

FLYING FROM THE ROCK.

The Story of Aviation at Gibraltar

1901-1945.

Intelligence Section,
Air Headquarters,
Royal Air Force,
Gibraltar.

August 1945.

THE STRONG ROCK.

"Sometimes we see a cloud that's dragonish;
A vapour sometime like a bear or lion,
A tower'd citadel, a pendant rock."

Shakespeare (Anthony and Cleopatra)

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FOREWORD.

While making inquiries early in 1944 about some aspect of the construction of North Front's runway it was found that no narrative or account existed in Gibraltar of that remarkable achievement. The facts could be ascertained only by examination of many files.

This gave Air Headquarters the idea of writing the story of North Front. Initial research quickly showed that story to be exceptionally interesting; and as the search of files proceeded it went further and further back into the years. Soon it was clear that the story must become one of aviation on the Rock and not merely of a single event. To complete it something must also be told of Royal Air Force operations at Gibraltar in the 1939-45 war, as Gibraltar was the essential stepping stone between the United Kingdom and the North African campaign. Research passed from files to published books, for the relation of modern events to history is always worth examination. As a result the story of aviation at Gibraltar begins in the year 1656! It is claimed that this connection over the centuries is not too far-fetched. Reference is also made to more recent history because although the reason for building North Front can be found without going further back than 1940 its existence cannot properly be appreciated without knowledge of its background in Gibraltar's political, military and civil career, and of the private and public opinion against which it rose to be one of Britain's greatest assets in the war against Germany and Italy.

Little appears to have been said or written anywhere about Royal Air Force operations from Gibraltar in the war against the Nazis and their Italian followers. A great deal has been told about Malta, Sicily, North Africa and other war areas in the Mediterranean where events were spectacular. The Rock's only spectacle has been its runway stretching 575 yards into the sea, and it has produced little public drama, but has been concerned with secret things which were important enough but had to be concealed because of the enemy at the gates. These gates were the Spanish frontier behind which the enemy waited patiently in the hope that some of the thousands of Spanish people returning each evening from work in Gibraltar would deliberately or unwittingly provide information about Allied plans. That the enemy did not know what was happening in Gibraltar and failed to find out through espionage is a tribute to the impenetrable security barriers. He could depend upon little more than the eyes and ears of Spaniards. It was important that these Spaniards should see and hear nothing that would tell Germany what Gibraltar was doing in the war, because on what Hitler knew about Gibraltar might depend the amount of pressure he brought to bear on General Franco to agree to or support any operations in Southern Spain. Therefore, not even the appeals of Public Relations could produce anything except harmless information about what was happening on the Rock.

Such a need for security has prevented the operational portion of this story from becoming complete and accurate, for when research was begun in the local records the lamentable discovery was made that scarcely any detailed account existed of any of the operations of the Royal Air Force. The official histories, bare and unexciting documents at any time, had observed a high sense of security and passed off great events, which they had to record at the time, with cautious sentences such as "operations were continued in connection with the North African landings". Research was made into as many of Gibraltar's documents as were available at Air Headquarters, Fortress Headquarters and the Colonial Secretariat, and conversations were held with some of Gibraltar's long-term Service and civilian residents. Most of what the papers and the people had to tell is here. It is admitted that gaps may exist which can be

filled only from information available in the War Office and Air Ministry archives or in the memory of people who were in Gibraltar when events happened. At the least, the story brings most of these events together for the first time and can be accepted as a general account of how flying and the Royal Air Force came to the Rock of Gibraltar.

Air Headquarters,

Gibraltar,

1st August, 1945.

OFFICERS AND AIR OFFICERS

COMMANDING

ROYAL AIR FORCE GIBRALTAR.

Air Adviser to Rear Admiral Gibraltar.

Wing Commander E.A. Blake M.M. 11th September 1939 - 26th September 1939.
(Officer Commanding No. 202 Squadron).

Officers Commanding No. 200 Group.

Group Captain F.E.P. Barrington	26th September 1939	-	March 1940.
Group Captain A.D. Rogers, C.B.E., A.F.C.	March 1940	-	August 1941.
Group Captain R. Halley, D.F.C., A.F.C.	August 1941	-	December 1941.

Air Officers Commanding, Royal Air Force Gibraltar.

Air Commodore S.P. Simpson, C.B.E., M.C. December 1941 - February 1944.
(promoted Air Vice Marshal September 1943).

Air Vice Marshal W. Elliot, C.B., C.B.E., D.F.C. February 1944 - June 1944.

Air Vice Marshal A.C. Stevens, C.B. June 1944 -

GIBRALTAR CONTRAST.

These photographs illustrate the transformation wrought at North Front by the building of the airfield. The upper photograph was taken just after the 1914-1918 war, and shows the racecourse (upper right) and Victoria Gardens (upper centre), the destruction of which was necessary before the airfield could be built. There was much official and private argument about this between 1932 and 1940. The lower one was taken in 1945.



FLYING FROM THE ROCK.

PART ONE - 1901-1939.

"Progress, therefore, is not an accident
but a necessity -----"

Herbert Spencer.

PART ONE. 1901-1939.

I - Early Historical Background.

It is always intriguing, if sometimes profitless, to observe how modern events are influenced by the decisions or actions of individuals who lived many centuries earlier. One can make such fascinating claims.

In the history of Gibraltar, for example, it may be asserted with some justification in fact that the Royal Air Force was able to operate from the Rock during the 1939-45 war, and make an invaluable contribution to the defeat of Germany and Italy in Africa and the Mediterranean, only because one of Oliver Cromwell's ships was captured by the Spanish in the year 1656. If the ship had not been captured, then Gibraltar might have been an island without the flat mile of land which connects it to Spain and on which Britain was able to build in 1942 the only aerodrome from which its enemies could be reached in Africa and the Mediterranean. Cromwell wanted to capture Gibraltar and dig all the flat ground away until the sea came in. There is not much on record about his scheme, but Samuel Pepys remarks in his Naval Minutes that either Sir Richard Haddock or Sir John Narborough once told him that "had not the ship which was sent by Oliver with spades and wheelbarrows been taken, he had certainly taken Gibraltar and made it an island."

It may also be claimed as true that when the doughty British Admiral, Sir George Rooke, decided to capture Gibraltar in 1704 in order to give his marines something to do, after they had failed to land the Hapsburg Archduke Charles at Barcelona to obtain the Spanish throne, he did his country a greater service than anyone realised until nearly 240 years later. Without Gibraltar it is doubtful if General Eisenhower in 1942 could have begun the African campaign which contributed so much to the end of the war and of the evil doctrines which were destroying Europe. For it was only from Gibraltar that the aircraft could be provided to guard the Straits against U-Boats, assist the relief convoys to reach Malta, shoot down German bombers, escort the invasion forces and carry the paratroops to Africa and later to Southern France. If Gibraltar had not been British none of our aircraft could have got anywhere near the enemy.

History shows that possession of Gibraltar has not always been appreciated by the British, and here again these are facts which have an interesting bearing on the circumstances under which the R.A.F came to Gibraltar. For nearly 240 years the wisdom of Britain in capturing and retaining Gibraltar has been argued in Western Europe and in America. One side has stated that the Rock has no commercial and very little military value, and should be returned to Spain in exchange for wider and more manageable territory on the southern shore of the Straits. The other has been accused of sentimentality because it has insisted that Gibraltar is a symbol of British strength and prestige with a practical value which will last to the end of time. It is a fortunate thing that the "sentimentalists" won.

From the earliest days the "practical man" was opposed to our possession of Gibraltar. He had some arguments in his favour. Trouble began after the Anglo-Spanish Treaty of Utrecht in 1713 which gave the Rock, harbour and town to the British, but reserved for Spain the territory round about. Once on the Rock the British claimed that it

became their property through conquest and not diplomacy. The Spanish would not accept that point of view, although they yielded it formally; and they always insisted that the treaty would be revoked if England did not abide by its terms. This was never a serious threat until 1939, when Spanish objections to the aerodrome construction at North Front might have found it an excuse to allow the Germans to attack Gibraltar.

The British soon discovered that Gibraltar had little real value as a military or commercial outpost and that no solid reconciliation with Spain could be possible as long as Britain held it. Possession of Gibraltar did not preserve or promote Britain's trade with Spain, but helped to engender no less than five Anglo-Spanish wars between 1713 and 1789, wars that curtailed or eliminated Spanish trade for extended periods. Contemporaries frequently criticised Gibraltar as an expensive luxury for which Britain received no commensurate return. The siege of 1779-83 showed once more that so long as the defenders of the Rock could command the sea the place was virtually impregnable for anyone who wished to retain it. One result of this was to increase the British pride in Gibraltar and its strength, and to end all possibility of it being surrendered short of national collapse. That was another circumstance which had a direct effect on Gibraltar in this latest war.

Informed "expert" opinion still said Gibraltar was valueless. The man in the street was of the opposite opinion, and the appeal of the Rock to him had little to do with rational arguments for or against its utility. Public opinion exerted a powerful control over the course of British policy in the eighteenth century. The conflict between informed and general public opinion as to the merit of the Rock influenced the course of the Gibraltar question in British diplomacy in a rather obvious manner. British statesmen proposed restitution or exchange on a number of occasions, but the hostility of public opinion towards such a step helped to check and frustrate the consummation of every one of these efforts. So in the nineteenth century we still possessed Gibraltar. The experts, politicians, statesmen and economists continued to argue about its value, but the Army and Navy continued to regard it as an asset, and the Rock's appeal to the public became strongly romantic as Britain's military glory advanced with the century.

In reality, of course, Gibraltar was far from attractive or comfortable, much less romantic. One of its troubles was the series of epidemics that sprang up from time to time, and increased with the growth in civilian population. In 1865 the Governor, Lieutenant General Sir R. Airy, K.C.B. decided to seek the co-operation of the Spanish by asking their permission to erect a number of isolation huts in the middle of the flat area of ground between the bottom of the Rock and the Spanish frontier, which was then at the fishing village of La Linea. It was the only way to check the spread of the current epidemic. The Spanish readily agreed, and the huts were erected. That was the beginning of the "acquisition" of the North Front ground which continued steadily until the aerodrome was completed in 1943.

In 1876 General Lord Napier of Magdala, K.C.B. who had just become Governor destroyed a number of farms which existed on the ground to supply fruit and vegetables for the garrison. He believed that they were sources of infection. In their place he began to make gardens which were carried over a large portion of the area, with trees, flower beds, lawns and walks, and were patriotically named Victoria Gardens. This was a harmless amenity to which the Spanish, now more friendly than they had ever been, could raise no objection. The gardens flourished quickly in the warm climate, sustained by water from a well which was found on the ground, and before long they gave the military the idea of making a racecourse so that they could do something

more exciting with their horses than merely exercise them back and forth. Again Spanish co-operation was sought and was quickly forthcoming, for the province of Andalusia, which adjoins Gibraltar, is full of men who breed and love horses and are fine riders. The racecourse was built, spicy competition was provided by the horses entered by the landowners, ranchers and soldiers of southern Spain, and for the first time since 1704 there was friendship between the local representatives of the two countries.

The British military mind, however, quickly saw another use for the racecourse, and before long the Army began to exercise the troops of the garrison there. The friendly Spanish pointed out, not unreasonably, that this was a technical military occupation of land which really was neutral. The British replied that it would be foolish not to use so wide a space of land to benefit the health of their troops, and that they had strictly observed the terms of the Treaty of Utrecht by erecting no building that was not of a purely temporary nature and unsuitable for military defence. The truth of that can be seen today, in a corner of North Front aerodrome, where there is a wooden horse-trough resting on iron spikes to demonstrate that it is not built over a concrete pill-box or gun emplacement.

The Spanish response was to move their frontier forward to the northern edge of Victoria Gardens, on the other side of the fence. They said that as the British had only to step beyond the gardens into what was, in effect, Spanish soil, they had better be there to meet them. The British made no complaints, were satisfied to "possess" their portion of the neutral soil, and did not build fortifications upon it. Neither did the Spanish on their side. Everything was in harmony, and the Spanish military and private owners continued to race and exhibit their horses at North Front.

It is requested that in any further communication on this subject, the following number may be quoted, and the letter addressed to—
The Under Secretary of State,
War Office,
London, S.W.

acut
6229
WAR OFFICE
LONDON, S.W.
29th May 1901.

57
Gibraltar
8110

Sir
In reference to your letter of the 25th March last No. R.S./6/362, forwarding a memorandum by the District Engineer in which it is stated that a captive balloon would be of great value at Gibraltar.

I am directed by the Commander-in-Chief to request that you will be good enough to furnish your personal views on this subject..

I have the honor to be,
Sir,
Your obedient servant.

The
General Officer
Commanding the
Troops,
Gibraltar

Reekwood
A.G.

PART ONE. 1901-1939.

II - Balloons Over the Rock.

The first flying from Gibraltar was in balloons. As North Front was considered to be too low, being only just above sea level, they were flown from positions on the western and southern slopes of the Rock and created no territorial problems with Spain.

Towards the end of the 19th century a certain success had been achieved in warfare by "ballooning", as it was called. In 1884 a balloon unit attached to the Royal Engineers had created some impression in the Bechuanaland Expedition and caused a native chief to observe, "The English have indeed great power". The unit was also used in the Sudan and the South African War.

In March, 1901, nine years after the school of ballooning had been founded at Aldershot, the District Engineer at Gibraltar wrote a memorandum to the Governor suggesting that a captive balloon would be of great value to the forces on the Rock. This was forwarded to the War Office, apparently without comment from the Governor, Field Marshal Sir George S. White, G.C.B., D.S.O., the defender of Ladysmith. A reply was received in May asking the Governor for his views on the matter. The letter forms one of Gibraltar's historic military documents. It was written on black-edged notepaper in mourning for Queen Victoria, in some senior clerk's careful hand, and was signed by Field Marshal Sir Evelyn Wood, V.C., G.C.B., Adjutant General to the Forces, who began his service life as a midshipman and became one of Britain's famous soldiers. A facsimile of the letter appears opposite this page.

Field Marshal White replied "my experience has shown me the difficulty of making accurate observations from a captive balloon, but the nature of the information which might be obtained by this means from the top of Gibraltar Rock would not require great accuracy of detail and would be of great advantage to the defence." This letter was typed; and as an after-thought the Governor added in his own handwriting, "It would also raise the observer above the Levanter cloud."

Letters took a long time in those days and the War Office reply was dated 4th July, 1901. This letter, from the Assistant Quarter Master General, said the War Office proposed to send an Officer and 25 N.C.O's and men with balloon equipment. It asked for a small shed to be provided as a gas factory and for storage. Local minutes which went round the various Royal Engineer unit headquarters following this announcement show clearly that difficulties of service accommodation existed as much in those days as at present. In reply to a query from one staff officer, "Can we accommodate this additional number of R.E's?" another replied, "No! We already have men sleeping in tents owing to insufficient accommodation." The Gibraltar Engineers admitted, too, that they knew little about the technicalities of ballooning. In reply to a request for suggestions about how the hut for a gas factory could be provided a senior officer asked, "Would not gas from the local gas works do?"

By the middle of August, however, the matter had been settled and a site was arranged at Bruce's Farm, with huts to be erected nearby. Nothing more was heard of the matter from the War Office until the end

of September when Sir Evelyn Wood wrote to the Governor that the unit could not be sent to Gibraltar and that it was proposed to work balloons and the gas factory by the Royal Engineers already on the Rock. When the Governor pointed out that no one in Gibraltar had made ballooning a speciality the War Office explained that the officers and men would be trained at Aldershot and sent out in due course as part of the Gibraltar establishment. Two years passed before this was done. In December, 1903, the year and month when the brothers Wright made their first aircraft flight of 284 yards, a party of two officers and 16 N.C.O's and other ranks arrived at Gibraltar by the s.s. Golconda accompanied by balloons and equipment, including storage cylinders and plant for manufacturing hydrogen. They belonged to the Balloon Section of the Royal Engineers which became, on 1st April, 1911, the Air Battalion of the Royal Engineers, out of which the Royal Flying Corps was developed. The letter to the Governor outlining the experiments which they proposed to make was signed by Colonel J.E. Capper, who became superintendent of the balloon factory at Aldershot in 1907 and whose energy was responsible for the first flight of the first British airship, the Nulli Secundus.

The unit was accommodated on a site towards the southern end of the Rock, 640 feet above the sea. One of the first things they did was to ask for a party of 15 volunteers to act as "aircrew" in the balloons. Infantrymen were suggested and it was specified that they should be "men of light or medium weight, who are good sailors and possess intelligence and good sight." The volunteers were selected from the first Lancashire Fusiliers, 2nd Loyal North Lancashire and 2nd Royal Garrison Regiment. War Office authority was obtained for a special allowance of "working pay" during the period of their attachment to the balloonists. On 1st March, 1904, the O.C. balloonists reported that there had been an extremely small number of days sufficiently calm to admit high altitude ballooning and very little high altitude work had been done. As it was unlikely there would be any better weather in the near future the section need not remain much longer. He proposed to leave certain equipment behind to ascertain the effect of the climate upon it. Photographs and reports were taken to Britain, but five balloons and equipment were left behind, one a 1000 c ft. balloon.

In October, 1904, it was proposed to send the section out again. They arrived in November, 1904, and again spent the winter at Gibraltar. It is not possible to relate in this narrative what the balloonists did or what were the results of their experiments as no copies of their reports exist in Gibraltar.

PART ONE. 1901-1939.

III - Aircraft of 1914 - 1918.

With the departure of the balloons in 1905 nothing was heard of flying at Gibraltar until the Great War broke out in 1914. Much had happened, though, in the development of flying. Between 1914 and 1916 even greater events occurred. The Royal Flying Corps was enthusiastically gaining in strength and achievement; the Royal Navy was regarding this modern arm of war with speculation and much doubt but was willing to experiment. In 1914 the first air reconnaissance of the war was carried out by Captain Joubert de la Ferte who later, as A.O.C. -in-C. Coastal Command, was to have much to say in the creation of the North Front airfield in 1942. A British seaplane, in 1915, sank an enemy ship in the Dardanelles in the first torpedo attack from the air. The Royal Naval Air Service bombed Constantinople and Adrianople in 1916. And so on. But no event worth recording in the history books occurred at Gibraltar.

The Rock was then, as it has always been, of more strategic value to the Royal Navy, and the possible assistance to be afforded by aircraft does not seem to have been given serious thought. Nor does anyone appear to have troubled to record events. The only clue in Gibraltar itself is a letter dated 1932 from a pilot who flew aircraft operating from the racecourse during 1914-1918. It was written to assist Wing Commander C.O.F. Modin, D.S.C., Fleet Liaison Officer, Atlantic Fleet, (now Air Commodore Modin C.B.E., D.S.C.), to compile a plan and report on the possibilities of using Gibraltar as an emergency landing ground for modern Fleet Air Arm aircraft. That plan is referred to and illustrated later in this narrative.

No dates are given, but the letter may be taken to refer to the earlier days of the war as it mentions Caudrons and B.E.'s, (Bleriot Experimentals), which were among the first types of aircraft to be used in operations. The pilot's comments are interesting in their relation to the problems which exist on North Front airfield today, including the tricky one caused by the proximity of Spanish territory. "We took to Gibraltar," said the writer of the letter, "three or four 80 h.p. Gnome Caudrons, about the same number of B.E.'s (not B.E'2c's) with 70 h.p. Renault motors. Both types were two seaters and were normally used as such. Although we lost a couple of each, the reasons were in no way attributable to the aerodrome or the local conditions. As a matter of fact, we only worked land machines for about three months as we got into trouble with the Spanish authorities for dropping a B.E. on their side of the fence and going after it, so our experience was not a long one." So, apparently, it was the Spanish who brought our air activities to an end.

Some effort was made to operate with seaplanes and flying boats, including two 2-ton Porte boats, one Short two-seater and three White tractors with Sunbeam engines, but the writer made it clear that this was not a success. "Our seaplanes and flying boats were so elementary," he said, "that we got practically nothing done at all." What he wrote about flying seaplanes from Gibraltar might be added, without alteration, to a current briefing of flying-boat crews. "There is no doubt," he said, "that in a Levanter it is quite impossible to work seaplanes within three miles or so of the Rock. We did on one famous occasion get a Porte boat off inside the breakwater in a Levanter



A view of North Front from the air. The race track is clearly seen with the "prepared strip" running across the course. The strip ended at the Spanish Road, leading into Gibraltar, which is the black line on the right of the picture. An aircraft is parked near the trees at the side of the Spanish Road. There are now defences on the Spanish ground. (7th May, 1940)

but she was blown down from about 20 feet in very quick time." Flying-boat crews who have operated all night in the Straits will appreciate the next remark. "Our good lads - and we had some very good ones - used to complain bitterly of bumps even as far out as Spartel up to a height of 3,000 feet. I remember one speaking of dropping about 600 ft. in one act." It is a fact that higher speed and greater power have not lessened to any marked extent the effects of these local conditions as they were felt by our pilots in the days of "wood and linen" aircraft.

All who have flown modern aircraft from Gibraltar will be interested in the comments by this pilot of 1914-1918 on flying conditions in his day. The distribution of the land and sea masses around Gibraltar result in winds tending to be from either easterly or westerly points. "From my recollection", he wrote, "there is only one wind that is really trouble-some and that is so rare as to be practically negligible. I think it would be very difficult to put a machine down if it were blowing from the north. There is, to my certain knowledge, no difficulty in an easterly or westerly wind and I think, with a bit of care, a southerly wind should not be impossible accordingly as it is a bit east or west of south."

The pilot's final words, written about conditions 18 years ago and manifestly different types of aircraft, are the basic rules today for flying from North Front. "I am inclined to think..... it is quite possible to use North Front in nearly all conditions of wind. Also seaplanes, with the proviso that if the Levanter is blowing you must give to the west side of the Rock a wide berth when coming in to land in any type of machine."

PART ONE. 1901-1939.

IV - Emergency Airfield on Racecourse.

There is no clear evidence that an airfield for Gibraltar was ever seriously discussed between 1918 and 1932. The Army was busy with its new schemes for defence, and in between times was sharing with the wealthier Gibraltarians and the Spanish in the amenities of the North Front racecourse, now somewhat shabby and a poor substitute for an English equivalent, even on days when it was crowded with people wearing bowler hats and riding-boots or other forms of racing or "horsey" clothes. Relations with the Spanish were excellent. North Front had become accepted as an English "possession", and both Spanish and English moved freely between the entertainments provided by the Calpe Hunt and the Jockey Club and those available in the cork woods and other hunting, riding and picnicing areas near San Roque and Algeciras. Somewhere in the background far-sighted persons were considering how to use Gibraltar as an airfield for service aircraft. Mostly, they seem to have been connected with the Admiralty. Little is to be found about their plans in Gibraltar documents and nothing in the newspapers, except the "New York Times", which seems to have had the services of a correspondent closely in touch with those concerned. This well known American newspaper has always shown great interest in Gibraltar; and on 17th October, 1932, it published an article which stated that a scheme was afoot to tunnel a great British air base inside the Rock.

The Gibraltar authorities were not unaware of the progress of aviation, and in the 1920's the Governor and his opposite number at Algeciras formulated a joint plan for an Anglo-Spanish airfield on the Spanish side of the fence, where it would not interfere with the racecourse and other Gibraltar amenities. It was not approved by London or Madrid. In 1931 a local aircraft company was given permission to use the racecourse as an airfield in their service between Gibraltar and Tangier, a popular spot for the Service and civilian inhabitants of the Rock spending leave and holidays. The company was called Gibraltar Airways, Ltd., and exists today although its last flight was made in January 1932. It began its service towards the end of 1931 but was compelled by maintenance and repair difficulties to close down after only three and a half months. The company possessed only one aircraft, a Windhover amphibian named "General Godley", after His Excellency the Governor, General Sir Alexander J. Godley.

Early in 1932 an instruction reached Gibraltar which began a long and confused discussion, and much opposition, before it finally made an end to the racecourse and produced in its place the modern North Front airfield which we know today. The instruction came to General Godley from the War Office in the form of a secret memorandum issued by the Committee of Imperial Defence in which it recommended that plans should be worked out for the establishment at short notice of an airfield at Gibraltar. The matter appeared to have a certain urgency. Mussolini's activities in Abyssinia had caused some concern and a reconsideration of the disposition of the Mediterranean Fleet if there should be any trouble. Accordingly, General Godley summoned a meeting at Government House, on 18th. February, 1932, of the heads of the Services in Gibraltar. Those who attended included Lieutenant Colonel A.E. Beattie, C.B.E., M.C., the Colonial Secretary, who had also received instructions from London. The Royal Navy was represented by Captain V.S. Butler, Chief of Staff, and the Air Ministry by Wing Commander Modin, whose presence was described as "in an advisory capacity only."

N E E U T R A L

G R O U N D

MEDITERRANEAN



Discussion was based upon the Colonial Secretary's instructions, a duplication of Gibraltar's requirements that was to cause some concern and annoyance to future Governors, to consider a proposal "to provide an aeroplane landing ground for Service aircraft at Gibraltar."

There was little argument and the meeting unanimously decided that a landing ground at Gibraltar for service aircraft was essential. It was also agreed that proper landing facilities from a broad strategic point of view were no less desirable. On the subject of a suitable site, the racecourse area at North Front was declared to be the only acceptable one. Windmill Hill was considered as an alternative, but was quickly rejected, as was a suggestion to establish a floating airfield, like the deck of a carrier, at Europa Point. Army representatives suggested that the use of a landing ground at North Front would prejudice weapon training as that was the only area where such training could be carried out. The meeting agreed that such structural alterations as might be necessary to the firing points and other range facilities could be carried out without detriment to weapon training. On the general question of inconvenience caused by aircraft using North Front the meeting stated, "these should be faced as being necessary in view of the great need for a landing ground for service aircraft."

The point was raised whether Gibraltar Airways and other civil airlines should be permitted to use the landing ground. The Governor decided that steps should be taken immediately to have the landing ground constructed "for use in emergency only." When that was in being, he stated, its use by civil aircraft would be considered. Wing Commander Modin was requested to assist the appropriate Royal Engineer officers to prepare a report on the method and cost of construction. That report, with sketches, one of which appears on the opposite page, was completed and submitted to the Governor on 5th March, 1932. The cost was estimated at £573.

Meantime, His Excellency had written to Admiral Sir John D. Kelly, C. in C. Atlantic Fleet, to ask his views on an emergency landing ground at Gibraltar. He added in the letter, "In addition, I should be grateful to have your opinion on the larger strategic aspect of the matter, that is to say the value which would accrue in war, were landing ground facilities of some sort available in Gibraltar." Admiral Kelly's reply, written within two days, was brief and decisive. "From a naval point of view", he wrote, "it is most desirable to have an emergency landing ground in the vicinity of Gibraltar. In time of war it would be essential both for any aircraft defences allocated to the Rock and for aircraft of ships employed on trade protection in the Western Mediterranean and Atlantic. A landing ground would also appear to be of value in certain circumstances as a link in passing aircraft reinforcements to the East by air." These were three of the uses to which North Front was put ten years later, when it was the corner stone of the North African landings and one of the principal supports to the relief of Malta.

On 12th May, 1932, the Governor reported to the Under Secretary of State for War, and placed the decisions and opinions before him. "I do not consider", he wrote, in recommending a landing ground at North Front, "that weapon training would be interfered with to any considerable extent by service aircraft using the area as an emergency landing ground." The Governor referred to Wing Commander Modin's sketch plan and notes, which he enclosed, and stated that the estimated cost of £573 included £210 for the re-erection elsewhere of the groundsmen's quarters.

There is no record of anything further being done in Gibraltar about the landing ground until October, 1932, when the General Staff Officer, Major H.W.R. Hamilton, D.S.O., M.C., received a letter from the War Office which referred to the Governor's letter of 12th May and told of a difficulty which had arisen at home. The letter explained that there



The complete runway in February, 1944. The Spanish defences
and the roads leading to them have also been completed.

(9th February, 1944)

had been "certain repercussions" from the Governor's proposal for a landing ground at North Front. "The Air Ministry", said the writer, "sent a copy to the Colonial Office asking for their views and the Colonial Office passed it on to the Foreign Office. The latter, being doubtful about the international aspect of the affair, asked the British Ambassador at Madrid for his opinion and his reply added to their fears. Briefly he said that Spain had always claimed that the "neutral ground" extended right up to the foot of the Rock (although this claim has always been resisted by us) and if we take the action proposed the question of ownership might arise and lack of proof in regard to our rights might lead to a request for international arbitration from Spain." The letter added that a copy of the Ambassador's despatch had been forwarded to the Governor by the Colonial Office, who, at the same time, asked for his remarks on the question of the title of H.M. Government to the area within which it was proposed that the landing ground should be constructed.

General Godley had already received a communication on the subject from Sir Philip Cunliffe-Lister, Secretary of State for the Colonies. He wrote to Sir Philip on 26th November, 1932, "In your earlier despatch," his letter said, "you ask for my views on the question of the title of H.M. Government to the area under discussion. I am strongly of the opinion that it would be a great mistake to open up any discussion on this point, and in any case, I would hesitate to express any opinion on the matter without very careful research. There is much old correspondence on the subject in the archives of the Secretariat and elsewhere and as opportunity offers this is being collected and carefully examined. For the present it would appear to be sufficient to state that our length of tenure of the area in question gives H.M. Government the strongest claims."

This opinion of General Godley was evidently endorsed at home because on 2nd May, 1933, the Admiralty wrote to the C. in C. Home Fleet, C. in C. Mediterranean, the Rear Admiral i/c Gibraltar and the Rear Admiral i/c Carriers, to inform them that the preparation of an emergency landing ground on the raccourse, in accordance with the proposals of the Governor, had been approved. "There is a proviso," said the Admiralty letter, "that the work to be carried out should be kept strictly within the limits of H.E.'s proposals and on the understanding that the use of the landing ground by the Fleet Air Arm shall be restricted to emergencies only."



An early stage of the present runway shown on the light strip.
It has crossed the Spanish road. The "prepared strip" is
still there and apparently in use. All that is left of the
race track is a faint outline at the bottom of the picture.

(7th. April, 1942)

PART ONE. 1901-1939

V - Expense and Other Arguments.

The general question having been decided, arguments began about expense and other points. Although the matter of the airfield had been discussed mainly between the Navy and Army, the Air Ministry had held a sort of watching brief. On 9th June, 1933, having seen the original estimate, the Ministry wrote to the War Office offering advice and assistance in preparing the airfield and said they were willing to pay the cost. These offers were all accepted, and the Colonel, Royal Engineers, Gibraltar, was authorised to deal directly with Air Ministry Directorate of Works and Buildings.

When the Royal Engineers at Gibraltar began to consider the practical work, however, it became clear that the original estimate of £573 was inadequate. A new estimate was made at £1450 and was cabled to Air Ministry on 3rd December, 1933. In two days Air Ministry replied protesting against this increase and warning Fortress Headquarters that they must not enlarge the scope of the airfield proposal beyond its original basis. The C.R.E. explained that the increase was a new estimate; and on 28th December forwarded the details, stating that the scheme had not been gone into in sufficient detail in the first instance and that the groundman's premises, which it was proposed to remove and re-erect elsewhere, were too old for such treatment and would require to be demolished and a new building provided. It was proposed to invite tenders for the demolition of the building and to credit the sum received to Air Ministry. He added, perhaps with a tinge of asperity, "This sum will, I think, be small." This increase must have caused some discussion at Air Ministry because on 12th July, 1934, the C.R.E. wrote to remind them that he had received no reply to his letter of the 28th December. A reply, dated 24th July, told him that in view of the expense involved in the re-provision of the groundman's premises it had been decided to rearrange the runways so as to avoid them. Wing Commander Modin had agreed to the modification. The C.R.E. was requested to put the work in hand as soon as possible and to forward an amended estimate. That estimate was worked out at £470, lower than the original! It was unconditionally approved by Air Ministry in a letter dated 3rd September, 1934. By 14th September work had begun on the emergency landing ground.

One of the main problems had now to be faced by the C.R.E. The rails, posts and starting gates of the racecourse would have to be made removable by inserting them in sockets, so that aircraft could have room to land. On 2nd October, 1934, he wrote to the President of the Gibraltar Jockey Club a brief letter, as follows:- "For military reasons some of the guard rails and posts enclosing the course and also a number of the starting gates at the North Front should be removable. It is suggested that such posts and gates as may be required to be removed should be carried in sockets (which do not protrude above ground level) so that removal can be effected in the shortest possible time. Work to be carried out forthwith and completed before 31st December, 1934."

This brought a long letter of protest from the President, Sir Kenneth J. Beatty, the Chief Justice, to the new Governor, Sir Charles H. Harrington, G.C.B., D.S.O.. While admitting the existence of a clause in their lease from the Government of the North Front racecourse, which made them liable for the cost of removing any of the buildings and any other structures for military reasons, the Club complained that it was

faced with a capital outlay of at least £150 and recurring expenditure of an unknown amount on every occasion that the racecourse had to be prepared as a landing ground. "The Stewards feel" the President wrote, "that the Jockey Club has played an important part and has already disbursed large sums of money in adding to the general amenities of the whole population of Gibraltar, thereby contributing to the health and happiness of the garrison and civil communities as a whole. In addition to this, any profits made by the club not devoted to improvements has been spent for the benefit of all - in charity and for the support of other forms of sport - which would have been difficult to keep going without assistance." The President reminded the Governor that Air Ministry had agreed to bear the expense of the original scheme, which would have been much more costly, and went on to question the probability of the airfield really being an "emergency" one. "If the landing ground is really an emergency ground," he argued, "it must be ready at all times at very short notice. If the ground is required at all times, racing cannot be carried out at all and a very great loss to the whole of the population of Gibraltar must ensue, which the Stewards feel cannot be the wish or intention of H.M. Government. If required at short notice, the Stewards require to bring to your Excellency's notice the fact that they are not in the position and have not sufficient staff to ensure that the ground can be rapidly and safely converted for flying purposes and that under such circumstances they are not in a position to accept responsibility for the safe landing of aircraft....."

When he received the President's letter General Harrington took the matter up with the C.R.E. and Fortress Headquarters. His Excellency was advised that technically the C.R.E. was right, and that the Jockey Club ought to pay. "On the other hand," said the writer of a minute from Fortress Headquarters, "when the lease was made in 1900 the question of the racecourse being used as a landing ground was beyond anyone's imagination." This minute suggested to his Excellency that in view of what the Jockey Club had done for all classes in Gibraltar Air Ministry might be willing to pay the cost.

General Harrington thereupon wrote officially to the Secretary of State for Air, the Marquess of Londonderry. At the same time he sent a personal letter to Air Chief Marshal Sir Edward L. Ellington, G.C.B., Chief of the Air Staff, signed "Yours ever, Tim Harrington." In it his Excellency said that the Jockey Club quite realised their responsibility but "It is a pity, as I got them, last year - the best year they have ever had - to give nearly all their profits to charities - the Hunt, Polo, etc., and they also built me a tea-room in the grandstand. It is rather hard now, when they know the money was provided for by the Air Ministry, to tell them to pay not only now but in the future. In addition, the Committee of Imperial Defence memo said this work was to be done without exciting the Spaniards. Now, unfortunately, it has become the talk of the Rock as the racing season opened yesterday. As the Emergency or Occasional landing ground will only, I gather, be used for a few days in a year when the Fleet is here, I think it would be a great pity to raise a stir and I should be very grateful if you would allow the cost to be borne as previously arranged, by Air Ministry. Come out and sample the Emergency ground."

In his official letter to the Secretary of State for Air the Governor said, "I am in the opinion that the reasons for this clause were to implement the Treaty of Utrecht which demands that all buildings and erections on the North Front should be of a temporary nature. I submit, therefore, that their liability, although it is apparently a legal one, is difficult from the moral point of view, to justify. I have received an appeal from the President of the Gibraltar Jockey Club..... I would point out that had the original scheme for the preparations of the Landing Ground been accepted the Jockey Club would have been in no way involved The Jockey^{Club} in Gibraltar plays an

important part in the life of those stationed in the Fortress and residents in the neighbourhood and when able subscribes to charity and assists financially military activities - in fact, without assistance received from the Club, subscriptions by officers would, in certain cases, have to be raised, which they could ill afford.

While these negotiations were being conducted the Governor received a communication from the Rear Admiral i/c, Gibraltar, Rear Admiral T.M. Austin, dated 7th December, 1934, asking what progress had been made with the landing ground and if it would be available for use by the Fleet Air Arm aircraft in an emergency during the visit of the Home and Mediterranean Fleets next Spring. The Governor replied that certain items in the work of preparation were still the subject of correspondence with Air Ministry, but that it was anticipated the work should be finished by the end of March, 1935.

On 15th December, 1934, Air Ministry wrote to the Governor that they were prepared to accept the expense of altering the rails and starting gates at a cost estimated at £150 as a charge to Air Votes. "I am, however, to add", the letter said, "that while in view of your representations the decision has been taken on the grounds of policy, the Air Council are of the opinion that in the event of any further expense of this nature being involved in the future it would be necessary to stipulate that the cost should be borne by the Jockey Club and I am accordingly to suggest that in view of the establishment of the landing ground arrangements should be made for consultation with the appropriate authorities before the Jockey Club undertake the erection of any fixtures which might constitute an obstruction." A personal letter to the same effect was written to the Governor by Sir Edward Ellington.

When it was known that an "emergency" landing ground for service aircraft was being arranged, other interests began to consider the possibility of renewing the civil air traffic at Gibraltar. Early in 1934 Sir Alan Cobham came to Gibraltar to make a survey and report on an air route to Tangier for passengers, goods and mail. He had flown from the Rock in 1927. Sir Alan argued that as Tangier had ample facilities for constructing an airfield but none for flying-boats it was essential for Gibraltar to take steps to provide an airfield. In his opinion the only site was the North Front racecourse, which, however, he thought could never become a public airfield. "It is of insufficient dimensions to receive a full licence", he said, "and could never be considered suitable for a landing ground for strangers to alight upon." The Colonial Secretary sent Sir Alan's report to the Governor, on 7th March, 1934, and said that the benefits of the establishment of an airfield were fully appreciated, particularly in connection with an expected mail service. For that reason Sir Alan's proposals had been viewed favourably by the Colonial Government and the Department of Civil Aviation in London. "The immediate and important point of consideration," the Colonial Secretary wrote, "is whether the obvious objection from the military point of view is of such a nature as definitely to preclude this area of ground being used for the purpose indicated."

Within two days the Governor sent a reply through Fortress Headquarters in which he refused to sanction the use of North Front racecourse as a landing ground. "The Governor has arrived at a definite conclusion," said the F.H.Q. communication, "that the proposed use of this ground is undesirable from the military point of view in that the arrival and departure of aircraft would not only constitute a hindrance throughout the weapon training season but would curtail the very limited existing facilities for exercising troops on open ground." At the same time General Harrington wrote to Sir Philip Cunliffe-Lister and sent him a copy of Sir Alan Cobham's report. "It will be observed from the report," he said "that for the reasons stated an aeroplane service is the only practicable one. Such a service necessitates a landing ground."

Gibraltar is faced with the hard physical fact of lack of ground, and the one and only site for a landing ground is that in the centre of the racecourse where is also situated the garrison marketry range. Greatly as I should like to see civil aviation established here, there are many objections from a military point of view to the racecourse site being used as a regular aircraft ground. During the weapon training season this area is in constant use by both the Army and Navy and it is considered that the arrival and departure of aircraft constitute a hindrance." The Civil Aviation scheme did not survive that objection.



The new runway has made good progress and is in use. The race track has completely disappeared and most of the "prepared strip" is now a dispersal for aircraft.

(19th January, 1942)

VI - Navy has the Last Word.

Throughout the negotiations every opportunity had been taken to emphasise that the airfield was to be an emergency one. The Army did not wish to give support to any proposal that North Front should become a permanent airfield, involving the sacrifice of its training ground and sport to the Third Arm of warfare, unless for an incontrovertible reason. That was why, no doubt, General Harrington wrote, on 11th. March, 1935, to the Rear Admiral in Charge, Gibraltar, and suggested that the time had come when some general policy should be laid down. He pointed out that the North Front ground was in constant use both for training and recreation, and emphasised that the welfare of the garrison would suffer if such use was often interrupted. The Rear Admiral was asked to consider a suggestion that the policy on the status of the ground should make it available occasionally for service but not civilian aircraft, and that as preliminary work was required before aircraft could land, its use should be regarded as abnormal and a week's notice given to Fortress Headquarters.

Rear Admiral Austin referred the matter to the Commanders in Chief of the Mediterranean and Atlantic Fleets. The first reply was received from the C. in C. Mediterranean, Admiral Sir William W. Fisher, who made it quite clear that he would like North Front to be available always and not only by giving adequate notice to the Army. He pointed out the value of having such ground available in war, and asked whether it would not be possible to arrange that it could be used as proposed without any preliminary work being necessary. Pilots could then be informed of its existence but warned that they must not use it except in emergency.

General Harrington's reply, on 8th May, 1935, stated that it was not practicable for North Front to be used as a landing ground without preliminary work. He gave a list of the work required, including the bridging over of firing trenches, and reiterated that the ground in its normal state was not available as a landing ground and preliminary notice was essential. "It is not felt, however," he said, "that this condition detracts from its value as an emergency landing ground. It can only be required in this capacity while the aircraft carriers are here and they are not normally here for more than a few weeks in the year. Nor, from past experience, have they flown off their machines on more than two or three occasions in this vicinity. It would not therefore appear to be difficult to give notice of the occasions on which the ground may be required for landing in an emergency. The preliminary work will then be done and service machines which get into difficulties will be able to land and so avoid the neutral ground."

The General's suggestion on this occasion was a change in phraseology rather than a concession. It was that pilots should be informed that the racecourse could be made available as an emergency landing ground, that a week's notice to Fortress Headquarters was required, and that as the ground was in constant use for training and recreation they should be warned to use it only in an emergency. Admiral Fisher's reply was not received until September, 1935, as it went missing. It stated briefly that the Commander in Chief concurred with His Excellency's suggestion.

A slightly different attitude was taken up by the C. in C. Home.

Fleet, as the Atlantic Fleet was now named. Admiral Sir Roger Backhouse did not reply to the Governor's letter of 11th March, 1935, until the Fleet was nearly due at Gibraltar for the 1936 Spring cruise. He asked in a letter dated 6th February, 1936, for the landing ground to be put at his disposal for an indefinite period from 11th February. General Harrington replied, on 11th February, "Bearing in mind the many other purposes for which North Front is used I do not consider it possible to maintain the area prepared for use as an emergency landing ground for an indefinite period. While the ground is prepared it cannot be used for certain weapon training exercises nor for racing. As you know, the Gibraltar Hockey Club are liberal supporters of all Service Charities here, and I am loath to agree to any step which will interfere with racing. As regards weapon training, the programme of shooting after 1st April is so full that it will be difficult to regain any time lost owing to the closing of the ranges after that date. I would, therefore, be grateful if you would consider the possibility of so arranging flying practice from H.M.S. "Furious" that the emergency landing ground is only required for certain clearly defined periods."

Admiral Backhouse responded by signal through the Rear Admiral at Gibraltar stating that he wished the landing ground available for the following week, and would consult the "local authorities" before representing further requirements. When the Home Fleet reached Gibraltar the Admiral sent his Fleet Aviation Officer, Wing Commander A.N. Gallehawk, A.F.C., ashore to North Front with two R.A.F. officers from H.M.S. "Furious" to make a report. When they had done so he wrote to the Governor from H.M.S. "Nelson", on 18th February, stating that it was not necessary to do all the preparatory work suggested by His Excellency. Aircraft could land without the rails being removed if the firing trenches were covered by boarding flush with the ground, certain concrete posts "which seem to serve no useful purpose" were removed, one or two large holes filled in and some large stones removed.

"I propose, with your Excellency's concurrence," the Admiral wrote "to issue an order warning pilots that should a forced landing be necessary at North Front they are to bear in mind that there may be men working there or in the firing trenches, that cattle may be grazing and people exercising horses. I suggest that Fortress Headquarters be warned that a pilot forced to land will do so as nearly as possible in the centre of the racecourse."

There could be no argument against this. Details were discussed by Fortress and Home Fleet Staff Officers and as a result Fortress Headquarters made the necessary "permanent" preparations suggested by the Admiral, and issued a warning that aircraft were to be expected. By 10th March, 1936, the "emergency landing ground" was fully available for the first time.



Great progress has been made with the extension of the runway into the sea in preparation for Operation Torch. At the eastern end part of the "prepared strip" is still being used. The border guiding lines and the centre circle are all that remain of the strip elsewhere.

(5th October, 1942)

PART ONE. 1901-1939.

VII - 1936-1939 Wrangles and Uncertainty.

Although the C. in C. Home Fleet had taken such decisive action that the emergency landing ground at North Front had in fact become an airfield available at all times, the matter was by no means decided. Europe became more unsettled, further consideration had to be given to the possible operation of land aircraft from Gibraltar, and it soon became obvious that North Front racecourse, Victoria Gardens and the army training ground were likely to be replaced by a full-sized airfield. There was hindrance to this in the form of frank statements of opinion from the Governor, confusion and misunderstanding between the three services and the Colonial Office, uncertainty in London about what was really required at Gibraltar, and a reluctance to cause annoyance to the Spanish Government in case they should appeal to international law and hold up the entire business indefinitely. This last-mentioned question became less important early in 1939, when Franco began to build fortifications on his side of the fence with the aid of German military engineers as a protest against the British refusal to aid him when the Republican warships bombarded Algeciras during the civil war. It was removed entirely early in 1940 when because of the break-down of international law it could be said that the juridical status of Gibraltar vis-a-vis Spain was only of historical interest.

The opposition that came from the Army, principally inside Gibraltar, was not surprising, for the creation of a permanent airfield on North Front seemed an utter impossibility. No one could believe, either, that the potential enemy would ever get his aircraft within 500 miles of Gibraltar or, for that matter, that aircraft based on Gibraltar would ever be able to reach the enemy. There was an added irritation in the possibility that the amenities of North Front, which were of such high importance to those inside Gibraltar, including the civilians, were to be despoiled for a scheme that might not be a success and was almost certain to be abandoned after a few years. When North Front was eventually taken up entirely by the airfield the loss to the people of Gibraltar was greater than the loss of Hyde Park and Regent's Park would be to the people of West London. It can never be replaced unless by ground which will have to be obtained by the goodwill of Spain. Those who opposed the scheme on the argument that an airfield would never be of real use had much apparent reason on their side. Sir Alan Cobham, who had an eye for a potential airfield, if ever anyone had, thought little of North Front. General Godley, who retired from the Governorship of Gibraltar in 1933, and who had been intimately concerned with the earliest plans, wrote in the "Evening Standard" of 5th. December, 1935, that aeroplanes attacking Gibraltar "cannot do so in close proximity to the Rock. Not only would they have to encounter the well-known Levanter.... but there are innumerable air pockets which cause aeroplanes to give the Rock a wide berth."

An unbiased observer of some standing, Mr. G.T. Garratt, "Times" correspondent during the Abyssinian war, wrote a book entitled "Gibraltar and the Mediterranean" in February, 1939, and in the little space he devoted to discussing the possibility of an airfield as part of Gibraltar's modern means of attack and defence, criticised General Godley's suggestion that Gibraltar could not be attacked from the air but was definite that little could be done to provide aerial defence against it. "The promontory of Gibraltar," he wrote "has no suitable ground for an airfield and the tricky winds round the Rock would be of far greater handicap to the defending planes rising off the ground than to attackers, who could come

at heights entirely unaffected by the 1300 feet of limestone underneath." These two opinions express the general attitude of mind of most people when the need for a service airfield at Gibraltar was suggested.

First evidence of a scheme for a full-size airfield at North Front came from the Secretary of State for the Colonies, Mr. W. Ormsby-Gore, M.P., who wrote to the Governor, General Harrington, on 1st. October, 1936, and asked his views on a proposed air base at Gibraltar partly on an area reclaimed from the sea. On 2nd. November Mr. Ormsby-Gore telegraphed the Governor that the law officers of the Crown had given a "qualified" opinion to the effect that there would be no objection to taking initial steps to carry out the project pending objection by the Spanish Government. Air Ministry was pressing for immediate authority to proceed and the Cabinet was going to discuss the matter on 4th. November. A summary of the Governor's views were requested by telegraph. General Harrington, who had already discussed the entire matter with Sir Samuel Hoare, First Lord of the Admiralty, during his visit to Gibraltar in October, agreed that an air base was essential and that all other interests should be subordinated to it and the various difficulties met at all costs.

Mr. Ormsby-Gore wrote again, on 26th. November, stating the Government had decided that although the provision of an air base at Gibraltar was essential for the needs of Imperial Defence they had "reached the conclusion that the risks of alienating Spain and of creating international complications and difficulties by taking action at the present time to reclaim the land required for an airfield are of such gravity as to outweigh any advantages to be derived from immediate action. They had therefore decided that the Secretary of State for Air should follow up certain possibilities of an emergency alternative concerned with the construction of a windbreak wall, 1100 yards long, 50 feet high and 12 feet broad, from East to West across the British sphere of the neutral ground, and the levelling and keeping clear of all obstacles of a strip 150 yards wide on each side of the wall, which would be a steel framework covered with slats. It would run from Gibraltar Bay (Western Beach) to Blackstrap Bay (Eastern Beach) practically through the centre of the racecourse. The scheme would cost £35,500.

On 21st. January, 1937, General Harrington wrote to Mr. Ormsby-Gore detailing certain inconveniences which the scheme would cause to civilian and service life and work, adding " I am forced to agree on my present information that there is no practical alternative, but it may be taken for granted that the erection of the proposed wall will give rise to representations from Spain. " Late that month Air Marshal Sir Philip Joubert de la Ferté (A.O.C. in C. Coastal Command) visited North Front. A report of the Air Marshal's opinion upon the "wall" scheme was sent by General Harrington to Field Marshal Sir Cyril J. Deverell, K.B.E., Chief of the Imperial General Staff. In a letter dated 27th. January, 1937, General Harrington wrote, " Air Marshal Joubert de la Ferté went to examine this wall scheme and I understand was most definitely against it. He asked if it had been examined by any really practical flying expert and as far as I know it has not. He said that he would prefer no wall at all. "

The scheme for a wall vanished temporarily into uncertainty, and the reclamation plan reappeared in a further letter from the Colonial Secretary, dated 23rd. August, 1937, when a proposal, which apparently originated at Air Ministry, was explained to reclaim from the sea on the west side of the peninsula an area 1000 yards by 800 yards - the first hint of the plan which was eventually to develop into the present 1800 yards runway. One feature about the reclamation that was perfectly clear was that it would mean the abolition of Gibraltar's only shipbuilding yard, Messrs. Eland's, as well as some subsidiary firms. " I have no hesitation in saying, " wrote General Harrington in an official despatch to the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, "that there will be great

feeling in Gibraltar against the uprooting of these firms. Whilst I entirely agree that the requirements of the Committee of Imperial Defence must be paramount, I, as Governor have to consider the effect of this decision on the local workers and on Gibraltar as a whole and I have no hesitation in saying that the whole scheme will be most unpopular as it deprives Gibraltar of certain of its present amenities and conveys no benefits to Gibraltar of any kind."

The first intimation that Spain knew what was afoot was a statement obtained unofficially, dated 17th December, 1937, which said that Franco's Government was expecting work to begin. If it was started without consulting them, their reply would be to fortify the neighbourhood. This threat was forwarded by the Governor to the War Office, and on 3rd January, 1938, it reached the Foreign Office and Air Ministry. All three were asked to make observations upon it. The replies, transmitted to the Under Secretary of State for the Colonies, form an interesting contrast in character and attitude.

The Army Council said, brusquely, "The Army Council has no comments to offer on this matter." The Foreign Office was tart. "As far as Mr. Eden is aware" the reply said, "it was never contemplated that General Franco's Administration should be consulted on this subject. Unless, therefore, the fortification of the neighbourhood of Gibraltar represents a serious threat to the safety of that Colony, a matter on which Mr. Eden is not competent to advise, he does not consider it necessary to make any notification to the Salamanca authorities."

The Air Council, being more directly concerned, made more of it. A letter dated 11th February, 1938 said "whether or not, for political reasons, the Spanish Republican Government or the Nationalist Government, or both, should be informed that the Royal Air Force are taking steps to enable aircraft to land and refuel at Gibraltar as a stage on the air route to the east, or whether perhaps the information should be conveyed to the local Spanish authorities unofficially, are matters on which the Air Council would not wish to comment. They are most anxious, however, to expedite the work as much as possible, and if it should be judged to be desirable that one or both of the existing Spanish Governments should be informed, the Council hope that it may be possible to avoid any negotiations which would have the effect of delaying the work."

There these questions were suspended, so far as Gibraltar was concerned, until General Harrington was succeeded in November, 1938, by General Sir Edmund Ironside, G.C.B.. At once the new Governor reopened them in his characteristic brisk fashion by a cable to the new Chief of the Imperial Staff, General Lord Gort, K.C.B., V.C., who as it turned out became Governor of Gibraltar in 1941 and was then able to bring the whole matter to a conclusion. "Has this airfield proposal," General Ironside asked, "really been considered carefully"? Later, having examined it more fully, he sent a further cable, "Hopeless confusion of ideas prevails here." The General discovered that the C. in C. Mediterranean Fleet had a plan for a seaplane base north of the Commercial Mole and that the Rear Admiral at Gibraltar had another for catapulting seaplanes from concealed hangars in the Rock. "No one here has any idea of what is being aimed at," General Ironside complained. "I can start work on clearing the airfield, but until I know definitely the final object to be aimed at I cannot act intelligently." General Ironside told the C. in C. Mediterranean Fleet what he had done and received a reply from Admiral Sir Dudley Pound which said, "I am most thankful that you have taken this matter up so strongly."

General Ironside bombarded War Office with cables and despatches with such intensity that Air Vice Marshal Sir Richard E.C. Peirse, K.C.B., Deputy Chief of the Air Staff, was sent to Gibraltar. He arrived early in February, 1939, and immediately cabled to the Chief of Air Staff confirming the Governor's request for quick, decisive action on all

matters concerned with the airfield, including the Spanish Problem. When he returned to London, Air Marshal Peirse called a meeting at Air Ministry, on 28th February, which was attended by representatives of the Admiralty, War Office and Colonial Office. Its object was "to clear up uncertainty which existed concerning the requirements for air facilities at Gibraltar." The decisions reached were based on the assumption that land and air action in the next war would never come near Gibraltar. The R.A.F., the meeting agreed, would only use the landing ground for occasional visits in peacetime, and possibly in war as a staging post for refuelling reinforcing units on passage. If a trade protection squadron were to be permanently based at Gibraltar it would be equipped with flying boats or amphibians and, in consequence, would use principally the sea alighting areas. The case of the Fleet Air Arm was different. When carriers came to Gibraltar there would be a shore requirement for keeping two squadrons on the airfield. In these circumstances the Admiralty agreed to provide maintenance facilities at North Front including hangar accommodation. The C. in C. Mediterranean suggested that the defence of the Rock should be strengthened by a fighter squadron, but Air Ministry replied that they "did not consider that as an immediate possibility."

The R.A.F. requirements could be met by the present strip. But for the continuous operation of two F.A.A. squadrons, and for the accommodation of any permanent unit, an airfield with adequate space for landing in all directions was required. "The proposed reclamation scheme," said a report of the meeting, sent to the Governor to clarify his instructions, "does not appear to give a satisfactory solution. If an operational airfield is required the reclamation scheme must be re-examined to establish whether an airfield for use in all conditions of wind is practicable. In the meanwhile work on the preparation of the strip should continue."

It was agreed that the Spanish Nationalist Government should be informed of the proposed developments on the lines that the plan was nothing new, but that steps were being taken to perfect an already existing emergency landing ground; that when the improvements were completed, however, it would follow that the ground would be more extensively used, and that Fleet Air Arm units from visiting carriers would use it for training purposes.

Air Vice Marshal Peirse wrote privately to General Ironside to assure him that if he found alternative sites for Bland's and the other works, and for his army barracks, it was unlikely that they would be interfered with by any expansion of Air Ministry or Admiralty airfield requirements. He remarked about the reclamation scheme that the more it was studied the less practicable it seemed. The Air Vice Marshal added that the Foreign Office had agreed to tell Franco at the first opportunity. Subsequent correspondence shows that the Air Council wrote to the Foreign Office suggesting that "it would appear to be desirable to cultivate the good-will of the Spanish Government towards the landing ground to such an extent as may be practicable."

In a further effort to clear matters up for General Ironside the Council wrote to the Admiralty, on 10th March, 1939, expressing the hope that their Lordships would co-operate in ensuring that any scheme for an airfield was a final one. "It seems clearly desirable," said the letter, "that it should be recognised that any further scheme of development would be framed on the basis of satisfying to the maximum possible extent both Admiralty and Air Ministry requirements for air facilities at Gibraltar. If their Lordships agree the Air Council propose that the Governor should be assured that this is the intention of both departments."

As the scheme unfolded the problem of what to do with Bland's works became an acute one for the Governor. On 6th April, 1939, General Ironside wrote to the War Office and asked approval to leave Bland's works

in their present position until the reclamation was proceeded with. The only deleterious effect of that would be to narrow the landing strip from 300 to 150 yards at the western portion. No reply was received to this letter, which the War Office forwarded to the Colonial Office, until September, 1939, by which time other changes had taken place in the plans for an airfield.

On 27th March, 1939, Admiral Sir Dudley Pound sent to the Governor a copy of a report which he had made to the Admiralty, following a discussion with the A.O.C. Mediterranean Command, on the provision of aircraft at Gibraltar as a minimum short-term policy. Sir Dudley Pound said that it seemed to him, and the A.O.C. concurred, that with comparatively little extra expense the landing ground at North Front could be suitably equipped and made available for the operation of disembarked Fleet Air Arm aircraft, reconnaissance aircraft for patrol of the Straits and for trade protection and fighters for the defence of the Fortress. His comments appear to be the first appeal for decisive action voiced by anyone who might be expected to make practical use of the airfield once it was finished. "It is most strongly urged," he said, "that the question of fitting out the North Front airfield so that it can perform the functions I have outlined should be taken up with Air Ministry, quite apart from the provision of the reconnaissance aircraft." The Admiral was not in favour of any proposal to establish a seaplane or flying-boat base at Gibraltar. "Given a properly equipped airfield and the necessary aircraft for reconnaissance," he said, "the need for such a base becomes of less importance since it is understood that with the increased endurance of modern aircraft the trend of development is towards the use of land planes for long-range reconnaissance over the sea, when the necessary airfields exist, rather than flying-boats or float planes." Nothing came of this immediately and the work of clearing North Front went on as fast as equipment and labour permitted.

The matter of fighters was raised again in July, 1939, when the Royal Navy was considered to be in charge of the Airfield at North Front. The Army Council wrote to the Admiralty to state that they were "very much concerned at the inadequacy of the facilities for air co-operation which at present exist in Gibraltar." As a result, the Council said, the training of anti-aircraft gunners and searchlight units was seriously handicapped and the readiness of the garrison for war was being prejudiced. At a time when Germany was producing great quantities of He. 111's and Ju. 88's, which had proved their efficiency in the Spanish Civil War, the Army Council had to confess to the Admiralty that they could only obtain slow float-planes with which to train their anti-aircraft units in modern defence. These aircraft came from Malta and were available only for three months in a year, and then at the expense of Malta's training, a circumstance to which the Council very wisely stated that it was not prepared to agree.

"We learn from the Air Council", said the letter, "that there is no prospect of a material increase in the amount of co-operation which can be provided from R.A.F. resources until the 1940-41 training season. It appears, therefore, that the only possibility of improving the situation in the immediate future is by assistance on the part of H.M. ships carrying aircraft. In view, therefore, of the present difficulties at Gibraltar the Council would greatly appreciate any assistance which the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty could provide, particularly during the part of the year (normally August to April) when there is no aircraft flight located at Gibraltar." The Admiralty agreed to provide Fleet Air Arm aircraft to be stationed permanently at North Front for the practice required by the Army.

By now the Spanish were watching North Front carefully and beginning to make public comments. This was one of the first problems to be faced by General Ironside's successor, Lieutenant General Sir Clive Liddell, K.C.B.. An article appeared in Franco's newspaper

"Arriba" in August, 1939, which concluded, "a few days ago, in one of our editorials, we expressed the hope that for the sake of good relations between Spain and Britain the old dispute about Gibraltar would now be settled. Today we have to confess that the attitude expressed by England in establishing this military airfield eighty metres from our lines is not the best way to arrive at an understanding or to confirm an expressed desire for friendship, particularly if these military defence works are going to be built on land over which we have today, as always, unquestionable right of sovereignty."

General Liddell sent the report to the War Office. "The local situation, now that the Spanish war is over," he wrote, "is rapidly becoming worse." The Spanish had begun to build defences in their portion of the "neutral" or polemic ground and had increased the guard at the Frontier. "I have reached the conclusion," General Liddell went on, "that until His Majesty's Government establish a friendly basis of discussion on the matter, if no more, the series of pin pricks to which Gibraltar is subjected will increase and that friendly relations with Spain will be difficult, if not impossible of achievement." General Liddell pointed out that before coming to Gibraltar he had been instructed to do all in his power to establish friendly relations with Spain. He asked for early information as to the Government's policy in the matter.



A Blenheim taxiing to the end of the runway. The centre has been completed but road-rollers and bull-dozers are completing the sides. It was on these sides that aircraft were parked before Operation Torch. (14th October, 1942)

PART ONE. 1901-1939.

VIII - An End of Argument - the Runway Completed.

When war began the situation so far as operations were concerned worked out very much as had been anticipated. There were no aircraft at North Front as the anti-aircraft practice flying was being done by three Swordfish of No. 3 Anti-Aircraft Co-operation Unit from R.A.F. Malta which were fitted with floats. The only other aircraft at Gibraltar were three French float-planes. A few days after the 3rd September, 1939, the Royal Air Force arrived at Gibraltar from Malta and formed No. 200 Group, with Headquarters in the Bristol Hotel, and began to operate flying boats of No. 202 Squadron from the harbour. That activity is referred to in Part II of this narrative.

So far as North Front was concerned, the need for an efficient operational airfield for the Royal Navy and R.A.F. had become a matter of some urgency. Very soon a new voice arose in the appeals for unity of purpose and decisive action. It came from Group Captain F.E.P. Barrington, who commanded No. 200 Group under the direction of the A.O.C. Mediterranean Command. On 30th September, 1939, the Group Captain reported to the A.O.C. that half the "prepared strip" would not be available under six months and that the other half could never become available until the garrison huts were vacated. "It is now clear," he said "that no sanction has been given for the construction of anything more than an emergency landing ground without hangar or workshop accommodation, and the Spanish Authorities have been told that the present construction is solely for that purpose. Further, it is unlikely that the Foreign Office will consent to an alteration of policy. It is apparent that even when this landing strip is completed it cannot be used for any other purpose than as an emergency landing ground and that until such time as the political situation vis-a-vis Spain changes completely the suggestion to operate land aircraft from Gibraltar is impracticable." In view of the urgent need for patrolling as much of the sea west of Gibraltar as possible the Group Captain suggested operating a shore based squadron from Port Lyautey in conjunction with the French. He wrote his letter after a conference at Government House to discuss a cable from the War Office giving instructions for two Bellman hangars to be erected near the airfield for the use of the Royal Navy.

After the conference the Governor cabled a reply to the War Office suggesting that the order was the result of Sir Dudley Pound's report to Admiralty of 27th March, 1939. "Possibly Admiralty, War Office and Air Ministry are not in closest co-operation on the problem of working aircraft from Gibraltar," was General Liddell's comment. He pointed out that the R.A.F. had arrived at Gibraltar and that he had received information from the Colonial Office that an inter-departmental conference had agreed to ask the Admiralty to give an assurance that they would not raise any further requirements which might interfere with the scheme for the emergency landing strip. General Liddell also took the opportunity to inform the War Office that as he had had no reply to his request in August for something to be done about informing the Spanish what was afoot he had done so himself. "Having in mind my previous instructions," he said, "I have informed the Spanish Consul General here that our only intention is to have an emergency landing ground."

There was no immediate reply from the War Office to these points. Instead, the Governor was asked two questions which confirmed

his belief that something more than an emergency landing was visualised in the near future. One was a request for information about the possibility of towing or man-handling aircraft with folded wings along the roads leading to North Front. The other asked for an opinion about the cost and advisability of excavating hangars in the face of the Rock at the north eastern end. No time was wasted in obtaining the answers. It was found that aircraft could be moved easily along the roads; and that tunnel hangars were practicable, would cost £40,000 and take twelve months to build, but that they would have many disadvantages, including a vulnerability to fire from the north east. In forwarding this information General Liddell sent a personal cable to the Chief of the Imperial General Staff asking him if he was aware of what was happening and requesting a definite policy and instructions. The C.I.G.S. replied that he was aware of the matter and was trying to get a policy defined without delay. This was followed by a War Office message that Admiralty and Air Ministry stated the early demolition of army hutments was essential.

Meantime No. 200 Group's problems had been solved temporarily by a letter from the A.O.C. Mediterranean which stated that no swordfish aircraft could be sent to Gibraltar and that certain operational facts, in addition to the political implications, made it seem evident that there was no likelihood of the Group being called upon to operate shore based aircraft in the near future. On the general matter of the airfield the A.O.C. said, "when the 150 yards strip is ready it will be time enough to take up the question of using it."

The Rear Admiral Commanding North Atlantic, Rear Admiral Dudley B.N. North was the next to make himself heard when he recalled in a letter to Admiralty the sea reclamation scheme for a runway and a naval seaplane slipway and pointed out that they would be possible from material being tunnelled out of the Rock, but that a decision would have to be made soon otherwise the material would be dumped into the sea. He also reported that No. 200 Group had asked for the slipway site to build a hangar for flying boats. "I suggest," he said, "if this is approved it should be regarded as an encroachment for the duration of the war in view of the projected allocation of the site for naval purposes." This matter was to produce some disagreement in later years.

While this was going on General Liddell had sent another cable to London drawing attention to "pressure being brought by Admiralty and Air Ministry to convert North Front to an operations airfield." The Governor hoped the Colonial Office would press for the limitations of the landing ground for emergency landings only and discourage any change of policy involving the breaking of his word to the Spanish authorities unless H.M. Government first arrived at an agreement with the Spanish Government. He was assured, in a reply from the Colonial Office, that his views would be given full consideration at inter-departmental discussions which were then proceeding on the question of communicating with the Spanish Government in regard to the use of the airfield.

The result of these discussions became apparent on 4th December, 1939, when the Governor received a copy of a secret despatch from the Foreign Office to the British Ambassador at Madrid, Sir Maurice Peterson, K.C.M.G.. It was accompanied by a letter from Mr. Malcolm MacDonald to General Liddell in which the Colonial Secretary made the surprising statement that an aide-memoire handed to the Duke of Alba, Spanish Ambassador in London, on 25th April, 1939, had said the improvements to the landing ground would not affect the general uses to which it was put and that it would remain primarily an emergency landing ground which would also be available for the periodical training of disembarked aircraft of the Fleet Air Arm. "It is not proposed," the letter went "to seek the assent of the Spanish Government for the use

of the landing ground for the purposes in view, and although it is not the intention of His Majesty's Government to employ the landing ground for operational purposes, it is not considered desirable to furnish the Spanish Government with any assurance on this point." The letter added that the Government were advised that they were on sure ground from the legal point of view. They were not willing to compromise their position by seeking an agreement with the Spanish Government which, for tactical reasons, would most certainly be refused.

On 21st November, 1939, the Governor received the first definite information that the main reclamation scheme had been abandoned. This news was contained in a letter from Mr. MacDonald which referred to General Ironside's letter of 6th April: "The Air Council, in consultation with the Admiralty, "Mr. MacDonald wrote, "have decided that only the landing strip should be proceeded with." The letter also said that the Air Council had decided that Bland's Works must be moved, an inconsistency that the Governor found hard to understand. It referred to the fact that in view of the creation of an airfield at North Front the Army establishment had been decreased, and made certain suggestions for an alternative site for the works by the demolition of part of the barracks.

A greater surprise followed. A War Office cable of 7th March, 1940, said "Possible only northern strip of landing ground may be required. Postpone work on southern pending decision." This was the result, it turned out, of a letter sent by the Admiralty to the Air Council on 4th. March, 1940, in which it was stated that the Fleet Air Arm requirements in Gibraltar had been reconsidered in the light of recent events and their Lordships "now regard the full implementation of their proposals at Gibraltar as a matter of less urgency than previously." Their Lordships suggested confining the work to the northern half of the landing strip and asked the Air Council if they would agree "consideration being given to the execution of the remaining projects if future events should require it." The work on the runway was altered accordingly and when it was completed the R.A.F. and Fleet Air Arm were able to use it operationally with fair success, although it was scarcely adequate for the Lockheed Hudsons and the Wellingtons which the R.A.F. brought out later and was responsible for many crashes. This is also dealt with in Part II.

An extension to the runway appeared to have been forgotten in London. No more was heard of it until March, 1941, when the new Governor, General Lord Gort, received a copy of a letter written by one of the private secretaries on behalf of Mr. Winston Churchill to Sir Samuel Hoare, Bt., the British Ambassador at Madrid. It pointed out that since the arrival of the Germans in Sicily the risk of interception of British aircraft on their way to the Middle East had been greatly increased. It was proposed, therefore, to make the journey with an intermediate halt at Gibraltar. Mr. Churchill referred to the fact that the Spanish Government had been told the landing ground would only be used in an emergency and proceeded to give a characteristic definition of the word. "In one sense the war itself constitutes an emergency," he wrote. "In a narrower sense an emergency is created by the fact that aeroplanes cannot safely fly direct to the Middle East. In a third sense landings of these aircraft will not be regular but intermittent." In these circumstances, Mr. Churchill informed the Ambassador, he had agreed to the use of the landing ground on condition that no violation of Spanish territorial rights would in practice be involved, that landings would be intermittent and that so far as possible the aircraft would arrive "singly and unostentatiously." The letter concluded, "I am satisfied that if the Spanish Government object it can be plausibly represented that the use of the landing ground is compatible with the assurances that have been given to them. I do not consider that it is necessary or desirable to consult the Spanish authorities or to inform them of what is proposed.

By 6th. April the first of the transit aircraft had arrived -

Wellingtons and Bombays - and successful tests had been carried out for take-off from North Front with full load. To improve the service and remove certain obstacles the new O.C. No. 200 Group, Group Captain A.D. Rogers, asked for Army assistance pending the arrival of a R.A.F. detachment from U.K. The request was put through the Vice Admiral at Gibraltar, Rear Admiral G.F.B. Edward-Gollins, who approved and suggested an Inter-Services Committee to discuss the matter. This committee was formed and met on numerous occasions, with the result that many problems were solved satisfactorily and harmoniously. This committee took the important decision, after consultation with London, to deepen the width of the runway and create a new extension westwards at an angle to the original strip. This meant the abolition of three recreation grounds but was a big improvement in efficiency. The extension formed a V towards the south-west with the existing strip and was actually the foundation or beginning of the present runway.

Lord Gort was enthusiastic about the new plan and gave many details his personal attention. The work went ahead at satisfactory speed. A quick method of building the runway was evolved with the use of broken stone rolled, then cold sprayed with an emulsion of bitumen. A certain amount of extension into the sea just above high water mark was necessary but nothing ambitious was envisaged. It was with something of a shock, therefore, that the Inter-Services Committee received an order from Air Ministry on 27th October, 1941, that the new runway was to be extended to a final length of 1,550 yards and have a width of 150 yards. The cable giving the order used the phrase, "Air Chief Marshal Sir Edgar Ludlow-Hewitt (Director of Organisation) says the scheme is practicable."

Lord Gort's reply said, "It would appear to be a major engineering feat." The Governor explained in a cable to the War Office that it entailed half a million tons of filling and building the runway over 500 yards into the sea without any lee to protect construction work. It might take two years. He concluded, "as any such project must effect essential work for the defence of the Fortress and involve my personal responsibilities I presume the whole question has been examined on the highest level." The War Office replied, "Matter has been on high level."

On 3rd November, the Governor sent to the War Office his plans and estimates for the work. The runway in the sea would have a freeboard of 6 feet 6 inches above high water and 400,000 cubic yards of filling would be required. He suggested the work be given to a firm which specialised in harbour works of that type and magnitude.

The new scheme alarmed the British Ambassador at Madrid. He cabled Lord Gort, "to embark on foundation of so extensive a plan will raise most embarrassing questions with Spanish authorities. A discreet and strictly limited reclamation might improve landing ground without either embroiling us with Spanish Government or taking many months or possibly years to complete."

Nevertheless, the scheme went ahead and with it the erection of a Royal Air Force Station at North Front. When details were worked out accurately it became apparent that the extension over the sea would be exactly 570 yards. The work was beyond any of the resources of Gibraltar, but it was urgent, for the United States of America had joined in the voices from high quarters. North Front would be required "as a necessary insurance in the U.S. Air Ferry Service from West Africa to the United Kingdom" - the arrival of the first U.S. bombers to assist in the bombing of Germany. No trouble would be too much. Lord Gort was promised labour and plant from Britain within three months and certain plant from America. Meantime, the completion of the original strip to a maximum length and efficiency became a work of the first priority. There was dismay when it was realised that the road from Spain could not be diverted and would be required to cross the extended runway. This would mean some 7,000 neutrals walking more or less across



In February 1943 the limit of the extension had been reached. Trucks were tipping hundreds of tons of rubble into the water of the enclosed area to fill it up. All traces of the race-course and the "prepared strip" have vanished.

(14th February, 1943)

the centre of the runway twice a day on their way to work in Gibraltar. It was too much to hope that the skill and vigilance of the security authorities would prevent the infiltration of enemy sympathisers and even of agents. It was an unheard of situation; but there was no alternative. The only safeguard was to extend the system of Security Defence begun in Gibraltar at the time of the Abyssinian war and to apply it with an intensity unknown at home. The Security Officers of the three services were not the "Cinderellas" they are at home stations, but became men of supreme importance.

The work was inspected by the A.O.C. in C. Coastal Command, Air Chief Marshal Sir Philip Joubert de la Ferte, towards the end of November, 1941. He expressed the view that the project being in any case a major one it was worth considering, as a final answer, an extension of half a mile seaward so as to provide a runway with a total length of 1800 yards. That would involve the demolition of Bland's Works which successive Governors had sought to preserve. This suggestion was approved by the Air Council in December but as a long term policy. The immediate task, finally decided at a meeting in London on 16th December, 1941, was to extend the runway to 1,550 yards. Work could then begin on the further extension provided that the runway could be used with freedom at all times. Preliminary work was begun a few days later and started in real earnest when the first of the plant and personnel arrived from Britain. Construction units and their fearsome equipment made life at North Front hideous with dust and noise. Stones and rubble were blasted from the Rock and dug from tunnels at a phenomenal number of tons daily and thrown into the sea to form the foundation of the extended runway. The extension began to reach out into the Bay with impressive rapidity: but to the few seniors officers who knew the Very Secret reason for the energetic drive to get the job done the progress seemed slow. Elsewhere there was equally intensive activity. Men working like ants obliterated all trace of the precious racecourse and its lovely surroundings. Buildings sprang up everywhere. The humblest worker saw signs growing of important events ahead, although even those who were far from humble could not do more than guess the reason for this sudden and extensive plan. The political and other objections that seemed so important in the 1930's vanished, as the intensive work had begun, almost in a night.

Lord Gort was a tireless director of the work. Early every morning he went to North Front and walked round the construction gangs encouraging them and starting a competitive spirit by telling each one that it was lagging behind the others. Work went on all day for seven days a week. The trucks carrying the "spoils" and rocks from the quarries which had been begun at the north-east portion of the Rock known as the "scree" were an almost continuous procession; those that brought material from the tunnelling elsewhere on the Rock were given 30 minutes for the round trip and worked to time-table. The daily "carry" of material to fill the runway was in the region of 7,500 tons.

On 12th January, 1942, the runway had been extended to 985 yards and an undertaking was given to the Air Council that it would be 1150 yards by the end of April. A request for even greater energy to be expended came in a signal from London on 24th March when it was pointed out that the scale of air attack on Malta was causing heavy casualties to aircraft reinforcing to the Middle East and India which had to make a stop there. Air Ministry was arranging to strip Wellingtons as far as possible so that they could fly from Britain to Gibraltar and thence direct to Egypt. It would mean taking-off from North Front with a very heavy load of petrol and that would be quite impossible until the runway had been extended to at least 1150 yards. "Request all energies on immediate work" said the signal "at the expense if necessary of preparing the remaining distance." A new estimate of the date when the 1150 yards extension would be completed was requested.



A close-up of the final reclamation work taken on the same
day.

(14th February, 1943)

Lord Gort replied at once, "within ten days." He then made a personal inspection of the work, had a talk with the technical officers and civilian experts, and cabled "Possibly 3rd April. Certainly 7th April." He redoubled his efforts to encourage the workers and then drove his staffs until they reminded each other that he once had the nickname "Tiger Gort". On 1st April he sent a signal to the Chief of the Imperial General Staff guaranteeing completion by the evening of 3rd April, twenty seven days earlier than the original estimate, one of the great constructional achievements of the war. The G.I.G.S. replied, "Please convey my congratulations to all concerned."

After that the tempo slackened a little, but not much, for the 1550 yards extension had to be completed for a much more important operation, one about which few people at that time had any information - Operation Torch, the Allied landings at Algiers, Oren and Casablanca. When this operation took place in November the runway was just under 1550 yards long. In January, 1943, the extension "frame" to 1800 yards had been completed and the runway was ready for use to its full length in July. By that time nothing whatever remained of the Victoria Gardens and the racecourse, a transformation which the majority of the civilian population did not witness because they had been evacuated from the Rook until the end of the war.



Above is a photograph of the tree-lined roadway that used to lead past North Front racecourse to the frontier, which can be seen at the end of the road. Below is the same road after North Front airfield had been completed, showing the traffic lights on the north side of the runway.



FLYING FROM THE ROCK.

PART TWO - THE R.A.F. AT GIBRALTAR.

"It's dogged as does it. It aint
thinking about it -----"

Anthony Trollope.

NORTH FRONT DURING 1944

This photograph, taken from a Hudson, shows what North Front airfield looked like during the last year of the war.

(5th January, 1944)

TRAFFIC AND PARKING.



The stream of civilian traffic, which can only enter or leave Gibraltar by crossing the runway, is clearly illustrated in this early morning picture. Parking difficulties for aircraft can also be appreciated. The photograph was taken eight weeks after Operation Torch. (1st January, 1943)

very first major crisis encountered on arrival at Gibraltar was that of accommodation, a problem which inevitably could only be solved by borrowing a small number of antiquated barracks and a very limited range of barrack equipment from the army authorities. In making this neighbourly gesture the army are to be congratulated because almost at the same period they themselves began to find their own accommodation worries extremely harassing."

The operational organisation was the comparatively simple one of bringing No. 202 Squadron to the Rock and mooring their aircraft in the harbour. Gibraltar Bay provided more than an adequate area for take-off and alighting. Much was achieved in those flying-boat operations, a great deal was added to the glory of Coastal Command's unique share in the war, and No. 202 Squadron, which flew from Gibraltar throughout the war, made a reputation for itself that ranks with the highest and created a tradition the equal of anything done in the long history of wars in the Mediterranean. When the squadron left the Rock in September, 1944, it could be said that the end had come of the war in the Western Mediterranean.

In 1938 the Squadron was stationed at Kalafrana, Malta. When the possibility of war was being considered it was decided that Malta would become untenable, in all probability, for some time. The Mediterranean Fleet would certainly move, and as the basic function of the squadron at that time was Fleet reconnaissance, a mobilisation scheme was compiled. Gibraltar and Alexandria were to be bases used by the Fleet and the Squadron. The scheme was given a trial in September, 1938, when the Squadron was ordered to Alexandria. The move was accomplished in four days and the squadron remained there for four months. Experience gained showed that the scheme required amending and a further test, with the squadron operating from Gibraltar. In February, 1939, Wing Commander E.A. Blake, M.M., the Commanding Officer, took four aircraft to Gibraltar. He made arrangements for mooring sites and accommodation, carried out several exercises to test conditions, and generally made all preparations so that the squadron could operate from Gibraltar as soon as it arrived there. As a result when the squadron was posted to Gibraltar on 9th September, 1939, it was operating within 24 hours of arriving at the Rock.

Orders to move to Gibraltar were received at Malta at 0300 hours on 9th September and the first aircraft was airborne at 0930. As the squadron was then equipped with Londons and each one had to be loaded with material necessary for immediate operations on arrival at Gibraltar an overnight stop had to be made at Bougie. The aircraft reached Gibraltar the following day and the first operational sortie took off at 0700 hours on 11th September. That sortie was an anti U-Boat patrol of the Straits, and the second was an escort to the east of the Rock. These were two of the types of operations which were to keep the squadron busy for precisely two days less than the next five years, for No. 202 Squadron remained at Gibraltar until 9th September, 1944. The remainder of the squadron's personnel arrived at Gibraltar in H.M.S. Shropshire, on 13th September, 1939, and the arrangements made by Wing Commander Blake were at once brought into force. There was no slipway and no hangar. No. 20 Shed on the North Mole was taken over from the Navy. Offices were erected, the maintenance personnel improvised workshops in the shed and adequate stores were installed in odd corners. To begin with all 60 hour and major inspections were done at Malta. Later the 60 hour inspections were done at ~~the~~ Gun Wharf, the aircraft being lifted on to the wharf by a crane. When Italy entered the war major inspections at Malta became impossible and the work was transferred to the United Kingdom. The Londons were only able to make the trip when winds were favourable, the aircraft freely stripped of all removable equipment, and extra petrol carried on board.

Group Captain Barrington arrived at Gibraltar with his staff in H.M.S. Hostile early in September, 1939. The war really came to Gibraltar in



A Catalina of No.202 Squadron on A/U patrol over the Straits.

(6th September, 1943).

October, 1939, when three merchant vessels were sunk in the approaches to the Straits and No. 202 Squadron made their first U-Boat sighting and attack without success. One of the early incidents of the squadron's operations was the sighting of the German merchant ship "Glucksburg" as she was leaving Cadiz harbour. A London shadowed her until H.M.S. "Wishart", in signal communication with the flying-boat, intercepted the German which then ran herself aground. From arrival until the end of December, 1939, No. 202 Squadron carried out 95 anti-U-Boat patrols, 56 convoy escorts, 13 reconnaissance patrols and six photographic sorties, a total of 1027 flying hours.

Maintenance was assisted in December, 1939, when the R.A.F. depot ship "Dumna" arrived at Gibraltar but it was still little better than make-shift and quite unsuited to a long war. A search was made for accommodation on which a flying-boat station could be established. It was found early in 1940 on an area of land north of the dockyard which was being reclaimed by the Navy and on which it was proposed to build married quarters for civilian dockyard workers. The ground was given to the R.A.F. on condition that most of the buildings, some of which were already being built, should retain their original design as three-room flats. This was the matter referred to by the Rear Admiral (page 24 :) when he wrote to Admiralty and called their attention to the need for making over the land for war-time purposes only, an attitude on which there was some contention in later years. Once the land was taken over work was begun on a slipway, a hangar and other accommodation peculiar to a flying-boat station. About this time Wing Commander Blake relinquished command of No. 202 Squadron and was awarded the O.B.E. for the services he had rendered in establishing R.A.F. operations at Gibraltar.

It was not until July, 1940, that the squadron experienced its first air fight. The French in North Africa were causing trouble and one of the more dangerous jobs assigned to Gibraltar aircraft was to carry out reconnaissance of the African coast. On 7th July, a Sunderland attached to No. 202 Squadron was on such an operation off Algiers and Oran and was observing a naval action with the French Fleet when an attack was made by three French Curtis fighters. The Sunderland shot down two and returned to Gibraltar riddled by machine-gun bullets and with a gunner badly wounded. The squadron's first loss occurred after it had been a year at Gibraltar. On 14th September, 1940, a London was shot down by a French fighter while it was on one of the reconnaissance patrols over Casablanca. The first successes on anti-U-Boat patrols occurred during October, 1940, when the squadron co-operated with surface craft in destroying two Italian submarines.

Up to May, 1941, the squadron was still operating with London flying-boats and Swordfish float-planes which had been taken over from No. 3 A.A.C.U. as a float-plane flight, both reliable and thoroughly respectable aircraft but by that time not capable of keeping pace with the progress of the air war. In May, 1941, therefore, it began to re-equip with Catalinas, the first of which was flown from the United Kingdom by Squadron Leader G.A. Harger who subsequently commanded the Squadron and was with it when it left Gibraltar in 1944. Nine days after its arrival the Catalina was attacked by four F.W. Kuriers while carrying out one of the long-range convoy escorts into the Atlantic. The way in which the new aircraft acquitted itself against the Kuriers, then a serious menace to shipping, was highly encouraging to the squadron. The Catalina fought with them for half an hour and drove them off. The convoy was not damaged. Two of the Kuriers, it was discovered later, failed to return to their base.

A few days after this success, two Londons attacked the German passenger ship "Alsterter". Some damage was done to the ship, which escaped in thick weather. When sighted next day by destroyers she scuttled herself.



A Catalina of No. 202 Squadron taking-off. Algeciras is on the left.

(11th November, 1942)

One of the Squadron's earliest decorations was won in a venerable Swordfish which at the time had its "wheels" on and was operating from North Front. On 20th July, 1941, a signal was received from a Blenheim in distress west of the Straits. Flying Officer F.E.G. Rashleigh was sent out in a Swordfish and sighted the wreck of a Blenheim about 20 miles south of Larache, in Spanish Morocco. While the pilot circled the wreck he saw several hundred Arabs in groups nearby. Three figures detached themselves and waved frantically to him and Rashleigh concluded that they were the Blenheim crew. He flew away, found a suitable landing ground out of sight of the Arabs, and put the Swordfish down safely. The Blenheim crew raced to the spot and before the Arabs realised what was happening they had scrambled aboard the Swordfish. The Arabs, however, did not stand and gape at this daring rescue attempt; they made a spirited attack upon the Swordfish with what appeared to be rifle fire and started to close in on it. Rashleigh got rid of them in a simple but effective manner by turning the tail of the Swordfish towards them and revving his engine. The resultant sandstorm caused some inconvenience to the Arabs and Rashleigh was able to take off successfully without further opposition. Later Flying Officer Rashleigh was awarded a D.F.C.

Plans to meet the increasing enemy threat to the Western Mediterranean and Gibraltar began to take shape. A Coastal Command Operational Squadron had arrived at North Front. Work at the new flying-boat station was making good progress. The large hangar was nearing completion in September, 1941, and as the living accommodation became ready the squadron and station personnel began to move in. Most of them, including aircrew, had been living out in hotels and flats in the town.

The hangar, a conspicuous silvery building on the edge of the new slipway, was occupied during the second week in September when the squadron abandoned No. 20 Shed. In later years a belief grew, and was passed on to newcomers as fact, that the hangar had been built and presented by the Americans as part of their memorial for the 1914 - 18 war. The Americans did build a war memorial at the top of the steps leading to Line Wall Road, near the new station, to commemorate their association with the Royal Navy in the Mediterranean. And at one time the U.S. Navy used as a hangar for their floatplanes the building which is now the Naval Trust Cinema, but they had nothing to do with the erection of the R.A.F. hangar.

Almost at once the thing happened to the new station which was the common experience of those who occupied new R.A.F. stations anywhere at home or abroad - it became too small. Operations at Gibraltar were expanding. No. 200 Group found that the Tower was not big enough for the increasing staff and decided to move into the new buildings. A number of Nissen huts had to be built to accommodate the Squadron Offices, stores and other equipment. How great a difficulty it must have been to find room for the huts can be appreciated by anyone who cares to walk round the present R.A.F. station, New Camp. The controllers of No. 200 Group occupied the new operations room. Crews could then be briefed on the spot, instead of having to take transport to the Tower, as transport for the R.A.F. in those days was scarce. Because of the distance, briefing at the Tower had to be done several hours before the aircraft were due to take-off.

An Air Commodore was appointed to Gibraltar, Air Commodore S.P. Simpson, M.C., and on 21st December, 1941, soon after his arrival, No. 200 Group was disbanded and all flying at Gibraltar came under the control of R.A.F. Gibraltar, with the A.O.C. directly responsible to Headquarters Coastal Command. An Area Combined Headquarters was formed with the Navy at the Tower, from the operations room of which orders were issued to North Front and the flying-boat station, the organisation being similar to that of a Group at home.



This Catalina has just rounded Europa Point on returning from
patrol. (11th November, 1942)

THE R.A.F. AT GIBRALTAR.PART II.II - North Front's Early Squadrons.

At the opening of 1942, then, the Royal Air Force was firmly established in Gibraltar as a growing operational concern, with a squadron of flying-boats and one of land aircraft, assisted by attachments from other R.A.F. and F.A.A. squadrons, under its control. Operations were carried out on a policy evolved to meet the rapid growth of the war over the head, as it were, of the discussions going on about the development of North Front. Malta was being raided viciously. Spain's attitude to the Axis was uncertain and might at any time break into an open alliance leading to an attack upon Gibraltar. A more obvious danger was created when the Germans began to take over from the Vichy French in North Africa. There was a distinct threat that fighting in the eastern and central Mediterranean would spread westwards.

It was also early in 1942 that the U-Boat attacks became more frequent and troublesome in the western Mediterranean, the Straits of Gibraltar and the western approaches. The enemy had been driven farther and farther away from British shores and was taking advantage of bases in France, and, it was suspected, probably in Spain as well, to operate in large numbers upon the great volume of shipping passing between the Mediterranean, Britain and the United States. No one could have any more doubt about the wisdom of pushing forward with the building of a modern runway at North Front; it seemed that Gibraltar might now pay a handsome dividend for the lives and effort that had been spent in retaining possession of it for 240 years. The responsibility of the R.A.F. at Gibraltar was a heavy one.

Photographic reconnaissance was one of the big problems at Gibraltar. There was so much that ought to be observed in North Africa, and in Spain, too, as new fortifications were springing up opposite Gibraltar and round the south-west coast, but no aircraft were available to do it efficiently with the necessary speed and lack of ostentation. Fulmars and Marylands of the F.A.A. did their best at the job but it was not until two P.R.U. Spitfires were sent from Britain in January, 1942, that the work could be undertaken in earnest and with profit. A ground staff including interpreters followed the Spitfires and very soon they began to build up interesting evidence of what was happening on both sides of the Mediterranean and the Straits. The Spitfire's value as a photographic aircraft was at that time very much a secret. It was particularly important, then, that the Spanish should not know that photographic reconnaissance was an urgent and daily part of the work at North Front. Accordingly the P.R.U. flight was never referred to as such but was given the mysterious letters R.T.F. which were generally believed to mean Reconnaissance Training Flight. This subterfuge was so successful, aided by the fact that the aircraft flew from North Front while the printing and interpreting was done at the new flying-boat station, that the majority of personnel at both stations were quite unaware of the presence of the invaluable P.R.U. in their midst; and every time a Spitfire took off to photograph Spain or North Africa it was recorded in the books of the German observer at La Linea as a fighter.



Hudson on depth-charge exercises over the Bay.

(6th January, 1943)

It was a double deception, too, because at that time Gibraltar had no fighter defence. It had, however, anti-aircraft gun batteries that were growing rapidly and, later in 1942, were described as the best A.A. defence in the world. These defences were tested for the first time on the early morning of 1st April, 1942, when several Italian aircraft attempted to raid North Front. The heavy A.A. fired 491 rounds and the Italians did not press home their attack. Most of the bombs fell in the Bay and on the eastern side of the Rock. One hit the south border of the airfield and others broke a water-main. The Gibraltar defences were surprised to find that they received assistance from the Spanish A.A. batteries but perhaps the surprise was greater among the Italians. Axis reports afterwards said that three aircraft had been lost.

The land aircraft squadron which came to Gibraltar as assistance for No. 202 Squadron and its attachments of Sunderlands and Swordfish floatplanes was No. 233 (Hudson) Squadron from Coastal Command. The Hudsons began to arrive late in 1941, the first modern, fast aircraft to use the "prepared strip". That was no joke for the pilots and doubtless was responsible for creating the bad reputation which Gibraltar had among aircrew for a long time to come. They had many accidents and their experience served to show, if any such evidence was then necessary, just how inadequate the new runway was for modern war aircraft; no one watched the growth of the runway westwards with keener anticipation than the pilots of No. 233 Squadron. The Hudson at that time was inclined to swing on take-off at the slightest provocation and the winds at North Front provided provocation that was far from slight. Operations were made additionally hazardous because there was no diversion base at which a pilot could land if he got into trouble once he was on patrol over the sea, and the 950 yard "strip" was scarcely the place to inspire confidence in a pilot returning with a damaged aircraft. It is recorded that the arrival of an American C.W. 20 passenger liner on 9th March, 1942, did much to improve the pilots' confidence in the runway. This aircraft was at that time the largest twin-engine monoplane in the world and the fact that it landed safely and without trouble at North Front was considered worthy of comment throughout Gibraltar.

In spite of these difficulties No. 233 Squadron worked hard and well. It received much support from its "junior" partners in operations, Nos. 807 (Fulmar), 812, 813 and 824 (Swordfish) (A) Squadrons, Fleet Air Arm. All of these were attachments to Gibraltar except No. 824 which had been formed specially for service on the Rock. In times of extra pressure the R.A.F. was able to call upon the Walrus belonging to H.M.S. Malaya for convoy escorts and small anti-U-Boat sweeps. The Swordfish were used to supply cover to escort vessels which were successfully dealing with the Focke-Wulf Kuriers, operating from French airfields against our shipping. They freed the Hudsons for distant operations more fitted to faster aircraft, and they were also entrusted, as has already been mentioned, with the defence of the Rock "in grave emergency". The Fulmars did reconnaissance and anti-U-Boat patrols and special meteorological flights.

In January, 1942, No. 233 Squadron carried out 85 sorties and flew 442 hours in anti-U-Boat sweeps and patrols, convoys and searches for their own and other missing aircraft. That was their busiest period in the first four months of the year. They made several promising attacks on U-Boats the best of which was on 23rd January when explosions were seen apparently coming from the submarine. No final result was observed as the Hudson had to leave for base at the end of its endurance. Towards the end of April, when possible moves of French warships in Oran and Casablanca were causing concern, the Hudsons were sent on special photographic reconnaissance sorties over those harbours. It was not a pleasant job but they did it well and found some relief in being able to report on a number of occasions that the French flak was "slightly inaccurate". When large convoys began to pass through the



A Hudson returning from patrol off the North (46 SQN)
African Coast. (6th January, 1943)

straits on their way to the Middle East and, later, to Italy, the Squadron flew many hours on escort. These convoys were among the largest sailed during the first years of the war and covered so much sea area that the Hudsons were only able to fly round them three times before having to set course for home on reaching the Prudent Limit of Endurance.

All this time the R.A.F. in Gibraltar was increasing in every direction. It was being prepared to take a leading part in several great events, the first of which was to assist in the relief of Malta. The little island had been heavily bombed throughout April and had been awarded the George Cross for its valour. There was every reason to believe, though, that it might not be able to endure much longer. On 1st. May, 1942, an important step was taken to increase the size and power of R.A.F. Gibraltar in preparation for the future when the two stations became separate units.

The new airfield ceased to be a Fleet Air Arm Establishment and became R.A.F. Station, North Front, under the command of Wing Commander J.W. Young. At the same time the flying-boat station became R.A.F. Station, New Camp, under the command of Group Captain G. A. Bolland and was concerned solely with the control of operational and transit flying-boats, with the Fleet Air Arm aircraft at Gibraltar attached to it. North Front took over control of all the R.A.F. land aircraft from an operations room of its own in half of a Nissen hut. Air Headquarters continued to work administratively from its premises in Cathedral Square and operationally from the A.C.H.Q. at the Tower. In a new tunnel inside the Rock, however, an Area Combined Headquarters was being built from which at a later date General Eisenhower was to plan and control the invasion of North Africa.



Passengers and crew abandoning the P. & O. liner Cathay when she began to sink after being torpedoed in the Mediterranean on 11th November 1942.

THE R.A.F. AT GIBRALTAR.P A R T II.

III - Aid for Malta.

Six days after this reorganisation of the R.A.F. in Gibraltar, the Governor, Lord Gort, enthusiastic supporter of all schemes to make the Rock a formidable air base, was sent to Malta to relieve General Sir William Dobbie as Governor of that battered island. He knew of the plans being made to help Malta and had confidence in the ability of North Front and New Camp to carry out their share. Lord Gort took over at once, and on 8th. May, 1942, General Dobbie passed through Gibraltar in a R.A.F. Sunderland, a sick man, on his way home. The new Governor arrived at Malta in the middle of the great three-day battle and he had time before it was renewed in the third week of the month to prepare for the relief convoys and the aircraft that were to be sent from Gibraltar. Although a certain amount of adjustment had to be made when Rommel opened his Libyan campaign on 26th. May, things in general went "according to plan".

At Gibraltar there was intense activity. The relief of Malta was the first part it was being prepared to take in the storming of the Axis "back-door" and New Camp and North Front aircraft were groomed for operations that would test them to the limit of their ability. No. 202 Squadron, now flying Catalinas and Sunderlands, had assistance from detachments from No. 10 R.A.A.F. (Sunderlands) Squadron, and Nos. 240, 209 and 413 Squadrons, all with Catalinas, for it was to be largely a flying-boat job. The main convoy, as everyone knows, left Gibraltar on 13th. June under Rear-Admiral Vian and fought its way through air and naval attacks south of Sardinia to reach Malta by 16th. June. The code title of the operation was "Harpoon". The supplies which the convoy brought helped Malta to carry on until the Germans finally gave up. Several other convoys were sent through from Gibraltar during the remainder of Malta's siege but this was the one to which Mr. Churchill is reputed to have issued the order, "the convoy must go through!" The task given to R.A.F. Gibraltar was to provide air escort and anti-U-Boat patrols west of the Straits, through the Straits themselves and as far into the Mediterranean as 4° East. In anticipation of Operation Harpoon intensive sweeps and searches were carried out early in June from Gibraltar to the east, west and north to locate and attack any U-Boat which might be in the vicinity. Several attacks were made during that period. The most successful occurred on 9th. June when Catalina J/240 had a twenty-minute fight in the Mediterranean with a surfaced U-Boat and sank it. Many members of the crew jumped overboard. The Catalina made an attempt to alight on the sea to pick up some of them but hit a swell, bounced badly and split the hull above the water-line, most of the crew being bruised or injured. The aircraft was able to return to base and alight safely.

Operation Harpoon itself consisted of escorting five merchant vessels and a tanker as near to Malta as the endurance of the aircraft would permit. It began on 12th. June, on the night of which the convoy passed through the Straits unharmed, and continued for seven days until the escorting Naval forces had returned to Gibraltar. New Camp and North Front aircraft flew 105 sorties before and during "Harpoon" with a total of 848 hours. The flying-boats distinguished themselves nobly and did not hesitate to take on enemy submarines which showed fight and



A Mediterranean convoy bound for the U.S. photographed from a Catalina of No. 202 Squadron on escort. (15th April, 1944)



This convoy from Britain to the Mediterranean was one of those whose arrival at Gibraltar in the summer of 1944 was so popular - they contained the mail, as Air Mail had been stopped until after "D" day. (1st July, 1944)

aircraft which attacked them in the belief that they would be easy victims. There were seven U-Boat sightings resulting in five attacks. One U-Boat was sunk, that attacked by J/240, and two were seriously damaged when they were straddled by depth-charges while on the surface. Thirty-eight enemy aircraft were sighted and there were three combats, two with JU. 88's, on both of which hits were claimed. A Sunderland was damaged in one of the combats.

The third combat was between a Catalina and four C.R. 42's and is worthy of detailed mention. The aircraft, B/240, was acting as escort to the cruiser Liverpool, which had been damaged near Malta and was returning to Gibraltar in tow on 14th. June, when the attack was made. For 10 minutes the Catalina fought the enemy and when they flew off, having had enough, the flying-boat was holed below the waterline and the wireless operator had been wounded. The holes were plugged and the Catalina continued with the escort for a further two hours. Shortly after leaving the cruiser a dinghy with four men was sighted. In spite of the damage to the hull the Catalina captain alighted long enough to pick the men up and bring them back to Gibraltar. They were the survivors of a Cant. Z 1007 which had been sent out to locate and shadow one of the convoy forces. Interrogation provided useful information about the enemy's methods and intentions.

The new Governor of Gibraltar was Lieutenant General Sir F.N. Mason-Macfarlane, K.C.B., D.S.O., and he arrived on the Rock in time to hear a full account of the success of this first major operation from the new R.A.F. stations. General Mason-Macfarlane, who quickly became known to Gibraltar as "Mason-Mack", took a great interest in North Front and "sampled" the runway in practical fashion by making a flight in one of No. 233 Squadron's Hudsons. He had arrived by flying-boat and said he wished to see for himself the methods of handling both types of aircraft at Gibraltar. North Front by then was working furiously in preparation for its next activity in the plan to help Malta, still sorely pressed and crying out for fighters. There was no way of flying off fighters to the Mediterranean and without Gibraltar the call could hardly have been answered, for the only way to get them there was to crate them from Britain by sea, assemble them at North Front and fly them to Malta.

As the beginning of this scheme there arrived at Gibraltar late in July a group of N.C.O's and airmen who were called the Special Erection Party. In August convoys began to steam into Gibraltar laden with crates containing Spitfires and Hurricanes. They were unloaded and seized by the Special Erection Party who started to assemble them at once. The work began in New Camp hangar under 136 airmen but test flights and dispersal were impossible. The required number of aircraft, too, rose far beyond original expectations and the erection party was increased by further arrivals from Britain. On 1st September the entire party moved to an adequate but bare site at North Front. Workshops and offices were improvised from empty aircraft cases and the party was ready for work when the next shipment of Spitfires and Hurricanes arrived on 15th September. This consisted of 70 Spitfires, 22 Hurricanes and five Hurricane bombers. Fifteen special tractors and six cranes also arrived to help speed up the handling. In 11 days all the aircraft had been assembled, test flown and dispersed to vacant areas throughout the station. The possibility of damage from an enemy air raid was enormous. Already, on 29th June, 1942, one Hudson had been destroyed, one B.O.A.C. Whitley damaged, six personnel seriously injured and several crates made in the dispersal area in a raid by Italian aircraft. The question of fighter protection for the Rock was re-opened. The answer was obvious. Eighteen of the newly-assembled Spitfires were withdrawn from dispersal and formed into a fighter squadron.

On 29th September the next shipment of aircraft arrived. It consisted of 20 Spitfires. Many of them had been damaged during the voy-



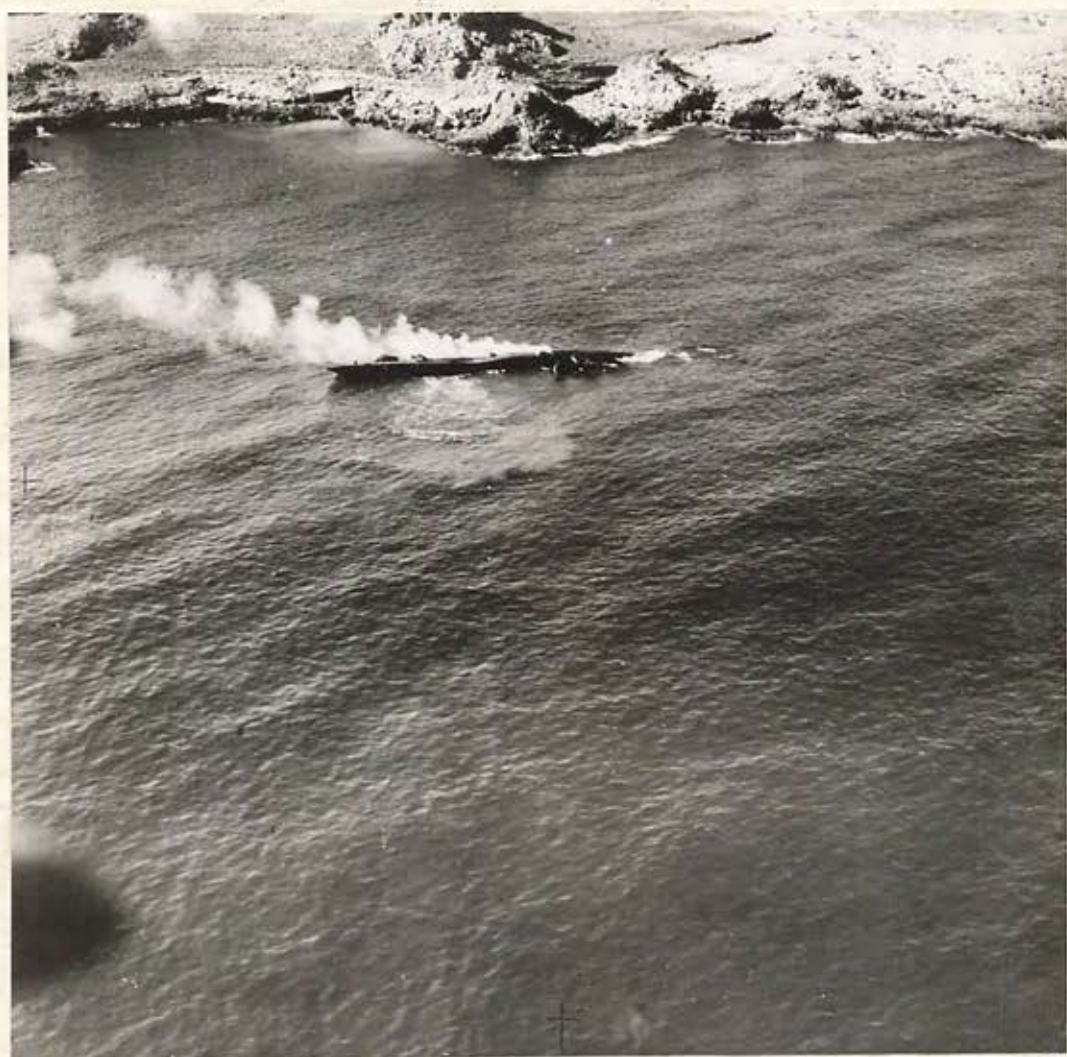
There is a U-boat in the midst of these depth-charge explosions.
It was attacked in the Mediterranean by a Sunderland on 29th May
1942 and badly damaged in a fight which lasted several hours.

age and assembly promised to be a long job. The Somerset Light Infantry loaned soldiers to help in the non-technical work and the aircraft were ready by 11th October. Demands upon the assembled aircraft increased. Thirty were ordered to be prepared for aircraft carrier use at Malta and twelve spitfires had to be fitted with overload tanks for an immediate direct flight to Malta. The aircraft required for the carriers had to have certain modifications which did not exist in Gibraltar. These were flown from Britain with two specialist sergeants in charge and work was begun on 24th October. The aircraft had to be on board the carrier on the 28th. On that date all were ready but one which had shown an unsuspected defect. It was subsequently flown direct to Malta with the twelve others.

During this period everything at North Front was happening at once. Accommodation had to be provided for the increasing staffs and some of the empty cases which had held the fighters were pressed into service even as living quarters for the officers. The half-Nissen hut proved inadequate as an operations room and a move had to be made to the stand of the racecourse - the "half-crown" stand, as the Operational Records Book is careful to point out. All sorts of additional departments began to arrive on the station including a detachment of ground personnel and administration from the U.S.A.A.F. to deal with the increasing number of American aircraft passing through Gibraltar.

This was welcome because the air traffic problem was becoming acute, to say nothing about that concerned with ~~shepherding~~ thousands of Spaniards across the runway without danger to themselves or the aircraft, and up to the beginning of August nothing had been done to establish Flying Control on the station. On 20th August a senior flying control officer arrived at North Front but the first flying control watch was not opened until the evening of 15th September. Up to that time control was exercised by duty pilots with the assistance of an airfield control pilot appointed for the occasion by the squadron or the R.N.A.S. Flying Control had its share of trouble, not the least of which was the very elementary flare path that went unserviceable fifty per cent of the time. One of the reasons was that aircraft, and traffic along the Spanish road, had to cross the leads lying exposed on the surface! Through some limitation of the electricity supply it often happened that when the traffic lights were switched on at the Spanish road the flare path lights went out. Telephones frequently went out of order at important moments and on one occasion it was recorded that the crash tender could not travel at more than 15 miles an hour. In addition, the flying control officers found that their control tower, the judge's box, gave an excellent view of the area which had once contained the finishing posts but a very restricted one of the runway. Miniature sandstorms created by the fighters which were being run up on the edge of the runway after assembly, for there was no where else to put them, provided yet another problem of control. Flooding was just one more, for when the winter rains fell on the unfinished surface of the runway it was necessary to call out upwards of 100 men to sweep and pump the runway clear of "casual water" before aircraft could land.

The greatest problem of all was the absence of diversion bases, which existed until after the North African landings in November, 1942. Pilots were faced with the alternative of ditching or attempting to reach the airfield. There was no third choice. This caused much concern one day in October, 1942, when five Hudsons of No. 233 Squadron returned from an anti-U-Boat patrol only to find Gibraltar unexpectedly fog-bound. The Meteorological Officer was of the opinion that the fog would clear within the endurance of the aircraft and orders were therefore given to the aircraft to remain in the circuit until a favourable opportunity presented itself for an attempted landing. At the same



A successful attack by Gibraltar aircraft in September, 1943,
wrecked this U-Boat and drove it ashore on the north coast
of Spanish Morocco. (12th September, 1943)

time the Navy were asked to have launches standing by at intervals around the Rock in case any of the aircraft were forced to ditch. In the event, one aircraft in attempting to land struck the sea and had to ditch but the crew were very quickly picked up by a launch. The fog did eventually clear and the four remaining aircraft were landed safely after being in the circuit for three hours.



One of the destroyers escorting the Bismarck on 29th December, 1943, was sighted by a Catalina of No. 202 Squadron. In spite of accurate fire which rocked and damaged the aircraft the destroyer was kept in sight for seven hours until a Liberator arrived to take over.

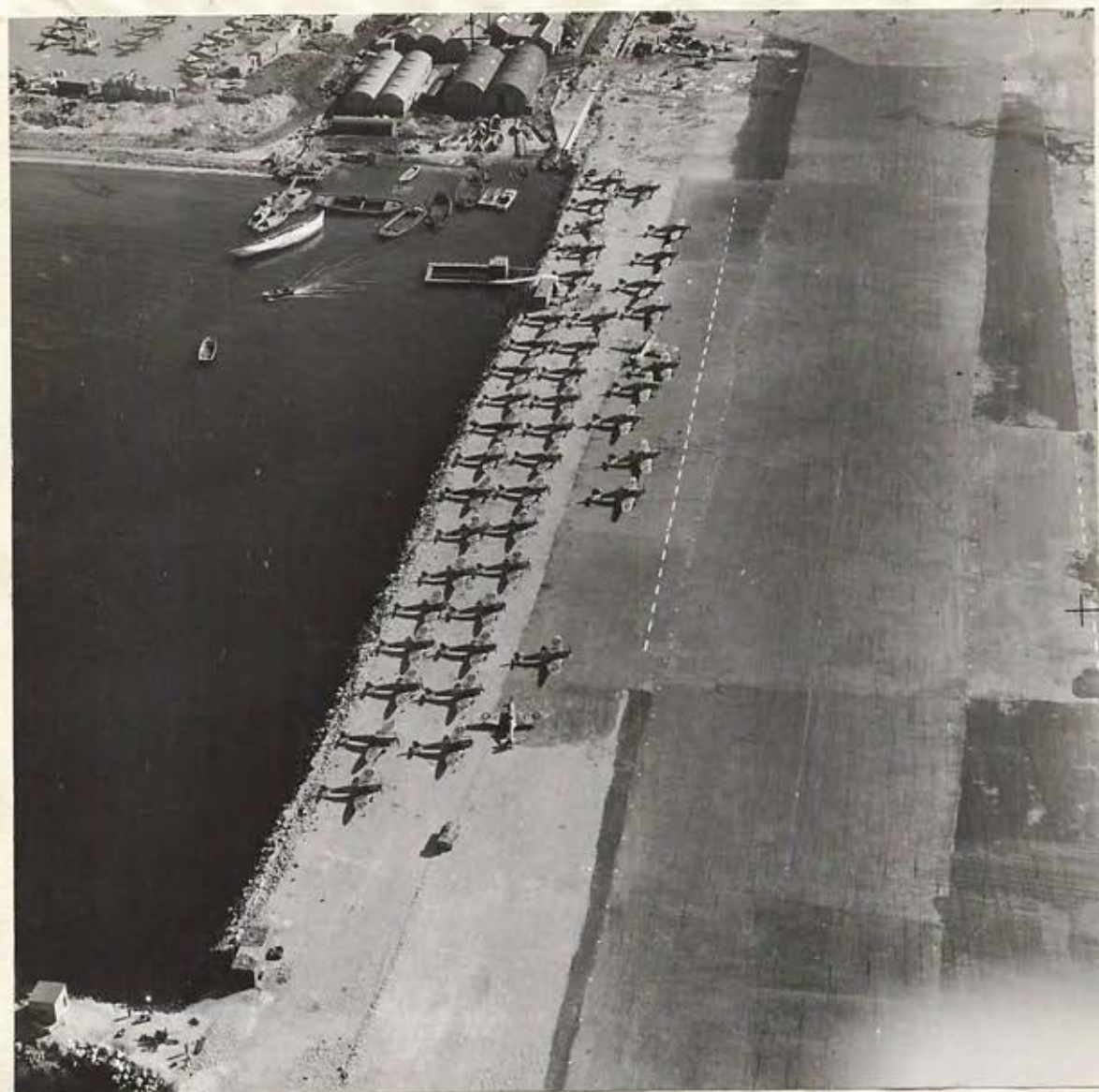
THE R.A.F AT GIBRALTAR.PART II.

IV - Operation Torch.

In October, 1942, Gibraltar began to approach the climax of its work. On the 20th of the month the final decision was made on the details of the now-famous Operation Torch. This was to provide air cover for the convoys carrying the North African expeditionary force - seven convoys and a naval force. The first convoy sailed from Britain on 19th October and others on the 22nd and 23rd.

Work at North Front was going ahead at breakneck speed in order that everything should be ready in time. It was known that the enemy was aware that action of some sort was contemplated from Gibraltar - he could hardly help but know, with his Spanish friends watching events from the other side of the fence. Air raids on a large scale were anticipated and great haste was made in completing the new Area Combined Headquarters so that Operation Torch could be controlled from there instead of from the Tower, a conspicuous, exposed building on the quay-side. Operations were still in the Tower, however, when the first enemy reconnaissance aircraft approached Gibraltar at noon on 11th October. Two Spitfires from the new squadron were "scrambled" and one of them damaged a Ju. 88 in combat east of the Rock. The other Spitfire was hit by another enemy aircraft and was lost.

As the new A.C.H.Q. was not ready it was considered prudent to retire temporarily to the Ragged Staff tunnel. In a few weeks, however, the war room and other premises in the new tunnel were completed, the Navy and R.A.F. moved in and everything was got ready for the arrival of General Eisenhower and his staffs of the Combined Services. As it turned out, the expected air raids were not serious. During one on 20th October, apparently by Italians, an incendiary bomb fell in the Spitfire erection park at North Front and burnt out, and a stick of anti-personnel bombs fell in La Linea and caused some casualties and damage and a vast amount of panic. During a raid the following night a greater number of bombs fell in Spain and none at all on Gibraltar. Other raids were even less troublesome to Gibraltar; the enemy was not adept at long-range work and Gibraltar's guns were many and fierce. The Luftwaffe did not come to Gibraltar, although on one day there was much apprehension when it was reported that 50-plus aircraft were approaching Gibraltar from the east. They turned back some 40 miles from the Rock, for a reason which has not become known, and never returned. This lack of attack upon Gibraltar caused much surprise - and relief - to the garrison. At one time it was feared that a large-scale assault might be made through Spain; and even the most optimistic commanders had to admit that no matter how excellent their defence of the Rock might be it would hardly enable North Front to operate successfully as an airfield. It is now known that Goering in 1941 had plans for a massive offensive in the Mediterranean and that they included an advance upon Gibraltar through Spain and an attack upon the Rock with many 80-cm. guns specially constructed for the purpose. Only a last minute decision by Hitler stopped this plan. The purpose of this narrative is not to theorise but to deal in fact; but it may be remarked that if such an assault had taken place the results would have been, to put it mildly, extremely serious for the Allied plans for the North



Fighters parked on the edge of the runway extension.

(14th February, 1943)

African campaign.

At North Front a number of problems were being faced and solved swiftly. One was concerned with accommodation, for in spite of the number of empty fighter cases available there was still not enough room for all the aircrew and others who kept arriving at the station in a steady stream. An arrangement was made with Fortress Headquarters to take over Engineer House, in the town of Gibraltar, an 18th century building that had once housed the chief engineer of the garrison. Later this became the administrative headquarters of the R.A.F. A subsidiary problem arose concerning the transport of evacuees from Malta which had been going on since August but which became heavier in October. It had been carried out by aircraft of 1425 Flight, mostly Liberators, which had been operating a shuttle service between Britain and Malta via Gibraltar. During October it was decided to convert the flight into No. 511 Squadron and make them responsible for the Gibraltar-Malta service. This gave added maintenance trouble to North Front.

To make matters worse, the weather began to deteriorate towards the end of October. On the 28th a Hudson of No. 233 Squadron came back from patrol in a gale. On touching down on the eastern end of the runway the aircraft was blown into the air again. Keeping the nose down the pilot managed to touch the runway again only to be thrown up once more by the wind. He finally touched down and remained on the runway but had to apply full brake as he was near the edge. The undercarriage collapsed and the aircraft was badly damaged but there were no casualties. A worse accident occurred from a similar cause on 31st October when a Liberator of No. 511 Squadron overshot the runway with 32 evacuees from Malta on board and crashed into the sea. The crew escaped with minor injuries but fourteen of the passengers were killed either by impact or drowning. Great bravery was shown by many of the North Front personnel who plunged into the sea and helped to rescue the passengers and crew.

The orders about Operation Torch put a further strain upon the Special Erection Party. They had their heads more or less "above water" in the task of supplying the requirements of Malta when a further and unexpected supply of fighters arrived on 28th October and were ordered to be assembled, tested and held for "an unspecified purpose" - Operation Torch, of course, being known only to a select few. An additional 86 men were promised from the United Kingdom to assist in the work but there was some misunderstanding and they were sent elsewhere and never arrived at Gibraltar. The original party was short of several of its key personnel, who had gone to sea in the carrier bound for Malta. The remainder of the party, with assistance from 150 soldiers, set to work. Those who had been to sea returned on 31st October and all of them worked from 7 a.m. until 10 p.m. in all weathers. Scarcely pausing for meals, often soaked to the skin, they completed 108 Spitfires and 13 Hurricanes by 10 p.m. on 6th November. They were then eight short of the required number of Spitfires. The shipment had consisted of 116 Spitfires and 13 Hurricanes to be made into eight squadrons of 12 Spitfires each (U.S.A.), three squadrons of 18 each (R.A.F.), two squadrons of 18 Hurricane fighters and one squadron of 18 Hurricane bombers. D-Day for Operation Torch was fast approaching. The newly-assembled aircraft were test flown, cannon tested and dispersed throughout the station. The erection work then ceased, as orders had been received to have all aircraft serviceable for 7th November. The servicing personnel worked on the erected aircraft throughout the night, assisted by searchlights, and everything was ready at 4 a.m. on 8th November - which was D-Day. While the operation was in progress a further shipment of aircraft arrived for assembly into four R.A.F. squadrons and for replacements. These were got ready immediately. There is, unfortunately, no detailed record available at Gibraltar of the difficulties, struggles and achievements



Ships from convoys escorted by Gibraltar aircraft discharging
troops and equipment in landing craft off Algiers during
Operation Torch. (8th November, 1942)

that went into the assembly of these hundreds of aircraft in so short a time.

The extension of the runway had now crossed the Spanish road and was well into the Bay between Western Beach and Stone Jetty -- a unique achievement in airfield engineering which added to the safety and efficiency of North Front with every completed yard. Few persons on the Station knew the reason for the sudden flood of aircraft and the feverish anxiety in high quarters that drove the construction units in their day and night work of removing the racecourse and substituting a modern airfield. As the special erection party completed its job the Station became a huge parking place for aircraft. Even the runway was used. The safety margin given by its unusual width of 150 yards had to be sacrificed and aircraft were parked upon it, two lines of Spitfires on the North side and one on the South, leaving just sufficient width for landing and take-off. The road leading into the Station from the foot of the Rock, at the "Scree", was full of fighters, and they were parked on the north side of the Station almost up to the fence dividing the British and Spanish share of the "neutral ground". Although absolute secrecy was observed about the reason for such intense activity everyone knew that something was about to happen. The binoculars of the German observers in La Linea were levelled on North Front night and day, and personnel at the station derived much fun from the presence of those "duty pilots", as they called them. But to those responsible for security the problem of keeping secret the real intention behind the collection of aircraft was an acute worry. They succeeded and the enemy was deceived. Operation Torch began as an unpleasant surprise.

On 31st October all North Front was declared a protected area, with extra guards provided by the Army. Every civilian who entered was examined and had to produce a pass. At night the entire station was lit by searchlights and special guards kept watch behind the beams ready to detect and investigate any unusual movement; it was feared that the Germans in La Linea might attempt to smuggle spies and saboteurs into North Front. In the early morning of 8th November all the preparatory work had been completed. The aircraft crowded North Front, standing wing tip to wing tip. For a brief period the sand and dust that had swept the Station from end to end during engine tests had subsided. The feverish work on the runway had slackened temporarily: the runway was then 1350 yards long. There was no trace of the racecourse or of Victoria Gardens except a few lonely eucalyptus trees in a corner. All that remained of Gibraltar's playground were a few out-buildings looking "horsey" and out-of-place and the judges' box in which the flying-control officers were preparing to move that great quantity of aircraft. There were the Hudsons of Nos. 233, 500 and 608 Squadrons, Mosquitoes of 540 P.R.U. Squadron, Spitfires of No. 4 P.R.U. Squadron and a special meteorological flight of two Hudsons, all ready to take part in the cover to the convoys and the naval force, in addition to the great quantities of freshly assembled aircraft that had another part to play in Operation Torch. The total number of aircraft was in the region of 650. North Front was a Royal Air Force Operational Station in the fullest sense of the word. The solemn discussions of a few years ago concerned with preserving the racecourse and the other amenities of Victoria Gardens would have seemed insignificant and rather laughable if anyone had had time to recall them.

At 0618 hours on 8th November, 1942, a telephone call was received from the newly-completed Area Combined Headquarters in the middle of the Rock, where General Eisenhower sat with his plans, ordering the barriers on the Spanish Road to be closed until further notice. Aircraft moved off for the normal operational sorties but the barriers did not open at the end of each take-off, as was customary, and the Spanish people coming to work in Gibraltar had to remain on their own side of the road. The fighters began to take off at 0800. First to move were 17 Hurricanes of No. 43 Squadron. They were followed at 1020 by a similar number of



Landing at Sidi Ferruch.

(8th November, 1943)

Spitfires from No. 81 Squadron. Other fighters left at intervals until 88 were airborne for a destination "East of Gibraltar". During the day there were two Spitfire "scrambles" for unidentified aircraft. Aircraft based at North Front carried out 30 operational sorties in support of Torch and flew 320 hours. These aircraft operated over the three landing areas of Torch - Algiers, Oran and Casablanca. The Fleet Air Arm contributed 13 sorties. During the day flying control recorded 213 movements of aircraft, which must compare well with the figures at any Coastal Command station in those days.

Rain fell during the night of 8th November with the relentless force characteristic of the western Mediterranean. The runway became flooded and unfit for use. It had to be made fit at the earliest possible moment, as aircraft to be used in the landings on North Africa were due to arrive. Everyone at North Front with every available brush and pump, was mobilised to sweep and pump the water off the runway. At 0800 everything was again ready. On that day 57 fighters took off for the east and 19 operational sorties were made. The heavy aircraft did not arrive until 10th November. Thirty-six C.47 troop carriers were the first and they were followed by Fortresses, Beaufighters and Lightnings. All these aircraft went on again during the day in addition to 35 more of the Gibraltar-assembled fighters.

Operation Torch, as everyone knows, proceeded smoothly. A little of the pressure on North Front was released on 12th November when Gibraltar aircraft were able to begin operating from Oran. But the Gibraltar aircraft movements continued to be impressive. There were 4388 movements during November, 1477 of which were operational, which meant some 738 operational sorties including meteorological flights. It is interesting to note that while 630 aircraft landed at North Front the number despatched was 1049. It can be assumed that the difference of 419 was approximately the number assembled by the hard-working Special Erection Party. Operational hours during the month totalled 4003. The peak period was between the 8th and 14th when there were 1274 movements - one every 7 minutes 54 seconds. That included a bad-weather day on which there were only 39 movements. There were several notable achievements in take-off. For example, 37 C.47's took off at night in 93 minutes, 27 Lightnings landed in 17 minutes, 6 Fortresses and 6 Lightnings as escort took off in six minutes, 16 Spitfires in four minutes and 11 C.47's and 9 Spitfires in 12 minutes. The Special Erection Party assembled 485 fighter aircraft, and 466 were despatched to North Africa. These figures must make aviation history.

Operationally, North Front aircraft made 63 attacks on U-boats. Four were classed as definitely destroyed, four almost certainly destroyed and 25 damaged. That, alone, was an ample justification for the conversion of North Front into a modern operational station. New Camp also had its share of Operation Torch. During the first fortnight of November, 1942, the two squadrons then on the station, Nos. 202 and 210, flew a total of 1311 hours which was more than double the normal average excluding Operation Harpoon.

All these achievements were in spite of the rainfall which was the heaviest during any November for 25 years. During November, 1942, it was 12.48 inches, compared with 2.61 for November, 1941, 2.52 for November, 1940, and an average of 6.4 for the previous 25 years. Yet there was not a single day in the month on which there was no flying.



H.M.S. Porcupine, torpedoed off Oran early in 1943, was towed to Gibraltar where the damage amidships was cut away. The two remaining portions were towed home separately, one as H.M.S. "Pork" and the other as H.M.S. "Pine", the missing "U" representing the amidships portion. This photograph of H.M.S. "Pork" was taken from a Hudson of No. 48 Squadron. (22nd May, 1943)

THE R.A.F. AT GIBRALTAR.P A R T II.V - Other Operations.

When Operation Torch was at an end and the pressure on North Front had been relieved by the co-operation of U.S. Navy aircraft and detachments of the Gibraltar squadrons flying from French Morocco the station settled down to a busy but less colourful existence. By December, 1942, the "resident" squadron, No. 233, had been reinforced by Nos. 608 and 48 (Hudson) Squadrons and No. 179 (Leigh Light Wellington) Squadron. These arrivals completely swamped the accommodation at North Front and Engineer House and necessitated building 74 extra Nissen huts, with the "usual offices", on the Spanish side of the station. A census taken on 23rd December, 1942, showed that there were 210 aircraft on the airfield of which 77 were operational and stationed at North Front. The three squadrons, with the assistance of the flying-boats at New Camp, were kept fully occupied and it was necessary on many occasions to call upon the Fleet Air Arm who augmented their Fulmars and Swordfish with Walrus aircraft. Statistics collected by No. 48 Squadron provide an example of the sort of work that was being done at Gibraltar. This squadron became fully operational in January, 1943, during which they carried out 245 sorties with a total of 1626 flying hours, a squadron record. They bettered that in February by flying 1777 hours, a record for Coastal Command. The squadron shared with the other Hudsons in the attachment at Agadir, on the north-west African coast, where they had a number of attacks upon U-Boats.

Early in 1943 operational sorties averaged 350 a month, including P.R.U., meteorological flights and the sorties made by fighters of No. 1404 Flight. The fighter flight had been established at North Front for the defence of the harbour and the Rock, in place of the Swordfish, who were released from their responsibility in that direction should a "grave emergency" arise. Further operational aircraft came to North Front in June to help deal with the Focke-Wulf Kuriers which had shown a sudden burst of activity on the convoy route between Cape St. Vincent and Lisbon. It was hardly the job for Hudsons, so the new aircraft were Beaufighters Mark X, a detachment from No. 248 Squadron. The pilots of the Hudsons were so moved at this assistance being necessary that they requested permission to use several Beaufighter II aircraft belonging to the Fleet Air Arm which had been left in a corner of North Front because they had gone unserviceable and the crews had been sent elsewhere. Several senior pilots of No. 233 and No. 48 Squadrons were allowed to train in these aircraft and after a suitable period they took them on operations against the Kuriers. These trips were so popular that volunteers from among the other pilots besieged the squadron commanders, who were compelled to begin a waiting list. The Beaufighters had little opportunity to pit themselves against the Kuriers, which were rarely seen, but one pilot who came back with a damaged aircraft claimed that he had been in combat with two of them and had seriously damaged both.

The Agadir detachments returned to North Front in August after an historic farewell dinner at which senior French officers were honoured guests. The R.A.F. Ensign was lowered on 19th August and within twenty



This U-boat while fully surfaced was attacked on 8th July 1943 by depth-charges and gunfire from a Catalina of No. 202 Squadron. It submerged and left bubbles and oil in such quantity that it was assessed as having been destroyed.

minutes the last aircraft had taken off for Gibraltar. Towards the end of 1943 operations at Gibraltar began to dwindle slowly and steadily. The war was moving farther away every day, U-Boats in the western Mediterranean had had enough and were retreating to the south of France, those west of the Straits had also given in temporarily, and the enemy aircraft menace to convoys had disappeared beyond the Gibraltar area. The flying-boats detached from other squadrons were returned to their home stations and No. 202 Squadron was left in sole possession of New Camp. Although it was averaging 500 operational hours each month the squadron had few anti-U-Boat patrols to do and was adding to its offensive record of the first war years an equally impressive one for accuracy and efficiency in long-range convoy and air-sea rescue work. By December, 1943, the Squadron's monthly score of U-boat sightings had dwindled to five, with none attacked. The squadrons at North Front remained there for the time being but certain adjustments to organisation were made. These included the disbanding of the meteorological flight and its reappearance as No. 520 Squadron, which, as things turned out, was destined to be the last squadron left at Gibraltar after the war.

There is no story to tell, however, of reduction in activity among the transit aircraft traffic; on the contrary. In March, 1943, when General Giraud made his famous broadcast from Algiers and the enemy was steadily retreating eastwards, the 1800 yard runway was nearing completion and aircraft movement figures had reached the exceptional total of 4292 a month. In May it rose to 5320. The runway was extended to its present length of 1800 yards towards the end of July, in time to meet the climax of transport traffic which in August rose to 6386 movements. North Front was beginning to take on a new character, one not concerned with operations; it was becoming the Clapham Junction of Mediterranean air transport. The need for personnel and materials in the liberated areas made greater demand upon North Front for transport facilities. The route to and from Britain, necessarily carried far west of the French coast, made it essential for aircraft to land at Gibraltar to refuel. The routes to the east and south being changed almost as soon as they were devised, because of the speed at which the war was moving, meant that many passengers had to alight at North Front and wait for further transport. Dozens of famous people, their identity hidden in the anonymous three letters V.I.P., passed through the Staging Post buildings which at that time were scarcely any larger than those on a wayside railway station at home. How to find out those names became one of the problems of the Germans in La Linea.

There was no intention of allowing the operational organisation to grow less or to cease preparations to make North Front at least as efficient as any home station in spite of its disadvantages. During 1943 work had begun on a new operations room and a new flying-control tower. The operations room was occupied in December, 1943, but the control tower was not completed until late in January, 1944. It was a tall, brick building on the edge of the Spanish Road and the common remark was that it looked exactly like a railway junction signal box - which it does. With the tower there came a new system of stop-and-go traffic lights for the Spanish road and a more efficient flare path.

Early in 1944 the U-Boats began to reappear in the Gibraltar area and it was believed that they would attempt to run the gauntlet of the Straits into the Mediterranean, probably in anticipation of allied landings in the South of France. Gibraltar was ready to meet the situation and in co-operation with surface craft of the Royal Navy and aircraft of the United States from Port Lyautey gave an intensive coverage which resulted in several attacks and the complete failure of the U-Boats' attempt. After a few weeks the U-Boats withdrew.

Those in high places who knew what was being planned were aware that the next major operation of the allies would be what the newspapers called the Second Front. Accordingly, when the U-Boats withdrew out of



A hangar in the course of erection early in 1944 is lit up by the searchlights which swept North Front every night as a guard against sabotage and smugglers.



This is the damage done to Gibraltar by the Italian air raid on 5th June, 1944.

range of Gibraltar the opportunity was taken to send experienced squadrons home where they were required in preparation for the allied landings in France. Nos. 48, 233 [redacted] went home in February. There was no guarantee that a few U-Boats might not make a further attempt to get into the Mediterranean, so assistance was obtained for No. 179 Squadron, which remained at North Front, by posting No. 52 (Baltimore) Squadron from Borizzo. Towards the middle of April two or three U-Boats were detected outside the Straits. The intense patrols were resumed by aircraft and ships and it soon became evident that the submarines had definitely withdrawn for the time being. No. 52 Squadron flew their aircraft to North Africa, handed them over and left for the United Kingdom by sea. They were succeeded by No. 17 (Ventura) S.A.A.F. Squadron who remained for only four days then were ordered to Bone. On 13th April a detachment of No. 500 (Ventura) Squadron came over from La Senia and began daylight operations on the 16th. On 25th April the last of the "original" squadrons at North Front, No. 179, went home, and left the station without a complete anti-U-Boat squadron. The U.S. Navy sent detachments of No. 114 (searchlight Liberator) and No. 112 (daylight Liberator) squadrons from Port Lyautey to assist the No. 500 Squadron detachment.

The April opinion that all U-Boats had been withdrawn to the North had to be revised early in May when a few U-Boats began to reappear outside the Straits, and the three detachments became very busy. One of two U-Boats attempting the passage of the Straits was sunk but North Front aircraft did not share in the attack. That, however, was "positively the final appearance" of the U-Boats for many months. In June, for the first time in a year and a half, a month went past without a contact, sighting or attack. It was decided to reduce operations in view of the situation and to hold aircraft in readiness to search definite areas of probability rather than fly daily routine patrols. The detachment of No. 114 Squadron left Gibraltar during June and No. 112 detachment followed early in July. The long-range night meteorological flight called "Nocturnal" was temporarily transferred to No. 202 Squadron owing to replacements in No. 520 Squadron. Aircraft movements fell to 2353, the lowest monthly figure since flying control was established at North Front. As much as 75% of the total was accounted for by transit aircraft. Operations at North Front were virtually at an end. No. 500 Squadron's Venturas flew fewer and fewer hours and finally left North Front on 15th July after having flown 35 operational hours since 1st July. They were succeeded by No. 22 (Ventura) S.A.A.F. Squadron.

On 5th June the last air raid of the war was made on Gibraltar. Enemy reports stated that in spite of a smoke screen raised by ships in the harbour a successful attack was made by Fascist Italian torpedo-bombers and that four merchant ships totalling 30,000 tons were badly hit and sank while others were damaged. The truth of the story is that the operations staff at New Camp, looking out of the windows when the enemy aircraft were reported to be over Gibraltar, saw no sign of smoke, flames or sinkings and heard only one explosion which turned out to be from a torpedo which hit the detached mole. No ships were hit and there was no smoke screen. The facts are that twelve S.M. 79's set out for Gibraltar from the south of France; three probably flew over the Bay and one of these dropped the torpedo which hit the mole. Several were lost on the return trip.

Excitement at Gibraltar declined after this event. The fighter flight, which had been reorganised and renamed Gibraltar Defence Flight, remained in existence until late in 1944 when the liberation of France made its presence unnecessary. No. 202 Squadron spent most of its time on fruitless long-range anti-submarine patrols. On several occasions it was of value to Naval Contraband Control by searching for and intercepting neutral ships whose cargoes or passengers were suspect and were required at Gibraltar for interrogation. On one or two occasions the ships attempted to dodge the Catalinas during darkness, or to ignore



In the summer of 1944 the U.S. Navy began to operate Blimps on the night A/U patrol of the Straits. This one was photographed off the French Moroccan Coast. (26th June, 1944)



Later, it was decided that Gibraltar would be a handy diversion base for the Blimps. A mobile mast was erected at North Front and on 20th July, 1944, an experimental trip was made. (21st July, 1944)

their orders to shape a course for Gibraltar, but none of them succeeded and all were either brought into Gibraltar or were handed over to a surface vessel escort.

The period was marked by an exceptionally good air sea rescue operation by four Catalinas of No. 202 Squadron. It was officially described as "one of the finest ever carried out". The search began on 5th June for a dinghy reported to be in a position 350 miles west of Finisterre and 750 from Gibraltar. Aircraft of the squadron found it, kept in touch for two days, and finally brought an American destroyer to the spot and waited until the occupants, the crew of a 19 Group Halifax, had been picked up. Without Gibraltar's intervention it is unlikely that this crew would have been rescued as the position being approximately 800 miles from the nearest bases in the United Kingdom, Halifaxes, of which 19 Group despatched two, did not have endurance to remain in the area for a sufficient length of time to home surface vessels. Furthermore, to have maintained continuous air cover from the United Kingdom would have necessitated using more aircraft than could have been spared from the urgent operational requirements of the "D"-day operations.



The Dakotas landing.

(19th July, 1944)



These Spanish workers on their way to Gibraltar have been held up at the barrier to allow Dakotas to take-off. Contrary to the accepted belief that the Spaniard is not energetic most of them are running to make up for lost time. (19th July, 1944)

THE R.A.F. AT GIBRALTAR.PART II.

VI - The Last Phases.

The station had a new burst of activity, associated with the plans for allied landings in the south of France, in July, 1944. Great numbers of parachute and other troop-carrying aircraft passed through North Front and put a severe strain upon the organisation for two days. In that time 196 aircraft landed, refuelled and took off again. Their presence was of great interest to the enemy observers in Spain but security triumphed once more and the belief was spread that these aircraft were bound for the Far East via the east coast of Africa. It was a feasible story as the aircraft were all Dakotas of the U.S.A.A.F. The first batch of 98 arrived on the morning of 17th July and took off again on the night of 18th/19th while a second batch of 98 arrived a few hours later and took off the following night. The aircraft came in, quite literally, at only a few yards interval. A "batman" stationed at the end of the runway, dwarfed by the size of the aircraft but making his presence conspicuous by waving two large yellow flags, directed them to their parking places with all the speed and efficiency of a policeman at the Twickenham car park on the day of an International. (See opposite page).

Ninety-four of the first arrivals, plus a York and a B.17, landed in 79 minutes, a record of which North Front is proud. Ninety-two of the second batch were got down in 105 minutes but the wind was tricky on that day. The only mishap was a burst tyre which occurred soon after one of the aircraft had touched-down. A tractor dragged it off the runway in a few minutes. In the night take-offs 94 Dakotas were airborne in 104 minutes, 64 in 56 minutes and 31 in 35 minutes. The gap was caused when the 65th aircraft swung on take-off and made a spectacular crash into the flying-control tower. The port wing struck the ambulance and fire-tender and wrecked them, although the crews managed to jump clear. Part of the crashed aircraft caught fire and the tower was enveloped in flames. Assistance was obtained from the Gibraltar Fire service but it was 35 minutes before the fire was extinguished. Flying-control personnel left the tower in some haste and with the exception of a visitor who damaged an ankle in leaping from the outside platform suffered no injuries. Three of the crew of the aircraft were thrown clear in the crash but the remaining five were killed. The structure of the tower sustained surprisingly little damage and although delay was caused by damaged telephone communications the remainder of the aircraft were able to get off during the early hours of the morning.

The departure of these aircraft for the southern France offensive was the beginning of the end of North Front's short, busy life. Transit aircraft traffic rose to a new high level in August, 1944, when many of the U.S.A.A.F. Dakotas passed through on their way home accompanied by an accumulation of other aircraft which had been concerned in the landings on the French south coast. But with the liberation of France the transit routes were reorganised and Gibraltar traffic dropped until North Front became, by comparison with its busy period, little more than a wayside "halt" with an average of 850 movements. Operations fell off, too. During June, July and part of August there were no sightings or attacks



Over 100 Dakota troop-transport aircraft are parked at North Front for re-fuelling on their way to take part in the invasion of Southern France in July 1944. (18th July, 1944)

on U-Boats as the enemy had fled to the North. No. 202 Squadron had its final U-Boat attack towards the end of August. It also proved to be the squadron's last operational incident at New Camp. Aircraft K/202 obtained a radar contact nearly 400 miles from the coast of Portugal. It was a dirty night. There was rain and wind and visibility was so poor that the state of the sea could not be seen even when the aircraft came as low as possible and dropped a flare. When the contact was a mile distant a second flare was dropped. It revealed, for no more than a moment, the wake and stern of a U-Boat. The Catalina captain kept on track and saw the U-Boat again for long enough to drop depth-charges. But the weather closed over the enemy so effectively that his gunners did not even see the explosions. The U-Boat was not observed again. It was believed to be a 750-tonner on its way to the Indian Ocean.

In September No. 202 Squadron was ordered to Britain. By the 8th of the month all but one Catalina had left Gibraltar. Engine and equipment faults, weather and sickness among the crew kept the aircraft until early in October, when, after several attempts, it finally took off. With the departure of the squadron R.A.F. Station, New Camp, came to an end operationally. The operations room was disbanded in October, probably the first in Coastal Command to cease work finally and completely. Operations staff were posted and the operations room was left in charge of an airman clerk. After a period in the doldrums, when all sorts of rumours were abroad about its future, New Camp Mess was occupied in October by officers of A.H.Q. who up to then had enjoyed the luxury of living-out in Gibraltar. The Gibraltar Defence Flight, with fighters, fighter control and R.T.F., were also sent home; but a few of the other ranks personnel who remained were accommodated in New Camp. New Camp Officers' Mess, freed from the disturbance of operations, was redecorated and reorganised in several ways and became a pleasant residence for the Headquarters officers and some who overflowed from North Front, where accommodation was being used for transit passengers in preference to hotels. The station lost its status and became a satellite of North Front later in the year.

The war was not yet over, though, for R.A.F. Gibraltar. Admiral Doenitz had fitted his U-Boats with the schnorkel under-water breathing apparatus which enabled them to run their diesels while submerged and so avoid detection to a much greater extent than hitherto. It was expected that a few long-range submarines would frequent the Straits in the hope of damaging convoys bound to and from the United States and the Mediterranean and North African ports. No. 22 Squadron assisted the U.S. Navy in their extensive patrols by M.A.D. Catalinas and Blimps. Disappearing contacts and an occasional sighting of what appeared to be the exhaust of a schnorkel became common but no U-Boat was detected well enough to be attacked. It was a game of hide-and-seek. There were some people who argued that there were no U-Boats anywhere near the Straits and pointed as proof to the undeniable fact that convoys passed through the Straits without attack. They were wrong. On 30th December, 1944, two ships were torpedoed some 350 miles north-east of the Azores and one of them sank. There was no other attack in December but the number of disappearing contacts, schnorkel smoke sightings and possible periscopes increased.

As a result it was decided to bring another squadron to North Front and early in January No. 458 R.A.A.F. (Leigh Light Wellington) Squadron arrived from the Mediterranean. Further attacks on shipping took place early in January, 1945. The s.s. Henry Miller (7,000 tons) was torpedoed in the Straits on the 3rd but managed to limp into Gibraltar. On the 9th the French escort vessel L'Enjoue was hit when off the North African coast and blew up; and the following day the s.s. Blackheath (4,600 tons) was hit forward while in the Straits. This ship ran aground and broke in two. All three attacks occurred in daylight and the U-Boats escaped apparently without damage.



The British motor tanker "Regent Lion" (9551 GRT) was the last ship to be torpedoed in the Straits. She was hit at 1057 hours on 17th February, 1945. Tugs took her in tow but she grounded on a rock approximately 5 miles from Gibraltar.



U.541 entering Gibraltar harbour.

(11th May, 1945)

Up to this time No. 22 Squadron had been averaging some 400 hours a month. But as No. 458 was not yet operational a further call was made upon them and they raised the figure as high as 1003 hours. Convoy escorts, as a result, increased from 14 in December to 101 in January. In spite of this effort, and a similar one by the U.S.N. and the Royal Navy, another sinking took place during February. On the 17th. two ships were torpedoed right in the entrance to the straits, the British tanker Regent Lion, (9500 tons), and an American Liberty ship Michael Stone, (7000 tons). As in the earlier attacks, one ship, the Michael Stone, was able to reach Gibraltar, but the other went aground and gradually sank. An immediate attack was made by the ships' escort of surface craft, again without apparent result. On 22nd. February, however, H.M.S. Recruit and an aircraft of No. 22 Squadron sighted a surfaced U-boat some miles west of the Straits. The naval vessel sank the submarine by gunfire and took off 41 survivors who said it was they who torpedoed the ships on the 17th. and that the subsequent attack by the escorts had damaged them so severely that they had been forced to surface.

During February there was a further increase in operational sorties from North Front, both squadrons between them accounting for 1242 hours. In March the U.S. Navy supplied a M.A.D. Catalina which was based at North Front as a strike aircraft and which carried out several sorties. There were no more attacks by U-Boats, however, and the war came to an end without any further sightings.

In spite of VE-Day the R.A.F. did not relax its vigilance much and the two squadrons kept a watch for possible "pirate" U-Boats and flew 379 operational hours between them during May. The last anti-U-Boat sorties of the war were flown on 10th. and 11th. May as escort to U-541 and U-489 which had surrendered at the Gibraltar datum point and made the passage of the Straits on the surface, a circumstance, as some of the Germans said afterwards, which caused them much chagrin. At the request of the Navy the North Front squadrons kept up "look-out" sorties in case further U-Boats should appear to give themselves up. These were abandoned when the Admiralty announced that all U-Boats known to be at sea had been accounted for.

On 29th. May, 1945, at 1830B. hours, the Royal Air Force closed down in Area Combined Headquarters. The majority of the War Room and Operations staffs were sent home, sufficient being retained to keep a 24-hour watch at North Front. R.A.F. Intelligence remained at A.C.H.Q. until 1st. June when it was moved to Air Headquarters at Engineer House. No. 458 Squadron was disbanded and left Gibraltar late in June after having been given the honour of performing the historic Ceremony of the Keys. A similar honour was given to No. 22 Squadron before they left Gibraltar in July. North Front had then spent its busy life and lapsed into honourable retirement as far as operations were concerned. It retained an interest in flying by dealing with a mere handful of aircraft, 500 transit movements in a month, and two or three meteorological sorties daily by the sole remaining squadron, No. 520.

AIR-SEA RESCUE.



An air-sea rescue unit, No. 71, was established at Gibraltar in December, 1941. From then until January, 1944, the unit rescued 74 British airmen and 17 allied airmen - a total of 91. Five flying-boats which made forced-landings on the sea were towed safely back to Gibraltar with their crews unhurt. H.S.L. No. 142, which was at Gibraltar until May, 1944, rescued 54 airmen. No. 2582, between April, 1943 and January, 1944, rescued 20. No. 181, photographed above on its way to search for a Halifax crew, has rescued 14. (12th August, 1943)



(1943)

In the upper picture a new slipway (right) is being built.
It has been completed, in the lower picture, and contains
a Sunderland.





These show a typical small Levanter cloud. It is the only cloud about - the shadows show that there is sunshine everywhere else. Much more severe cases can occur. The cloud may extend right across the bay to Algeciras. The cloud base is sometimes as low as 200 feet above sea level. (25th July, 1944)



FLYING FROM THE ROCK.

PART THREE - GENERAL.

"Some rock which stretches into
the vast sea and which ----
endures all the violence and threats ----
standing unmoved."

Virgil (Aen).

GENERAL.PART III.

I - Accidents and Weather.

The weather conditions and the geographical situation of Gibraltar combined in the early days, when the runway was too short for modern aircraft, to give North Front a bad reputation among pilots throughout the Royal Air Force. But when the runway had extended to beyond 1150 yards the danger was vastly less and it diminished even more once the full 1800 yards had been attained. Although there were 52,418 aircraft movements in 1943 and 34,231 in 1944, North Front had surprisingly few serious accidents caused entirely by weather or the airfield's own peculiarities.

One of these, unhappily, was sufficiently startling to focus unwarranted attention on North Front as a dangerous place. It occurred on 4th July, 1943, and involved the death of General Sikorski, the Polish Prime Minister and C. in C. of the Polish Forces. The Liberator in which he was to have returned to Britain crashed into the sea a few moments after taking-off. The crash occurred at night. With the exception of the pilot the aircraft's eleven passengers and crew of five were killed. The other passengers were Major General Klimecki, Chief of Staff; Colonels Marecki and Gralowski, Staff Officers; M. Kulskowski, secretary to General Sikorski; Colonel Victor Cazalet, M.P., Liaison officer with the Polish Forces; Brigadier Whitley, Mme. Losniowska, General Sikorski's daughter; Lieut. Prsewski, A.D.C.; and two Englishmen, Messrs W.H. Loch and Pinder. Within a few minutes of the crash a R.A.F. pinnacle was at the spot. The crew heard a voice in the darkness and picked up the pilot but the aircraft sank before they could reach it. The bodies of General Sikorski and Major General Klimecki were recovered and artificial respiration was attempted without success. The H.S.L. ordered to the rescue picked up two more bodies. After lying-in-state in the Gibraltar Roman Catholic Cathedral of St. Mary the Crowned the body of General Sikorski was taken to England in a Polish destroyer. The aircraft was subsequently raised and other bodies and documents recovered.

One of the rare fatal crashes to operational personnel occurred on 22nd April, 1944. On that date S/L. G.A.B. Johnson, O.C. of No. 520 Squadron, was killed when landing a Gladiator II. The aircraft bounced, swung off the runway into a wooden hut and caught fire.

The greatest hindrance to flying and safety is the picturesque cloud formation caused by the Mediterranean Levanter east wind and which the Spanish call the Suicide Cloud. It may descend on North Front without notice and can hang over the Rock for days. The Levanter was responsible for much anxiety in high places on 12th June, 1943. His Majesty the King, in a York aircraft, was on his way to Gibraltar when the wind changed to easterly and the Levanter came down and remained over North Front as strongly and stubbornly as ever it had done. The A.O.C., Air Commodore S.P. Simpson, who was in the control tower with the Governor and the Station Commander, ordered the York and its escorting Liberator to be diverted to Port Lyautey where the United States Navy made speedy preparations to receive the distinguished visitor. Both aircraft landed there safely.



This layer of very low cloud, formed over the sea, drifted slowly westward. This condition is rare and in this case was very transitory. Except during the short period shown by the photographs the cloud was poured over the Rock and was lower and denser over the town and harbour than either to north or south of the Rock.

(13th June, 1944)



It may be a surprise to most people to hear that from the aviators point of view weather at Gibraltar is on the whole very good, occasions when the airfield or flying-boat landing area are unusable being very rare in comparison with home stations. Wind rather than cloud or visibility is the most frequent difficulty. With south-east or south-west winds exceeding about 15 knots there is a dangerous cross-wind on the runway; and extremely violent eddies set up by the Rock add greatly to the difficulties of landing. Even when the Levanter is very low it does not usually extend over the runway but it does make the approach difficult as an aircraft landing in an east wind has to fly through the cloud and only emerges when it is very nearly on the line of the runway. Rain is sometimes heavy enough to make landing difficult or impossible simply because of the reduction in visibility but such conditions rarely last long. The majority of rain comes with south-west winds but the cloud is seldom below about 1500 feet in these conditions. The kind of "frontal" conditions, with continuous rain and cloud below 800 feet, which constitute the main obstacle to flying in Great Britain are very rare in Gibraltar. The main rainfall occurs during the five months between November and March and is usually about 35 inches. Thunderstorms nearly always take place at high levels and the main cloud base is at 6000 feet or more. They are troublesome chiefly because of the heavy rain which they often give; as they almost always occur at night, the effect of this rain on visibility is particularly severe. There are about 15 - 17 thunderstorms each year.



This photograph and the others on the next page, taken in 1943, show that only a fence divided Spain and North Front. If Germany had attacked Gibraltar through Spain North Front would have been in a precarious position. For several years this threat hung over the station. In addition, there was the knowledge that enemy agents could lean against the fence and watch freely what our aircraft were doing, a unique situation in war!

GENERAL.PART III.

II - The Spanish Question.

Mention has been made on several occasions in this narrative of the remarkable situation at North Front where the Spanish and their German friends could see what was happening on the airfield with no more trouble than is required to look through a high fence of steel railings; and of the still more remarkable circumstance where thousands of Spaniards walked across the runway every day on their way to and from work in Gibraltar. Everyone who has had experience of the horror that was aroused at R.A.F. stations in Britain if a harmless civilian was found peering through the barbed wire at an aircraft dispersal will realise how the authorities at Gibraltar felt when it was announced to them that North Front was to become an airfield with a major secret operation to perform. The daily presence of Spaniards in Gibraltar is as unavoidable as the fact that North Front is next door to Spain. A fortress the size of Gibraltar, with an important Naval dockyard, requires several hundred skilled and unskilled workmen in addition to its service personnel. For several reasons, one of which is the lack of living accommodation, and another the dislike of the Gibraltarian for becoming an artisan, Gibraltar has always recruited its craftsmen and other workers from Spain. The civilian shopkeepers and residents, too, have found it necessary to get their assistants and servants from Spain, where labour is cheap. Normally the number of Spanish people who find jobs in Gibraltar is a few thousand; but shortly after this war began it had increased to something well over 9000. The Spaniards were eager to find jobs on the Rock and the Spanish authorities encouraged them. It was not unlikely that among those thousands there would be some associated with the Germans living in La Linea and Algeciras, or who were anti-British and would not consider it necessary to be reticent in cafes about what they saw and heard in Gibraltar.

The task which faced the British security defence authorities and the success which they achieved are not to be described in this narrative. It is sufficient to point to the success of Operation Torch. Among R.A.F. personnel the need for security was realised and observed in a manner which must have delighted those responsible for teaching it. Attendance at a security talk was almost the first thing that happened to officers and airmen arriving at Gibraltar. That in itself seemed to impress the newcomers. In the hundreds of letters censored every day it was rare to find one in which the writer talked about his job and conversation indiscretions were negligible. New Camp provided an example of the sort of discretion that existed. It was a fairly common experience for R.A.F. aircrew who had escaped from occupied Europe to arrive at Gibraltar through the Spanish frontier. They were brought to New Camp conspicuous in nondescript civilian suits at first and even more noticeable in new R.A.F. uniforms a short time later. A number of officers and airmen on the station, inevitably, had to know who those visitors were; in fact, the code word used was "visitors". But the vast majority of the station personnel of all ranks served their allotted span at New Camp and saw these lost-looking people moving about without knowing anything of what was happening.

There were, of course, several practical examples of the presence of



It can be seen from these two photographs taken near the summit of the Rock how the extensive ranges of hills in Spain could supply cover for a bombardment of North Front. (1943)



the enemy and his agents to encourage discretion. Everyone knew about the gentlemen on the top of the German consulate at La Linea who were called, with the English sense of humour which other races so seldom understand, the "German duty pilots". These observers saw and reported all movements of aircraft and shipping and as many other things as their binoculars could pick up. Personnel who were permitted to go to Algeciras and La Linea on short leave saw Germans in the hotels and cafes, heard news boys crying "signal!", and other German propaganda publications and a number got into conversation with a noted Spanish journalist who was better known as a German agent and against whom an official warning was issued. It would have been a stupid officer or airman indeed who saw these things within sight of his own station and did not realise the danger of speaking or writing about his work.

Other things occurred to discourage the possible chatterer. The danger of sabotage was always present. Nothing ever happened to aircraft but there were several incidents at the dockyard. Fires were started and bombs were discovered near the new operations room tunnel and the ammunition store about the time Torch was due. Two Spaniards were hanged in Gibraltar for these crimes and news of the hangings made public. Between 1940 and 1943 mysterious attacks were made on shipping at anchor in the Bay. It was obvious that they were not coming from U-Boats; but it was not until the Italian armistice that the discovery was made of human torpedoes being sent across the Bay from the Italian tanker Olterra lying inside the outer break-water at Algeciras less than four miles from New Camp.

Every night anti-sabotage guards had to be mounted at both stations. Nothing sensational ever happened. The reason why our aircraft were preserved from damage is to be found in the report and files of the Security departments, the "cloak and dagger" men, but there is little chance of the story being told for some time to come. Those who wish to read about Gibraltar in those days will have to be satisfied with Wing Commander Pelham-Groom's novel "Defend the Rock" which was written around Operation Torch and in which a little fact has been blended with a great deal of fiction.

To the ordinary member of the R.A.F. aircrews the Spanish question was bound up in the need to avoid flying over Spain in the vicinity of Gibraltar or infringing the country's neutrality by respecting the three-mile limit when near other parts of the coast of Spain or Morocco. Several of them had the importance of this emphasised by Spanish anti-aircraft fire and at least one man was wounded by a shell fragment. Behind the scenes a great deal of correspondence was conducted between Gibraltar and the Spanish authorities, through the British consulates and the Embassy at Madrid, to try and still the trigger-itch of the Spanish gunners until they were sure that our aircraft were actually inside their precious three-miles of sea. In general, the Spanish were courteous and promised to issue cautionary orders to their battery officers; all except General Luiz Orgaz, High Commissioner for Spanish Morocco. General Orgaz was emphatically not only anti-British but also anti-R.A.F.

The reason was supposed to be an incident which occurred on 20th April, 1944, when Gibraltar fighters intercepted a JU. 52 with Spanish markings in which the General was returning to Tetuan from Madrid. A signal advising Gibraltar of the aircraft's proposal to fly across the Straits was not received until after the JU. 52 had been plotted and the fighters scrambled. Two spitfires dived on the JU. 52 from astern to identify it then climbed ahead and flew level with it at about 50 yards. The fighter pilots waved to the Spanish pilot indicating that he should keep away from Gibraltar. On reporting this on R/T to Gibraltar Fighter Operations they received the instruction, "He's a civil aircraft, don't be rough with him". The fighters went no nearer but kept the JU. 52 in sight until it was above Spanish territorial waters off the Moroccan coast. Their attitude, however, had annoyed the High Commissioner. As soon as he landed at Tetuan he complained bitterly



An unusual sight. Catalinas of No. 202 Squadron in formation
on the A.S.R. search mentioned on the opposite page.

(16th June, 1944)

to the British Consul and alleged that the fighters had forced his aircraft to change its course and had violated Spanish territory. A Spanish diplomat who was also in the aircraft privately told the Consul that the passengers were "frightened to death". The matter ended with a report of the actual facts sent by H.E. The Governor, Lt. Gen. Sir T. Ralph Eastwood, to the British Ambassador, Sir Samuel Hoare, at Madrid; but forever afterwards General Orgaz had bitter feelings towards the R.A.F. and a spate of Spanish A.A. fire on our aircraft whenever they came near the three-mile limit around the Moroccan coast afterwards was thought to be related to the interception incident.

From time to time a British aircraft crashed in Spain or made a forced landing. If the aircraft and crew survived, the Spanish authorities retained the former, which they were entitled to do under international law, and an agreement was reached with the British Government whereby it became part of the Spanish Air Force. They invariably sent the crew home after a suitable interval to satisfy their conscience if any inquiries should come from the Axis. That was an act of courtesy which they need not have observed and which created a good impression with Gibraltar aircrew generally. The first practical experience of that courtesy occurred in Gibraltar in December, 1942, to the pilot of an American P.38 which was forced to land on the Spanish side of the North Front fence. The aircraft was retained but the pilot, who was slightly injured, was quickly permitted to return to Gibraltar.

An incident occurred in June, 1944, when a Catalina of No. 202 Squadron crashed and the crew were killed in General Orgaz's country, Spanish Morocco. This fact was not known for some time and the aircraft was reported as missing over the sea, resulting in one of the biggest air-sea rescue attempts ever made by a flying-boat squadron. It also produced an interesting manifestation of Spanish sympathies with Britain. During the search for the aircraft, which was thought to have crashed into the sea near Alboran Island, Gibraltar witnessed the unique sight of eight Catalinas of No. 202 Squadron flying in formation as they set out from New Camp. They were recalled when the wreckage and the bodies of the crew were found on the hills at Tres Forcas. There was some doubt as to the willingness of General Orgaz to allow members of the squadron to attend the funeral and inspect the wreck. An approach was made, however, and the Spanish showed the greatest friendliness. They gave the crew a military funeral in Melilla and crowds thronged the streets. Later the Squadron Commander and other officers from Gibraltar flew to Melilla and were received so cordially that they remained for three days. The Spanish officers paid for the erection of a headstone and grave. During a dinner given at the seaplane base the military governor of Melilla proposed a toast to the friendship of Britain and Spain. General Orgaz did not appear but sent greetings to the visitors.

Another of several further indications of Spanish friendliness to the R.A.F. occurred in October, 1944, when a Halifax from Brawdy which was diverted to Gibraltar arrived only to find the airfield closed through an unpredicted fog. The nearest fit base being beyond the aircraft's range of endurance several unsuccessful attempts were made to land at Gibraltar. The only course now seemed for the aircraft to ditch and as it was dark the flare path was towed out to a given position for the ditching, with the H.S.L. and other craft standing by. Unfortunately by this time the fog had become so thick and extensive that a clear area could not be found and as a last resort plain language messages in Spanish were sent by the M/F station to Tetuan, in Spanish Morocco, asking if they had airfield lighting and could land a Halifax. This Tetuan agreed to do, the Halifax was given full details of course, distance, and so far as they were known, facilities, and landed safely. The Halifax was retained at Tetuan but the crew returned to Gibraltar full of praise for the lavishness of Spanish hospitality.

It was becoming clear that German influence in the Spanish area opposite Gibraltar had gone and that the authorities were keen to be friendly. This was demonstrated on 20th November, 1944, when the



(8th April, 1945)
Two contrasts in sightings - the Mauretania and a Spanish Wine Schooner.



(8th August, 1943)

Officer Commanding of No. 520 Squadron had engine failure in a Martinet on approaching the western end of the runway and ditched in the shallow water about 40 yards off the Spanish shore. He was rescued unhurt by H.S.L. 181. Spanish carabinieri refused a R.A.F. pinnace permission to salvage the aircraft which was within the agreed Spanish territorial waters of Gibraltar Bay. A naval M.L. with a R.A.F. officer on board went close in shore and negotiations were conducted with a Spanish official bearing the title Captain of the Port of La Linea. He was very friendly and asked that no attempt be made at salvage until permission had been received from the Spanish Governor. He said he understood this would be granted if applied for in the usual formal manner. As this was a precedent H.E. The Governor applied for permission, which was granted on 22nd November. The Martinet was then salvaged and towed back to North Front. The incident can go down in history against the apparent unwillingness of the Spanish to allow us to salvage crashed aircraft during the last war.



A French Sunderland in tow of a Spanish Schooner.
A Gibraltar H.S.L. has arrived to take charge of the
aircraft but does not appear in the picture.

(17th. July, 1943)

NORTH FRONT.

What will be the future of the airfield?

(27th November, 1943)

FLYING FROM THE ROCK.

EPILOGUE - THE FUTURE.

"Where stands a winged sentry
all skilful in the wars."

Henry Vaughan.

EPILOGUE - THE FUTURE.

So ends a period in the history of Gibraltar as momentous as any since 1704. Once more the Rock has been an asset of high value to Great Britain. The story of its service to the Royal Air Force, contained not so much in the incidents of flying from the Rock as in the fact that the Rock was there and in spite of apparently insurmountable difficulties was adapted to the use of aircraft, is a justification of the romanticists and sentimentalists whose pleadings to retain Gibraltar overcame the considered opinions of the "practical" experts.

With that observation this narrative might well come to an end. Yet, having explored history and combined it with the immediate past to form this narrative there is an irresistible temptation not to retire without saying something about the future. This is more to emphasise that there is still a problem in Gibraltar than to claim ability to predict a solution. It can hardly be that Gibraltar's success in providing an airfield vital to allied victory in this latest war, in defiance of the opposition of thoughtful people, will abolish all suggestions to exchange it for some place else. The achievements of a weapon in one war is no reason to believe that it will be invincible in the next, although such an argument has been accepted on occasions, usually with unhappy results. There are many voices ready to be heard on this subject though, and there is every likelihood of a situation arising in which sentimentality, national pride, expediency and wise forethought may find themselves at loggerheads. One of the principal factors then in any discussion about Gibraltar's future will be its potentialities as a base for air power and its ability to retain whatever advantages these may contain. The answer to that is hardly to be found in the achievements of the past few years but in a wise appreciation of developments in aviation in the future.

The attitude of Spain, too, may have to be considered, although at the moment Spain is in no position to be opinionative. It is extremely unpleasant, though, to have an unfriendly next-door neighbour who may hurl stones and unpleasant words across the fence and who cannot be persuaded to desist except by the force and not the majesty of the law. That has not happened to Gibraltar but it must always be borne in mind that a neighbour with his hands in his pockets can always withdraw them if he wishes.

Today's position is that Gibraltar possesses a modern airfield with a unique runway. How will it be prepared to meet the next emergency? The decision to be made on this point will not be the simple one of whether or not a racecourse is to be despoiled to permit aircraft to land in war.

THE END.