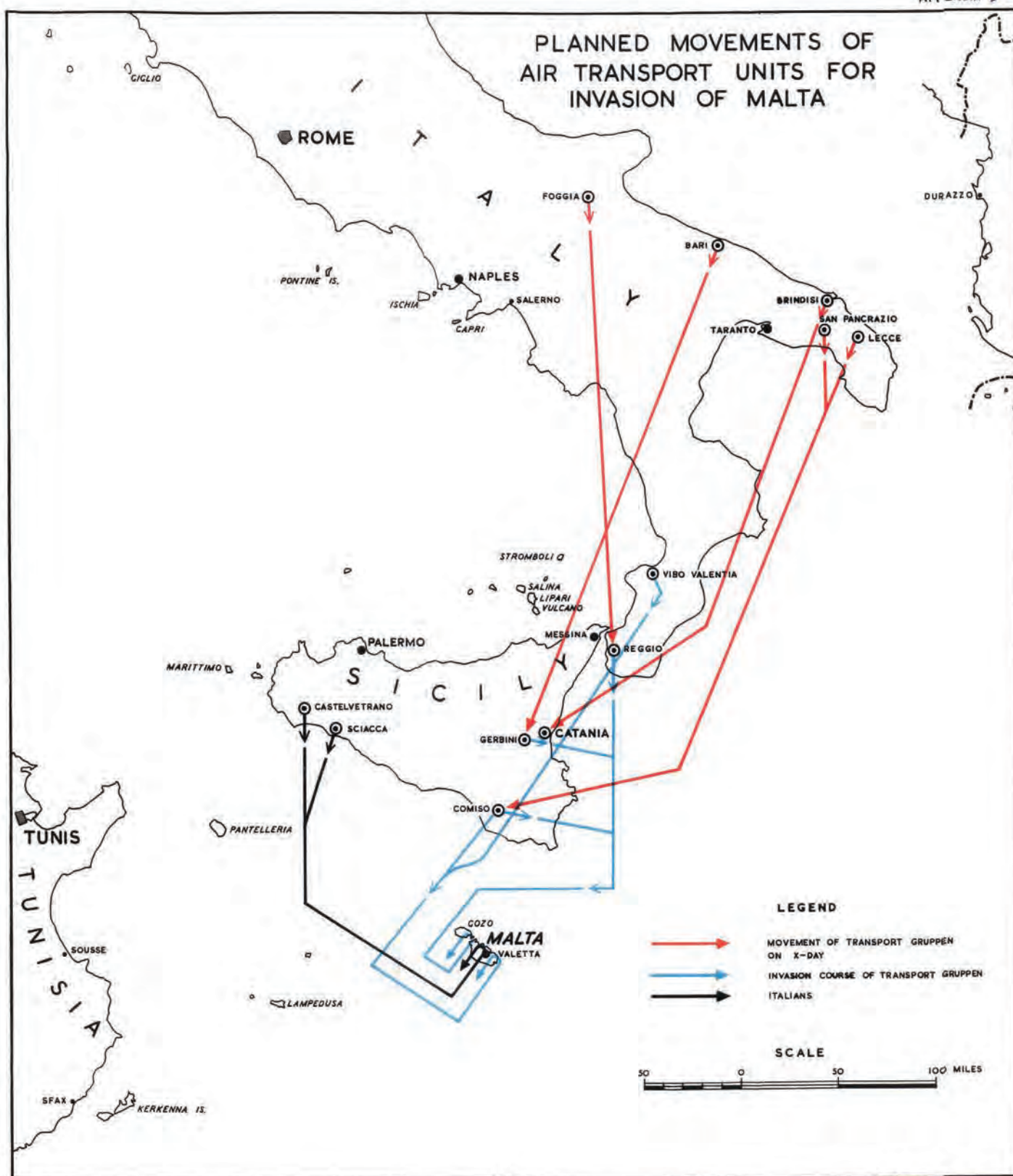
LEGEND

	ITALIAN	GERMAN
BOMBERS	200	214
FIGHTERS	227	281
TORPEDO BOMBERS	74	
GROUND ATTACK	168	27
TRANSPORT	168	14
AIR-SEA RESCUE	24	18
GLIDERS	24	27
	890	550

HQs

AIRFIELDS





7.

S E C R E T

Appendix No. IX (contd)

embarked on carriers during this period, one hundred and ninety-six were flown off in the Mediterranean, and of these only six were lost en route to the Island, although four crashed on landing. Of the aircraft which reached Malta in these four operations 115 had been sent on to the Middle East by the end of July.

This type of operation consequently became accepted as a rapid and efficient means of reinforcing Malta and the Middle East, and was, in due course extended to include Spitfires, when these aircraft became available later.

S E C R E T

CARRIER-BORNE REINFORCEMENTS FOR MALTA

APPENDIX NO 17

(Authority A.H.B. IJ1/68 and Admiralty Historical Section)

Name of Operation	No. of Aircraft Loaded U.K.	Date Loading U.K.	Date Flown off	Type of Aircraft	Name of Carrier	Type of Operation	Escorting Aircraft	No. of Aircraft			Remarks
								Embarked Carrier	Flown off	Arrived	
Hurry	12	20. 7.40	2. 8.40	Hurricane	Argus + 2 Subs.	Carrier	Skua Sunderland	12	12	12 Malta	Reinforcement of 261(F) Squadron, Malta. 1 aircraft damaged.
White Quick	12	4.11.40	17.11.40	Hurricane	Argus & Sheffield	Carrier	Skua Sunderland Glen Martin	12	12	4 Malta	8 aircraft lost through technical errors and bad navigation of escorting Skua.
Winch	12	16. 3.41	3. 4.41	Hurricane II	Argus & Ark Royal	Carrier	Skua Sunderland Glen Martin	12	12	12 Malta	1 crashed on landing
Dunlop	23	15. 4.41	27. 4.41	Hurricane I & II	Argus	Carrier	Sunderland Fulmar	23	23	23 Malta	Reinforcement 261(F) Squadron, Malta. 1 aircraft did not embark at Gibraltar.
Skirmish Tiger	15 left U.K.	Left U.K by air 1. 5.41	Left Gib. 2. 5.41	Beaufighter	-	Air cover to convoy Tiger	-	-	-	13 Malta	252 Squadron. To attack enemy aerodromes whilst convoy of 6 M.T. ships passed through Mediterranean and give long range fighter protection. 1 returned St. Eval, 1 remained Gibraltar.
Splice	64	7. 5.41	21. 5.41	Hurricane I	Furious* & Ark Royal	Carrier	Fulmar	64	48 +	46 ϕ Malta	* 20 transferred to Ark Royal at Gibraltar. + 16 left at Gibraltar. ϕ P/O Downey crashed off Cape Bon. 1 missing. To proceed Middle East.
Glover Rocket	29	13. 5.41	6. 6.41	Hurricane II	Argus* Furious Ark Royal	Carrier	Blenheim	29 +	45	43 ϕ Malta	* Transferred to Furious and Ark Royal at Gibraltar. + Plus 16 transferred from Splice. ϕ 1 returned Ark Royal. 1 (P/O. Barnes) missing. To proceed Middle East.
Harley Tracer	48	10. 5.41	14. 6.41	Hurricane I	Victorious* Furious Ark Royal	Carrier	Hudson	48	47	45 + Malta	* Transferred to Furious and Ark Royal at Gibraltar + 1 lost at sea, 1 landed N. Africa, 2 crashed landing. To proceed Middle East.
Track	6 Squadrons	22. 5.41	-	Hurricane I & II	-	Convoy WS9	-	-	-	-	6(F) Squadrons + 1 A.S.P. + R.S.U. etc. Nos. 46, 213, 229, 260, 238, 249. All to Middle East. Flying personnel via Takoradi & overland.
Nordic Railway	64	17. 6.41	26. 6.41 1. 7.41	Hurricane II	Furious	Carrier	Swordfish Blenheim	64	22 35 +	21 * 34 * Malta	* 1 unaccounted for. + 1 crashed on board. 6 not flown off, pilots injured as result of crash.
Random Substance	126(F) Squadron personnel	-	-	Hurricane A	-	Convoy	Sunderland	-	-	24.7.41 Malta	126(F) Squadron (personnel only).
Scarlet Status I & II	-	29. 8.41	9 & 13.9.41	Hurricane	Furious & Ark Royal	Carrier	Blenheim	14 45	14 45	44 45 Malta	-
Halberd	3 Squadrons/ 2 Flights	16. 9.41	-	Bleim Wellington Beaufighter	-	Convoy WS, IIX *	Beaufighter	-	-	28.9.41 Malta	* 8 - 15 Kt.M.Vs. and heavy naval escort. + 2 Blenheim Squads; 1 Wellington SQUAD; 1 BEAUFIGHTER FLT. 1 BEAUFORT FLT

Name of Operation	No. of Aircraft Loaded U.K.	Date Loading U.K.	Date Flown off	Type of Aircraft	Name of Carrier	Type of Operation	Escorting Aircraft	No. of Aircraft			Remarks
								Embarked Carrier	Flown off	Arrived	
Callboy		30. 9.41	16.10.41	Albacore * Swordfish	Ark Royal	Carrier	Swordfish	14	14	12 ⁺	* 828 Squadron. ⁺ 11 Albacore and 1 Swordfish.
Troon	6 Squadrons *	Oct. 41 Nov. 41	-	Hurricane	-	Convoy WS13 Convoy WS14					* To have been 13(F) Squadrons for Middle East. Reduced to 6(F) Squadrons - Nos. 17, 135, 136, 242, 258, 605. To land either Red Sea or Persian Gulf as required.
Pantaloon Perpetual	62	1.11.41	12.11.41	Hurricanes IIB & C	Argus Athene * Ark Royal	Carrier	Blenheim	62 ⁺	37	34 ^Ø Malta	* Aircraft to be transferred from Athene to Ark Royal at Gibraltar. Pilots of 605, 242 & 258(F) Squads. for Middle East. ⁺ Part 2 of operation (25 aircraft) cancelled owing to loss of Ark Royal. Aircraft sent Takoradi in Athene Dec. 1941. ^Ø 3 missing.
Some time Opponent	48 Port Sudan		15. 1.42	Hurricanes	Indomitable	Carrier		48 ?	48 ?	48 ? Singapore	Far East.
Quarter Spotter		9. 2.42	7. 3.42	Spitfire VB	Eagle	Carrier	Blenheim	15 as 16	15	15 Malta	
Scantling } Picket (1) } Picket (2) }	31	28. 2.42	21. 3.42 29. 3.42	Spitfire VB Spitfire VB	Argus or Eagle	Carrier Carrier	Blenheim Blenheim	16 * -	9 7	9 Malta 7 Malta	* 15 aircraft not embarked at Gibraltar. Left for future disposal. See Bowery L.B. Reinforcement for Malta.
Gilman	32	24. 3.42 arranged	-	Spitfire VB	-	Carrier	-	-	-	-	Operation cancelled.
Calendar Newman	47	10. 4.42	20. 4.42	Spitfire VC	Wasp	Carrier	No air escort	47	47	46 *	* 1 missing - Sgt. Walcott. First operation of this type without air escort.
Oppidan) } Bowery) }	47				Wasp			47	47		* 1 crashed on ship. 1 landed in Africa. 1 landed in sea. 1 crashed on landing. Aircraft for 601 and 603 Squadrons.
Hansford) } Bowery) }	17		9. 5.42	Spitfire VB	Eagle	Carrier	No air escort	17	17	60 * Malta	

- 3 -

Name of Operation	No. of Aircraft Loaded U.K.	Date Loading U.K.	Date Flown off	Type of Aircraft	Name of Carrier	Type of Operation	Escorting Aircraft	No. of Aircraft			Remarks
								Embarked Carrier	Flown Off	Arrived	
Hansford Bowery LB	16	-	18. 5.42	Spitfire	Eagle	Carrier	Sunderland	16	16	16 Malta	Taking 15 Spitfires remaining from Picket.
Tilden) Style)	32	9.5.42	3. 6.42	Spitfire	Eagle	Carrier	No escort	32 ?	31	27 * Malta	* 1 damaged landing. two shot down at sea; two missing.
Maintop Salient	32	24.5.42	9. 6.42	Spitfire	Eagle	Carrier	"	32	32	32 *	* 1 crash landed, pilot uninjured. Aircraft ex Empire Conrad.
Colima Pinpoint	32	9.6.42	17. 7.42	Spitfire VB or VC	Eagle	Carrier	"	32 ?	32 ?	31 Malta	
Knapsack Insect	32	-	21. 7.42	Spitfire VB or VC	Eagle	Carrier	"	30	29	28 *	* 1 A/C crashed after taking off. Pilot baled out and was killed.
Headlong	32	-		Spitfire VB or VC	Eagle	Carrier		P O S T P O N E D			
Landaman	32	-		Spitfire VB or VC	Eagle	Carrier		C A N C E L L E D			
Grinnell Bellows	40	30.7.42	11. 8.42	Spitfire VB or VC	Furious	Carrier	"	38	37	37 * Malta	* 1 landed H.M.S. Indomitable. 2 damaged landing Malta.
Headlong Baritone	-	-	17. 8.42	Spitfire VB or VC	Furious	Carrier	"	32	32	29 * Malta	* 1 crashed) 1 damaged) landing Malta
Train	-	-	29.10.42	Spitfire VB or VC	Furious	Carrier	"	31	29	29 * Malta	* Two could not be flown off due to engine defects.

S E C R E T

APPENDIX No. X

R.D.F. in the Defence of Malta

It had already been pointed out that R.D.F. cover was particularly necessary on so small an Island as Malta. Not only did visual observation take place only a short time before the enemy aircraft arrived at their targets. It also provided insufficient warning for the fighters to scramble to meet the raid, since the defence aerodromes were themselves within the main target area. R.D.F. could therefore play a decisive part in the defence of Malta.

S.47124
131A

Until December 1940 the Island was protected solely by Nos. 241 and 242 ~~Transportable Radio Units~~ ^{Transportable Radio Units} working alternately throughout each twenty-four hour period.

Although sited within 3,000 yards of one another, these T.R.U's had slight but important differences in performance, resulting in varying gaps in the R.D.F. screen. Enemy formations flying at approximately 20,000 feet were normally detected at 65-75 miles. On No. 241 T.R.U. these raids faded between thirty-five to twenty-eight miles but this caused no serious operational drawback. On No. 242, however, the fading area was between fifty to thirty-nine miles, a most inconvenient distance since it covered the period during which fighters had to be flown off if intercepting were to be made. The addition of another receiving aerial however did much to fill up this gap.

The first C.O.L. station became operational to provide low cover at Fort Ta Siloh on 28th December 1940, followed by a second on 29th January 1941, at Fort Maddalena, while the third station commenced testing and calibration at Fort Dingli in February. Although these stations were able to plot aircraft at their extreme range (approximately seventy miles) the operational height of enemy aircraft had been such that they had so far provided only a little extra coverage over Nos. 241 and 242 Transportable Radio Units.

Until the arrival of the German Air Force in the Mediterranean, enemy raids usually consisted of formations of bombers escorted by fighters, flying at an average height of 20,000 feet. Similarly reconnaissances were carried out by fighters and no difficulty was experienced in detecting any of these raids. Single aircraft rarely approached the Island by day, and night raids usually consisted of single aircraft or a succession of single aircraft flying at approximately 10,000 feet. These were normally detected

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at about 40-50 miles, and were followed in by R.D.F. observation with some, but not serious, fading.

With the arrival of the Luftwaffe, Tactics underwent a considerable change. Frequentⁿ reconnaissances were made by single high-flying aircraft (usually Ju.88) and these were seldom picked up beyond 25 miles and on two or three occasions were only detected when within visual range of the Island. Although this was sufficient for gun crews and for warning the population, fighter interception was impossible. Enemy reconnaissance aircraft were therefore able to return to base unmolested, with valuable visual and photographic information. In addition the effect of such episodes on morale threatened to be cumulative if they continued.

S.50536/RDF
1A & 6A

In view of the increasing enemy activity over the Island, Air Commodore Maynard was very anxious to improve the R.D.F. cover and to remedy its somewhat dangerous faults. He therefore applied to Middle East for advice, and when suggestions for technical alterations failed to satisfy, he asked the Command H.Q. to send Wing Commander Tester the Chief Radio Officer to inspect the system at the Island.

Wing Commander Tester arrived on 30th January and carried out a ten-day tour of inspection at the end of which time he compiled a detailed report.

ibid 13A

He discovered that generally speaking the whole air defence system operated with remarkable efficiency. The main drawbacks were the lack of height information and of I.F.F. although this was mitigated to some extent by the smallness of the target area and the low number of friendly aircraft. The former caused lost opportunities for intercepting single enemy aircraft which frequently circled the Island at a distance of almost thirty miles, and which ought to have been easy targets. The latter led to frequent false alarms when friendly aircraft were approaching the Island. Wing Commander Tester found that it was undoubtedly true that several cases had occurred of single Junkers aircraft being detected at ranges only slightly more than

/ twenty

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3

twenty miles. Several technical faults in the newly-erected stations had been discovered however, and work was immediately begun to remedy them. The chief fault in the operation of the stations was the method of sweeping of the C.O.L's (the units giving low cover) so that if the T.R.U. did not pick up a raid, there was great danger of its getting close to the Island undetected. It was considered that this might be the cause of single aircraft slipping through, although there was no direct evidence of this. ⁽¹⁾ In spite of the three instances when no effective warning had been given, previous tracks did not indicate serious gaps in the vertical and horizontal coverage.

Some of the R.D.F. difficulties were due to shortage of personnel. For example no Filter Officers were available for the Filter Room, and the duty was carried out by two A.M.E. Station Commanders who were thus prevented from supervising their own R.D.F. Stations. Activity was considerable. In thirty-four normal days about 20,000 plots were received, the majority being hostile tracks.

Owing to shortage of crews action had to be delayed in following up an important recommendation for an increase in R.D.F. cover. It was proposed to split Nos. 241 and 242 T.R.U.s into separate units operating simultaneously, and the personnel of No. 241 were posted to No. 242 in March. A new site was then found for the equipment of No. 241 T.R.U. at Ghar Lapsi on the south coast. This station was intended to give cover to the south and west against possible raids from Tripoli, but it did not come into operation until May 1942.

No. 241
A.M.E.S.
O.R.B.

A.M. File
S. 50541/RDF
130A

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- (1) It was later considered more likely that failure to pick up single aircraft on R.D.F. was due simply to their great height as similar difficulties had been encountered on the Home Chain.

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APPENDIX No. XI

Aerodromes and Landing Grounds

IIJ5/16

By the end of 1940 extensive plans had been put forward for the improvement of the aerodromes at Malta. In September a decision had been taken to extend the flight paths at Takali and Hal Far and to develop Krendi and Safi as two runway sites. The arrival of the Wellington unit in November made necessary the extension of the main runway at Luqa which was then too short for use by the bombers in no-wind conditions, and this extension was completed by the end of December.

In January 1941 a rough estimate of Malta's capacity was made in view of the need for more air units. The forecast of work was then as follows:-

- Safi - Should be completed by July
- Krendi - Should be completed by October
- Hal Far - Extension should be completed by late October
- Takali - Extension should be usable by March

The capacity of the aerodromes was estimated as:-

- Hal Far: Six Glen Martins and twelve Hurricanes
- Takali: Two Hurricane Squadrons or
One Hurricane and one Beaufighter
(Not usable for Elenheims or Beauforts)
- Luqa: Twenty-four Wellingtons, or
Sixteen Wellingtons and sixteen Hurricanes or
Sixteen Wellingtons and sixteen Elenheims or
Beauforts

IIJ1/46/5

At a meeting on 13 May 1941 it was agreed that there was accommodation for five squadrons at Malta and the V.C.N.S. suggested that it was most desirable that this number should be increased to six.

Protection of Aircraft

A.M. File
S.171800

The limited dispersal area on the Malta aerodromes made some form of protection for aircraft particularly necessary. At first it was proposed to tunnel out hangars in the rock force round the aerodromes but this project was abandoned as it would involve too much time and expense. The method adopted was the

/ construction

S E C R E T

SECRET

construction of stone pens on the perimeter of the airfields, and work was commenced on these in September 1940. In May 1941 the A.O.C. reported that stone pens, though not ideal and not affording complete protection, had proved their utility and saved many aircraft from complete destruction. They could be built with local material and labour and experiments were being made with roofing over pens with steel trusses from destroyed Bellman hangars. It was hoped this would prevent damage to aircraft by falling rock or incendiary bombs. Meanwhile dispersion was being developed outside the aerodrome perimeters.

S E C R E T

APPENDIX XII

DISTRIBUTION OF GERMAN AIRCRAFT IN SICILY 12 JANUARY 1941

CATANIA

III/LG 1	1 Ju.88
II/LG 1	4 Ju.88
I(F) 121	6 Ju.88
II/KG 26	28 He.111

KG z.b.V. 9

TRAPANI

St.G. 3	1 Do.17
St. G.3	44 Ju.87
KG 26	1 He.111

COMISO

III/KG 26	3 He.111
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PALERMO

III/2G	25 Me.110
St.G. 3	5 Ju.87

STRENGTH OF THE GERMAN FLIEGERKORPS X
IN SICILY AT 22.2.1941

CATANIA

		<u>Strength</u>	<u>Serviceable</u>
Stab/L.G.1	}	-	-
II/L.G.1		24	13
III/L.G.1		29	10
1/F/121		17	7
	L.R. Recce		

PALERMO

III/2G. 26	T.E. Fighters	40	31
------------	---------------	----	----

TRAPANI

Stab/2.G.3	}	5	2
I/St. G.1		30	22
II/St. G.2		38	31
	Dive-bombers		
7/J.G.26	T.E. Fighters	14	12
1/N.J.G.3	Night Fighters	7	4

E
GOLA
K

COMISO

II/K.G.26	Bomber	30	9
2/K.G.4		9	7
	<u>TOTAL</u>	<u>243</u>	<u>148</u>

STRENGTH OF THE GERMAN FLIEGERKORPS X
IN SICILY, AS AT 22.3.41

<u>Location</u>	<u>Unit</u>	<u>Aircraft</u>	<u>Type</u>		<u>Strength</u>	<u>Serviceable</u>
Catania	Stab/L.G.1	Bombers	Ju. 88	1	1	1
	II/L.G.1		Ju. 88	38	26	20
	III/L.G.1		Ju. 88	38	40	11
	III/K.G.30		Ju. 88	38	27	24
	1/(F)121	L.R. Recce	Ju. 88	12	15	9
	2/(F)123		Ju. 88	9	14	7
Palermo	Stab/III/Z.G.26	T.E. Fighters	Me.110	3	3	3
	7/Z.G.26		Me.110	15	15	11
Trapani	II/St.G.1	Dive bombers	Ju. 87	39	42	27
	III/St.G.1		Ju. 87	39	37	18
	Stab/St.G.3		Ju. 87	9	5	2
Gela	7/J.G.26	S.E. Fighters	Me.109	15	14	11
	1/N.J.G.3	Night Fighters	Me.110	12	7	4
Comiso	2/K.G.4	Bombers	He.111	12	12	2
	II/K.G.26		He.111	36	36	19
		III/St.G.1	Based here and at Trapani			
TOTAL				316	294	169

STRENGTH OF THE GERMAN FLIEGERKORPS X
IN SICILY AS AT 19.4.41

Catania	1/(F)121	L.R. Recce	Ju. 88	12	15	4
	2/(F)123		Ju. 88	12	15	5
	II/L.G.1	Bombers	Ju. 88	38	30	17
	Stab/L.G.1		Ju. 88	1	1	1
Palermo	Stab/III/2.G.26	T.E. Fighters	Me.110	3	3	3
Trapani	II/St.G.1	Dive bombers	Ju. 87	39	29	20
Gela	7/J.G.26	S.E. Fighters	Me.109	15	15	10
	1/N.J.G.23	Night Fighters	Me.110	12	12	5
Comiso	2/K.G.4	Bombers	He.111	12	12	0
	II/K.G.26		He.111	36	36	7
Gerbini	III/K.G.30	Bombers	Ju. 88	38	25	15
<u>TOTAL</u>				218	191	87

STRENGTH OF THE GERMAN FLIEGERKORPS X
IN SICILY AS AT 3.5.41

Catania	Stab/L.G.1	Bombers	Ju. 88	1	1	1
	II/L.G.1		Ju. 88	38	30	11
	III/K.G.30		Ju. 88	38	22	13
	1(F)121	L.R. Recce	Ju.88	12	14	5
	2/(F)123		Ju.88	12	13	2
Palermo	Stab/III/2.G.26	T.E. Fighters	Me.110	3	3	3
Trapani	III/St.G.1	Dive bombers	Ju. 87	39	35	20
Gela	7/J.G.26	S.E. Fighters	Me.109	15	15	9
	1/N.J.G.3	Night Fighter	Me.110	12	15	3
<u>TOTAL</u>				170	148	67

NOTE: Departure of Fliegerkorps X from Sicily

The German Units began to move from Sicily to North Africa and Greece in the first weeks of May 1941. The majority of the moves took place between ^{the} 18th and 27th although the Long Range Reconnaissance Units remained until 4th June. After this date during this particular phase of the enemy air offensive against Malta, the German Air Force in Sicily was virtually non-existent.

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S E C R E T

APPENDIX No. XIII

Attacks on the *Illustrious* and Malta
(from a study prepared by the German Air Historical
branch and dated 30th October 1944 - *R.H.B. Ref. Trans. No. 57/11*)
No. 57/11)

27 3. Course of Events

A supply convoy sailing from Gibraltar to Malta and consisting of 23 ships, among them the aircraft carrier *Illustrious* and two battleships, was sighted by our reconnaissance aircraft north of Bougie on 7th January 1941. Fighter bombers and torpedo-carrying aircraft delivered a low-level and dive-bombing attack on the convoy south of Sardinia. Carrier aircraft presented no danger worth mentioning since they were of an obsolete type. Naval flak caused slight losses. Fighters based on Malta found the distance to the target area too great. Bad weather helped the sea operations so that parts of the convoy, including the *Illustrious* reached Malta. There followed a series of day and night attacks by Ju.88s and He.111s and day attacks by Ju.87s and Me.110s on ships in the harbour of Valetta and on airfields on Malta. Dive bombing and level flight attacks made from a medium height, in which escorting aircraft also took part, achieved on the whole good results. Several hits on the aircraft carrier by S.C.1000 and 500 bombs were reported and confirmed in aerial photographs but she did not sink and on the 24th January, under cover of bad weather, she left port for Alexandria. Our own losses were tolerable and were caused mainly by accurate flak and, to a lesser extent, by Hurricanes. Air supremacy over the Island was won in February 1941. At times Malta had only three fighters ready for immediate action. Our own air attacks were aimed at the following - Main target, operationally active airfields; second target, heavily occupied airfields; third target, harbour installations and ships in port. (1) It became very difficult for the enemy to bring up supplies to Malta since he was unable to provide any fighter escort for the long sea routes along the coast of North Africa. From the middle of 1941 onwards the task of continuing to pin Malta down fell to the Italians. They did not succeed and Malta rose again.

(1) This assertion was later corrected by German officials with the remark "unfortunately No".

EXTRACT FROM THE OPERATIONAL ORDERS AND COMBAT RESULTS
OF FLIEGERKORPS X

BASED ON A REPORT OF A VISIT BY A TECHNICAL OFFICER OF
THE GERMAN AIR MINISTRY DATED 26TH FEBRUARY 1941
(AHB ref. Trans. No. VII/54)

Attacks on the Aircraft Carrier Illustrious -

- First attack - One direct hit by St.G. 3 with SD 250 bomb with 28a fuze, and a possible hit by St.G.3 with one SD 1000 bomb with 35 fuze; also a possible hit by KG 26 with one SD 1000 bomb with 35 fuze. After this attack the carrier docked in La Valetta (Malta).
- Second attack - In La Valetta St.G.3 scored hits with one SD 1000 bomb (35 fuze) and three SC 500 bombs with 28b fuzes, and LG 1 with 2 SG 1000 bombs with 28b fuzes. It was estimated that these fell between the Carrier and the quayside.
- Third attack - In La Valetta, St.G.3 attacked with 5 SC 500 bombs with 28b fuze and 5 SD 500 bombs with 28a fuze. After this attack thick columns of smoke were observed. Subsequent photographic reconnaissance showed severe damage on the upper deck (landing deck) of the carrier, and the fact that shadows cast were short indicated that she was lying low in the water, and it was therefore assumed that she was aground.

A few days later the Illustrious was sighted once more, this time in Alexandria, which she was thought to have reached under her own power. This failure caused great disappointment in Fliegerkorps X. These poor results were generally thought to be due to some special protection round the Carrier's engines and her main installations, rendering the blast of the bombs ineffective. The SC 1000 bombs which fell between the Carrier and the Quayside probably damaged the ship's hull, but as she was no doubt equipped with strong bulkheads, she could keep afloat in spite of being partly flooded and lying low in the water (as seen from the shorter shadow cast).

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APPENDIX No. XIV

GERMAN AIRCRAFT LOSSES IN THE MALTA CAMPAIGN

1 January - 30 June 1941
(from official Enemy Sources)

A. Losses through Enemy Action

<u>Date</u>	<u>Type</u>	<u>No.</u> <u>Destroyed</u>	<u>No.</u> <u>Damaged</u>	<u>Date</u>	<u>Type</u>	<u>No.</u> <u>Destroyed</u>	<u>No.</u> <u>Damaged</u>
<u>Jan.</u>				<u>Apr.</u>			
10th	Dive-Bomber	3	2	11th	Long-range Recce	1	
13th	Bomber	1 bombed on ground	6		Dive-Bomber	1	
15th	Dive-Bomber		1	16th	T.E. Fighter	1	
16th	Bomber	3		17th	Bomber	1	
18th	Dive-Bomber	1		19th	Dive-Bomber	2	
19th	T.E. Fighter	1		21st	Long-range Recce	1	
	Bomber	3		22nd	Bomber	1	
	Dive-Bomber	4	1	29th	Bomber	1	
23rd	Bomber	3					
24th	Bomber	1					
26th	Long-range Recce	1					
		<u>21</u>	<u>10</u>			<u>9</u>	
<u>Feb.</u>				<u>May</u>			
1st	Bomber	1		1st	S.E. Fighter	1	
4th	Bomber	1	2	3rd	Dive-Bomber	1	
8th	Bomber	2		4th	Dive-Bomber	1	
15th	Bomber	1		6th	Bomber	1	
21st	Bomber	1		8th	Long-range Recce		1
23rd	Dive-Bomber	4	1		T.E. Fighter		1
		<u>10</u>	<u>3</u>		Dive-bomber		1
<u>Mar.</u>				9th	Long-range Recce	2	
5th	Dive-Bomber	5			T.E. Fighter	1	
11th	Bomber		1		Dive-Bomber	1	
21st	Bomber	1		10th	Bomber Transport	2 (on the ground)	1
23rd	Dive-Bomber	4		11th	Bomber	1	
26th	Bomber		<u>1</u>	13th	Bomber	<u>1</u>	
		<u>10</u>	<u>2</u>			<u>12</u>	<u>4</u>

GERMAN AIRCRAFT LOSSES IN THE MALTA CAMPAIGN

1 January - 30 June 1941 (continued)

B. Losses on Operations but not due to enemy action

Date	Type	No. Destroyed	No. Damaged
<u>January</u>			
16th	T.E. Fighter	1	
	Bomber	2	
18th	Bomber	1	
24th	Bomber		2
		<u>4</u>	<u>2</u>
<u>February</u>			
15th	Bomber	2	1
17th	Night Fighter	<u>1</u>	<u>1</u>
		3	
<u>March</u>			
2nd	Bomber	1	
3rd	T.E. Fighter	1	
8th	T.E. Fighter		1
10th	T.E. Fighter		1
11th	Night Fighter	1	
	T.E. Fighter	1	
	Bomber		1
13th	Bomber		1
15th	Bomber	<u>1</u>	<u>1</u>
		5	4
<u>April</u>			
5th	T.E. Fighter		1
12th	Bomber	1	
17th	Night Fighter	1	
22nd	Bomber	<u>1</u>	<u>1</u>
		3	
<u>May</u>			
6th	Bomber	1	
14th	Dive-bomber	<u>1</u>	
		2	

APPENDIX XV

MALTA AIRCRAFT LOSSES

BY ENEMY ACTION

JUNE 1940 - MAY 1941

In Action						On the Ground		
Fighters			Others					
Date	No.	Type	Date	No.	Type	Date	No.	Type
<u>June - December 1940</u>								
16 July	1	Hurricane	14 Aug.	3	Swordfish	15 Aug.	1	Swordfish
1 Aug.	1	Gladiator	1 Nov.	1	Sunderland	20 Aug.	1	Blenheim
17 Sept	1	Hurricane	16 Nov.	1	Wellington	17 Sept	1	Wellington
26 Nov.	1	Hurricane	20 Nov.	1	Wellington	24 Nov.	1	Wellington
			14 Dec.	1	Swordfish			
Total	4			7			4	
<u>January - May 1941</u>								
9 Jan.	1	Hurricane	11 Jan.	1	Maryland	18 Jan.	1	Wellington
12 Feb.	2	Hurricane	12 Jan.	2	Wellington		1	Hurricane
16 Feb.	1	Hurricane	9 Feb.	1	Swordfish		4	Swordfish
26 Feb.	3	Hurricane	24 Feb.	1	Wellington	5 Feb.	1	Gladiator
5 Mar.	1	Hurricane	12 Mar.	1	Swordfish		1	Swordfish
7 Mar.	1	Hurricane	18 Mar.	1	Swordfish		1	Hurricane
22 Mar.	5	Hurricane	13 Apr.	2	Swordfish	26 Feb.	6	Wellington
23 Mar.	1	Hurricane	10 May	1	Beaufighter		1	Maryland
28 Mar.	1	Hurricane	27 May	2	Blenheims	5 Mar.	3	Swordfish
11 Apr.	3	Hurricane					1	Gladiator
13 Apr.	1	Hurricane				7 Mar.	1	Maryland
23 Apr.	1	Hurricane				9 Mar.	1	Hurricane
30 Apr.	1	Hurricane				10 Mar.	1	Sunderland
6 May	3	Hurricane				24 Apr.	1	Maryland
7 May	2	Hurricane				6 May	1	Beaufighter
13 May	2	Hurricane				10 May	1	Sunderland
14 May	2	Hurricane				11 May	1	Maryland
15 May	1	Hurricane				15 May	1	Wellington
20 May	1	Hurricane				20 May	1	Beaufighter
						21 May	1	Wellington
						22 May	1	Wellington
						25 May	2	Hurricane
Total	33		Total	12		Total	33	

Source: A.H.B. ILJ1/111
Summary of Aircraft
Losses, Middle East.

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APPENDIX XV

ITALIAN AIR FORCE ON SICILY (USED AGAINST MALTA)

	FIGHTERS		BOMBERS		COASTAL	
	Strength	Serv.	Strength	Serv.	Strength	Serv.
December 1940	100	80	55	39	35	17
May 1941	112	78	60	36	43	16
November 1941	180	126	122	83	52	26
January 1942	122	74	57	34	51	32
May 1942	164	86	133	78	64	47
October 1942	208	96	129	67	68	36

ITALIAN AIR FORCE ON SARDINIA (used as anti-shipping
force against convoys in Western Mediterranean &
in attacks against Gibraltar)

	FIGHTERS		BOMBERS		COASTAL	
	Strength	Serv.	Strength	Serv.	Strength	Serv.
December 1940	25	15	62	47	39	25
May 1941	39	38	64	51	35	21
November 1941	99	79	62	11	31	22
May 1942	60	50	68	38	41	30
October 1942	34	28	59	45	49	33

Source: A.H.B.6

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APPENDIX XV.11

LUFTWAFFE ON SICILY - 17 JANUARY 1942

	UNIT	A/C TYPE	LOCATION	STRENGTH	SERVICEABLE
<u>Long range recon</u>	1 (F) 122	Ju 88		<u>10</u>	<u>7</u>
<u>S.E. Fighters</u>	Stab JG 53	Me 109 F		6	6
	I/JG 53 (less 1st St)	Me 109 F		<u>34</u>	<u>21</u>
	II/JG 53	Me 109 F		<u>37</u>	<u>25</u>
				<u>77</u>	<u>52</u>
<u>Night fighters</u>	I/NJG 2	Ju 88		12	8
	4/NJG 2	Ju 88		<u>5</u>	<u>3</u>
				<u>17</u>	<u>11</u>
<u>T.E. fighters</u>	III/ZG 26 (less 7th St)	Me 110		<u>17</u>	<u>10</u>
<u>Bombers</u>	Stab KG 54	Ju 88 A4		1	1
	1/3 of I/KG 54	Ju 88 A4		12	7
	K Gr 606	Ju 88 A4		20	10
	1/3 of K Gr 806	Ju 88 A4		17	6
	2/3 of II/KG 77	Ju 88 A4		20	12
	1/3 of III/KG 77	Ju 88 A4		<u>16</u>	<u>13</u>
				<u>86</u>	<u>49</u>

Source: A.H.B.6.

APPENDIX XVIII

ITALIAN AIR FORCE ORDER OF BATTLE IN SICILY

22 JANUARY 1942

UNIT	A/C TYPE	LOCATION	STRENGTH	SERVICEABLE
173 Sq R S	Cr 25	Palermo	17	11
278 Sq Aero-silurante (torpedo bombers)	S 79	Pantellaria ^e	14	7
			31	18
<u>Bomber Command</u>				
10 St B T	S 79	Palermo		4
30 Gr	S 79	Castelvetro	14	8
32 Gr	S 79	Palermo	6	4
221 Sq	S 79	Palermo	6	4
			26	20
<u>Fighter Command</u>				
54 St C T		Castelvetro		
16 Gr	Cr 42			
	Mo 200			
	Mo 202	Castelvetro		
7 Gr	Cr 42	Palermo	12	7
	Mo 200	Catania		
377 Sq C T	Re 2000	Comiso	100	58
		Trapani	10	9
			122	74
<u>Army Co-Op. (6^a Armata)</u>				
76 Gr		Palermo		
30 Sq	Ro 37	Palermo	9	7
40 Sq	Ro 37			
	Ca 311	Palermo (sect. at Reggio)	8	4
115 Sq	Ro 37			
	Ca 311	Palermo (sect. at Gerbini)	10	4
			27	15
<u>Navy</u>				
83 Gr	Cz 501			
	Cz 506	Augusta	35	21
85 Gr	Cz 501			
	Cz 506	Stagnone	16	11
			51	32

Source: A.H.B.6

APPENDIX XIX

LUFTWAFFE ON SICILY - 21 FEBRUARY 1942

	UNIT	A/C TYPE	LOCATION	STRENGTH	SERVICEABLE
<u>Long range</u>					
<u>recco</u>					
	Stab (F) 122		Trapani		
	2 (F) 122	Ju 88		5	3
	1 (F) 122	Ju 88		9	4
				<u>14</u>	<u>7</u>
<u>S.E. fighters</u>					
	Stab JG 53	Me 109 F	Comiso	4	4
	I/JG 53	Me 109 F	Gela	36	24
	(less 1st St)				
	II/JG 53	Me 109 F	Comiso	36	30
	III/JG 53	Me 109 F	Comiso	35	32
	10/JG 53	Me 109 F	Gela	7	7
	II/JG 3	Me 109 F	Sciacca	35	28
				<u>153</u>	<u>125</u>
<u>Night fighters</u>					
	I/NJG 2	Ju 88	Catania	13	4
	4/NJG 2	Ju 88		3	1
				<u>16</u>	<u>5</u>
<u>T.E. fighters</u>					
	III/ZG 26	Me 110	Trapani	17	11
	(less 7th St)				
<u>Bombers</u>					
	Stab KG 54	Ju 88 A4	Catania	1	1
	I/KG 54	Ju 88 A4	Gerbini	29	16
	K Gr 606	Ju 88 A4	Catania	19	8
	K Gr 806	Ju 88 A4	Catania	24	10
	Stab KG 77	Ju 88 A4	Comiso	1	1
	II/KG 77	Ju 88 A4	Catania	21	11
	III/KG 77	Ju 88 A4	Castel Vetrano	24	5
				<u>119</u>	<u>52</u>
<u>Dive bombers</u>					
	Einsatz St G 1	Ju 87 B/R	Comiso	10	2

Source: AHB.6

ORDER OF BATTLE

A.H.Q. MALTA

1 MARCH 1942

Type	Squadron	Establishment	Total	Serviceable
Beaufighter	No. 272	Detachment Ex M.E.	4	-
Hurricanes	126	16 + 8	6	4
	185	16 + 8	9	6
	242	to reform India	7	6
	249	16 + 8	-	-
	605	16 + 8	8	6
	1435	9 + 0	9	5
	(N.F.) Flt. Luqa		1	-
<u>Total - Fighters</u>		73 + 32	44	27
Blenheim	No. 18	16 + 0	2	
	21		1	1
	107		5	-
	Luqa		3	-
Maryland	69		6	3
Mosquito	do.		1	-
Wellington	38		2	1
	40		3	-
	104		1	-
	221		3	2
	37	16 + 0	14	12
	Luqa		4	-
<u>Total - Bombers</u>		32 + 0	45	19
<u>Total Aircraft</u>		105 + 32	89	46

Source: AHB/VB/9/4

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APPENDIX XXI

LUFTWAFFE ON SICILY - 14 MARCH 1942

UNIT	TYPE OF A/C	LOCATION	STRENGTH	SERVICEABLE
<u>Long range recon</u>				
Stab (F) 122		Trapani		
2 (F) 122	Ju 88	Trapani	6	4
1 (F) 122	Ju 88	Gerbini	11	7
			<u>17</u>	<u>11</u>
<u>S.E. fighters</u>				
Stab JG 53	Me 109 F	Comiso	4	4
I/JG 53 (less 1st St)	Me 109 F	Gela	24	22
II/JG 53	Me 109 F	Comiso	39	27
III/JG 53	Me 109 F	Comiso	32	29
II/JG 3	Me 109 F	San Pietro	39	25
10/JG 53	Me 109 F	Gela	8	8
			<u>146</u>	<u>115</u>
<u>Night fighters</u>				
I/NJG 2	Ju 88	Catania	11	5
4/NJG 2	Ju 88		3	1
			<u>14</u>	<u>6</u>
<u>T.E. fighters</u>				
III/ZG 26 (less 7th St)	Me 110	Trapani	19	12
<u>Bombers</u>				
Stab KG 54	Ju 88 A4	Catania	1	0
I/KG 54	Ju 88 A4	Gerbini	31	14
K Gr 806	Ju 88 A4	Catania	24	13
K Gr 606	Ju 88 A4	Catania	24	18
Stab KG 77	Ju 88 A4	Comiso	1	0
II/KG 77	Ju 88 A4	Comiso	27	8
III/KG 77	Ju 88 A4	Comiso	23	12
			<u>131</u>	<u>65</u>
<u>Dive bombers</u>				
III/St G 3 (less 9th St)	Ju 87D	San Pancrazio	18	15
9/St G 3	Ju 87D	San Pietro	7	5
			<u>25</u>	<u>20</u>

Source: A.H.B.6.

APPENDIX XXII

ORDER OF BATTLE

A.H.B. MALTA

1 APRIL 1942

Type	Squadron	Establishment	Total	Serviceable
Beaufighter	No. 1435 (N.F.) Flight	9 + 0	5	2
Hurricane	No. 185 Squadron	16 + 8	28	10
	229 "	16 + 8	7	6
	Luga		1	-
Spitfire	No. 126 "	12 + 8		
	249 "	12 + 8	18	14
<u>Total Fighters</u>		65 + 32	59	32
Blenheim	No. 107 Squadron		1	
	M.E. Detach.		1	
	Luga		2	
Maryland	No. 69 Squadron	7 + 5	3	1
Wellington	40) Detach-		1	
	104) ments Ex		1	
	221) M.E.		3	
	Luga		7	
Beaufort	Takali		1	
<u>Total Bombers</u>		7 + 5	20	1
<u>Total Aircraft</u>		72 + 37	79	33

Source: AHB/VB/9/4

APPENDIX XXXIII

LUFTWAFFE ON SICILY - 18 APRIL 1942

	UNIT	A/C TYPE	LOCATION	STRENGTH	SERVICEABLE
<u>Long range</u>					
<u>recco</u>					
	Stab (F) 122		Trapani		
	2 (F) 122	Ju 88	Trapani	11	10
	1 (F) 122	Ju 88	Gerbini	16	12
				<u>27</u>	<u>22</u>
<u>S.E. fighters</u>					
	Stab JG 53	Me 109 F	Comiso	5	4
	I/JG 53	Me 109 F	Gela	40	33
	II/JG 53	Me 109 F	Comiso	31	26
	III/JG 53	Me 109 F	Comiso	30	24
	10/JG 53	Me 109 F	Gela	7	4
	II/JG 3 (less 6 St)	Me 109 F	San Pietro (4 a/c on Pantelleria)	24	20
				<u>137</u>	<u>111</u>
<u>Night fighters</u>					
	I/NJG 2	Ju 88	Catania	21	7
<u>T.E. fighters</u>					
	III/ZG 26 (less 7th St)	Me 110	Trapani	21	9
<u>Bombers</u>					
	Stab KG 54	Ju 88 A4	Catania	3	2
	I/KG 54	Ju 88 A4	Gerbini	27	18
	K Gr 606	Ju 88 A4	Catania	22	19
	K Gr 806	Ju 88 A4	Catania	30	21
	Stab KG 77	Ju 88 A4	Comiso	3	3
	II/KG 77	Ju 88 A4	Comiso	22	15
	III/KG 77	Ju 88 A4	Comiso	28	20
	II/LG 1	Ju 88 A4	Catania	37	22
				<u>172</u>	<u>120</u>
<u>Dive bombers</u>					
	III/St G 3	Ju 87 D	San Pietro	32	28

Source: A.H.B.6.

LUFTWAFFE ON SICILY

30 APRIL 1942

31 MAY 1942

		<u>STR.</u>	<u>SERV.</u>			<u>STR.</u>	<u>SERV.</u>
<u>LONG RANGE RECCE</u>				<u>LONG RANGE RECCE</u>			
Stab (F) 122	Trapani	-	-	Stab (F) 122	Trapani	3	1
1 (F) 122	Comiso	14	9	1 (F) 122	Catania	15	5
2 (F) 122	Trapani	12	6	2 (F) 122	Trapani	13	7
		<u>26</u>	<u>15</u>			<u>31</u>	<u>13</u>
<u>S.E. FIGHTERS</u>				<u>S.E. FIGHTERS</u>			
Stab JG 53	Comiso	5	5	Stab JG 53	Comiso	5	5
II/JG 53	Comiso	30	22	II/JG 53	Comiso	41	25
III/JG 53	Comiso	31	25	III/JG 53	N. Africa		
10/JG 53	Comiso	6	4	10/JG 53	N. Africa		
		<u>72</u>	<u>56</u>			<u>46</u>	<u>30</u>
<u>NIGHT FIGHTERS</u>				<u>NIGHT FIGHTERS</u>			
I/NJG 2 (less 1 Kette)	Catania	26	11	I/NJG 2	Crete	-	-
<u>T.E. FIGHTERS</u>				<u>T.E. FIGHTERS</u>			
Stab III/ZG 26	Trapani	4	4	Stab III/ZG 26	N. Africa		
8/ZG 26	Trapani	10	4	8/ZG 26	N. Africa		
10/ZG 26	Trapani	8	6	10/ZG 26	Trapani	9	6
		<u>22</u>	<u>14</u>				
<u>BOMBERS</u>				<u>BOMBERS</u>			
Stab KG 54	Catania	3	3	Stab KG 54	Eleusis, Greece		
I/KG 54	Catania	30	19	I/KG 54	Eleusis, Greece		
K Gr 606	Catania	17	13	K Gr 606	Catania	31	19
K Gr 806	Catania	30	14	K Gr 806	Catania	27	15
		<u>80</u>	<u>49</u>			<u>58</u>	<u>34</u>
<u>DIVE BOMBERS</u>				<u>DIVE BOMBERS</u>			
III/St G 3	San Pietro	31	16	III/St G 3	N. Africa	-	-
TOTAL LEFT ON SICILY:						<u>144</u>	<u>83</u>

Source: A.H.B.6.

PLANS FOR THE OCCUPATION OF MALTA
(OPERATION "C 3")

"C 3"

Study prepared by the Italian Air Ministry
(Translated by Air Ministry A.H.B. 6)

During the first months of 1942, the Supreme Command began to plan a 'coup de main' for the surprise occupation of Malta which was already besieged from the sky and blockaded from the sea. The surprise attack of the Island's defences while in this critical position, was to be known as "Operation C3".

The plan was submitted to Hitler, who indicated that he fully agreed with a direct operation against the Island. If British landing attempts were not carried out in the West, which would have called for a concentration of forces, he promised the full co-operation of the German forces to ensure the success of the operation. Not only would Germany have put two battalions of parachutists at our disposal, but she would have supplied a certain number of cargo-gliders and a quantity of modern light tanks, which would have been especially suitable for this type of operation.

The duty of preparing the special aerial requirements for the operation devolved upon the Italian Air Force General Staff.

The following were essential for the success of the operation:-

1. Accurate preparations carried out with the maximum of secrecy.
2. Air and sea supremacy in the Central Mediterranean Sector.
3. Preliminary and continuous blockade of the Maltese Archipelago.
4. Continuous and heavy bombing attacks aimed at the enemy defences as much as possible, to be carried out without indicating in which area the landings were to be attempted.

The Italian Air Force and the Sicilian Air Force began their attacks on Malta from the first days of the War, with bombing operations and the intervention of fighter formations to meet the enemy. These operations were carried out with the aim of reducing the aerial strength of the Island, smashing its defences, airfield installations and administrative centres.

These methodically carried out operations kept the Island under continuous control and greatly checked the naval traffic which was attempting to bring supplies of men and munitions to Malta from Gibraltar and Alexandria.

With the transfer of the 2nd C.A.T. (German Air Corps) to Sicily, air operations were intensified and in addition dive bombers were used.

The increased strength of the Sicilian Air Force Command and the co-operation of the 2nd C.A.T., soon achieved the following results: the gradual but steady weakening of the air strength of the Island, with the destruction of airfields and unit H.Q.'s, the destruction of British aircraft in the air and on the ground and the annihilation of the Island's A.A. defences.

The intensified operations against the enemy convoys which were attempting to supply the Island led to the creation of an air and sea blockade, an indispensable condition for any future operations against the Malta defence system.

In April 1942, by which date it was considered that the defences would be disorganised and sufficiently weakened, the General Staff foresaw that the operation would assume certain characteristics and issued the following operational directives:-

1. Aim of the operation: the surprise occupation of Malta.

2. The operation, which would have the characteristics of a 'coup de main', was to be carried out with adequate forces in the estimated maximum period of ten days.
3. The occupation of the Island was to be carried out as follows:
 - (a) Night landings from the sea on the S.E. coasts of Malta with adequate forces for such a specialised operation.
 - (b) Night landings of paratroops in co-ordination with the sea landings, for the purpose of aiding their success and proceeding with the occupation of the principal airfields of the Island. All available paratroops to be employed.
 - (c) Air transport of units, as soon as the airfields were available for landings.
 - (d) Transport of units by sea, to land at a favourable moment at the same places used by the troops mentioned at (a), in order to counterbalance the effect of any possible delay in using air transport, due to unfavourable conditions on the airfields.
 - (e) Feint landings by means of M.T.B's at as many coastal points as possible.
4. Direct naval support to be used for the following purposes:-
 - (a) minesweeping;
 - (b) protection of convoys;
 - (c) assistance in landings;
 - (d) clearing obstructions.
5. Indirect naval support to be used for the purpose of hampering the participation of enemy naval forces, and to engage them if necessary.
6. Air support, by both combat and transport aircraft to be given as laid down in directives to be issued later.

In order to implement the above directives, the General Staffs of the three Services were to establish a close liaison, to ensure that the operation would be carried out with all speed and efficiency.

These points, in particular, had to be borne in mind:-

- (a) The composition of the Expeditionary Corps in troops and material and their employment.
- (b) Maximum speed in the training and preparation of the paratroops and airborne units and daily supervision of the aircraft needed for their transport.
- (c) Speedy transfer of troops and materials of the Expeditionary Corps, from their bases to the air and naval take-off points.
- (d) Maintenance of troops in a constant state of readiness for transport by sea.

The Italian Air Staff put forward to the Chief of the General Staff the view that the capture of Malta was primarily an air operation and that the ground and naval operations were necessarily of a supporting nature.

The operation, according to the Italian Air Staff, was to be carried out as follows:-

/Phase 1

Appendix No. 1 (cont.)

SQUADRON	TYPE OF AIRCRAFT	LOCATIONS	ARRIVED	DEPARTED	DESTINATION
57 Pursuit Grp. U.S.A.A.F. 64 (F.B.) Sqd.	P.40	Camp No.5 (Camp No.5 HAL FAR		18 July	PACHINO
65 (F.B.) "	"	(Camp No.5 HAL FAR		18 "	"
66 (F.B.) "	"	(Camp No.5 GOZO 15 July		18 "	"
79 Pursuit Grp. U.S.A.A.F. 85 (F.B.) Sqd.	Personnel only	Camp No.5 " "		?	SICILY
86 (F.B.) "	"	" "			"
87 (F.B.) "	"	" "			"
31 Pursuit Grp. U.S.A.A.F. 307 (F) Sqd.	Spitfires	GOZO		15 July	LICATA
308 (F) "	"	"		15 "	PONTE OLIVO
309 (F) "	"	"		15 "	" "
33 Pursuit Grp. U.S.A.A.F. 58 (F) Sqd.	P.40	^E PANTELLARIA		14 July	LICATA
59 (F) "	"	"		14 "	"
60 (F) "	"	"		14 "	"
232 (L.B.) Wing 55 Sqd.	Baltimores	LUQA	20 July	10 Aug.	MONTELUONGO (Nr. GELA)
223 "	"	"	20 "	10 "	" "
3 SAAF (L.B.) Wing 12 Sqd.	Bostons	HAL FAR	21 July	20 Aug.	CUTTICCHIO
21 "	Baltimores	" "	21 "	19 Aug.	"
24 "	Bostons	" "	21 "	20 Aug.	"
47 (L.B.) Wing 84 Sqd.	A.20	TA KALI	23 July	10 Aug.	COMINELLI (Nr. GELA)
85 "	"	"	23 "	10 "	" "
86 "	"	"	23 "	12 "	" "
97 "	"	"	23 "	12 "	" "
<u>MISCELLANEOUS</u>					
23 (F) Sqd.	Mosquitoes	LUQA			
73 (N.F.) Sqd. (1 Flt)	Hurricanes	"	8 & 9 July	13 July	LA SEBALA
108 (N.F.) " (1 Flt)	Beaufighters	"			
219 (N.F.) " Det.	Beaufighters	"	26 July		
230 Sqd. Det.	Sunderlands	KALAFRANA			
256 (F) Sqd. (1 Flight)	Mosquitoes	LUQA			
600 (N.F.) Sqd.	Beaufighters	LUQA		26 July	CASSIBILE
1437 (S.R.) Flight	Mustangs	LUQA	11 July	31 "	FRANCESCO
Air/Sea Rescue	Misc.	HAL FAR			

Order of Battle

Appendix ~~XXXI~~ ¹

A.H.Q. Malta

31 July 1942

<u>Type</u>	<u>Squadron</u>	<u>Establishment</u>	<u>Total</u>	<u>Serviceable</u>
Beaufighter	69	Baltimore 16 + 0	14	13
	89	M.E.	6	5
Hurricane	185	Spitfire	1	-
	229	M.E. 16 + 0	12	5
Spitfire	69	Baltimore 2 + 0	3	2
	126	16 + 0	37	35
	1435 (N.F.) Flt.	9 + 0		
	185	16 + 0	21	18
	249	16 + 0	20	17
	603	16 + 0	20	17
<u>Total Fighters.</u>		107 + 0	134	112
Baltimore	69	2 + 0	2	1
Wellington	38	M.E.	1	1
	221	M.E.	3	3
Beaufort	86	M.E.	8	7
	217	India (12 + 4)	12	9
<u>Total Bombers</u>		14 + 4	26	21
<u>Total Aircraft</u>		121 + 4	160	133

Source A.H.B./VB/9/4

German and Italian Air Forces Available for Operations Against
"PEDESTAL", 10-15 August 1942I. German Air Force

(a) Sicily:

Gerbini:- 84 Ju 88
6 Me 109

Trapani:- 3 Ju 88
28 Ju 87
12 Me 110

Catania:- 31 Ju 88

(b) Sardinia:

22 Me 109

(c) Pantelleria:

32 Me 109

II. Italian Air Force (+)

(a) Sicily:

Palermo:- 8 Cr 25
9 Cr 42
13 Re 2001

Sciacca:- 13 S 84
11 Cz 1007 bis

Castelvetrano:- 28 Br 20
39 Cr 42
60 Me 100
10 Me 202

Gerbini:- 19 S 79

Gela:- 16 Ju 87

Caltagirone
(S. Pietro):- 33 Re 2001

(b) Sardinia:

Decimomanu:- 29 S 84
5 S 79

Alghero:- 17 Cz 1007 bis

Cagliari:- 17 S 79
41 Cr 42
19 G 50

(+) Based on returns for end of May 1942 - figures for August not available.

Source: A.H.B.6.

ORDER OF BATTLEA.H.Q. MALTA31 AUGUST 1942

Type	Squadron	Establishment	Total	Serviceable
Beaufighter	89	16 + 0	11	10
	227	16 + 0	18	14
	248	U.K.	4	3
Hurricane	229	Spitfire	8	7
	Takali		5	-
Spitfire	126	16 + 0	16	16
	185	16 + 0	16	12
	229	16 + 0	16	13
	249	16 + 0	16	15
	1435		13	13
	(N.F.) Flt. Command			
	Reserve		55	52
	P.R.U.		6	6
<u>Total Fighters</u>		96 + 0	184	161
Baltimore	69	16 + 0	5	4
Wellington	69		7	6
Beaufort	39	16 + 0	19	15
Luga			3	-
<u>Total Bombers</u>		32 + 0	34	25
<u>Total Aircraft</u>		128 + 0	218	186

Source: AHB/VB/9/4

ORDER OF BATTLEA.H.Q. MALTA30 SEPTEMBER 1942

Type	Squadron	Establishment	Total	Serviceable
Beaufighter	89	M.E. Detachment	6	6
	227	16 + 0	18	13
Hurricane	229	Spitfire	9	4
Spitfire	69	Baltimore	6	6
		4 + 0		
	126	16 + 0	16	16
	185	16 + 0	16	14
	229	16 + 0	16	14
	249	16 + 0	16	13
	1435 (N.F.) Flt. Command Reserve		16	15
<u>Total Fighters</u>		84 + 0	168	145
Baltimore	69	4 + 0	5	4
Wellington	69	8 + 0	11	8
Beaufort	39	8 + 0 (M.E.)	9	7
Luqa			3	-
<u>Total Bombers</u>		20 + 0	28	19
<u>Total Aircraft</u>		104 + 0	196	164

Source: AHB/VB/9/4

ORDER OF BATTLE

A.H.Q. MALTA

31 OCTOBER 1942

Type	Unit	Establishment	Total	Serviceable
Beaufighter	89	8 + 0	8	6
	227	8 + 0	8	1
Hurricane	229	Spitfire (see below)	9	8
Spitfire	69	7 + 0 (P.R.U.)	6	6
	126	16 + 0	16	15
	185	16 + 0	16	15
	229	16 + 0	16	12
	249	16 + 0	16	13
	1435 N.F. Flt.	Ex Spitfire Squadrons	16	15
	Command Reserve		35	30
<u>Total Fighters</u>		87 + 0	146	121
Baltimore	69	5 + 0	5	3
Wellington	69	4 + 0	4	4
	Luqa		3	-
Beaufort	39	M.E.	2	-
	Luqa		1	-
<u>Total Bombers</u>		9 + 0	15	7
<u>Total Aircraft</u>		96 + 0	161	128

Source: AHB/VB/9/4

ORDER OF BATTLEA.H.Q. MALTA30 NOVEMBER 1942

Type	Unit	Establishment	Total	Serviceable
Beaufighter	46	(ex M.E.)	5	3
	89	8 + 0	9	9
	227	16 + 0	13	4
	272	16 + 0	13	7
	(ex M.E.)			
	Luga		9	-
Hurricanes	229	Spitfire	10	8
Spitfire	69	Baltimore	7	6
	126	16 + 0	16	15
	185	16 + 0	21	18
	229	16 + 0	20	17
	249	16 + 0	22	18
	1435		16	15
	N.F. Flt.			
	Command Reserve		27	22
<u>Total Fighters</u>		104 + 0	188	142
Baltimore	69	8 + 0	11	8
Wellington	40	16 + 0	14	10
	104	8 + 0	9	6
	69	8 + 0	11	7
	Luga		1	-
Beaufort	39	16 + 0	18	12
	Luga		3	-
<u>Total Bombers</u>		56 + 0	68	43
<u>Total Aircraft</u>		160 + 0	256	185

Source: AHB/VB/9/4

Patfighter	89	ex M.E. 8 + 0	7	7
	227	16 + 0	10	6
	272	8 + 0	11	9
Hurricane	229	Spitfire	9	7
Mosquito	23	Detachment ex F.C. 8 + 1	10	10
Spitfire	69	Baltimore	6	6
	126	16 + 0	16	16
	185	16 + 0	20	20
	229	16 + 0	23	22
	249	16 + 0	20	17
	1435			
	N.F. Flt.		16	16
<u>Total Fighters</u>		104 + 1	148	136
Baltimore	69	8 + 0	9	8
Wellington	40	8 + 0	12	11
	104	8 + 0	12	11
	69	ex Baltimore 8 + 0	12	12
Beaufort			5	5
<u>Total Bombers</u>		32 + 0	50	47
<u>Total Aircraft</u>		136 + 1	198	183

Source AHB/VB/9/4