



AUGUSTA'S WARTIME CONNECTION WITH MALTA

by Tullio Marcon

Sicily, being only sixty miles distant from Malta's shores had a dual effect. It meant that bombing raids from Sicily were only a thirty minutes flight away. Likewise this facilitated raids from Malta's airfields by Royal Air Force and Fleet Air Arm aircraft in retaliation.

This article brings into focus a number of incidents involving British aircraft as seen from the Italian side. The Italian defences shot down a good number of these aircraft. Other British aircraft were however lost, not during raids but because of other factors. Inclement weather and navigational errors accounted for some incidents.

There was also interference from the CRIRIA stations on Monte Pellegrino (Palermo) and Monte Ranna (Ragusa) which disturbed the radio beacons used to guide Malta-bound aircraft from Gibraltar's OADU. Some of these incidents involved the naval and seaplane base of Augusta, situated on the south-eastern Sicilian coast, as narrated in this article.

13th August 1940

After its first publicized but unsuccessful attack on Augusta's oil storage tanks, in the evening of 30 June, 830 Squadron Fleet Air Arm, stationed at Hal Far, Malta dispatched three other Swordfish air-

craft for a torpedo attack to Augusta in the late hours of 13 August. This raid proved ineffective, as no shipping was found in Augusta's harbour, and none of these planes managed to return safely to Malta. Two of them were hit by anti-aircraft fire. One crashed ashore in Sicily with the loss of its crew. The other one ditched off Malta and its crew were rescued. The third aircraft crewed by Lt Waters and his TAG Harris and coded T4M had a different fate, as, after releasing its flares during its dive, it struck the sea in the harbour and sank almost immediately. The crew was instantly picked up and the Swordfish

fuselage was salvaged the day after, together with one of the torpedo's air rudder, which was taken to Rome for evaluation and comparison with its Italian counterpart. As for Waters and Harris, they were given hospitality in the Italian Navy barracks and then sent to a POW camp in Italy by train. Before reaching the railway station, orders were given that they should be marched under escort through Augusta's main street for propaganda purposes. However the women bystanders, mindful of the feelings of the crew's mothers, gave them a sympathetic reception.

This attack will be remembered for



The silhouette of Torre Avalos which deceived Lt Walford during his night attack



the torpedo dropped by Lt Walford, whose aircraft ditched off Malta, because he believed that his target was a vessel near the breakwater, whilst in fact it was Torre Avalas, a 16th century Spanish fort whose outline was mistaken for a ship in the moonlight. So the fort has added to its history the oddity of having been torpedoed.

17th November 1940

Operation White launched from the carrier HMS Argus would have provided Malta with reinforcement of much needed Hurricane fighters. Two flights of six fighters, one guided by a Skua aircraft, were flown off the carrier. The first flight managed to reach Malta with the loss of two fighters and one pilot. The second flight alas missed the landfall at Galite and the bomber sent out to meet it became lost en-route. As each Hurricane ran out of fuel, it had to ditch at sea. None of the pilots were found

despite searches by Malta based aircraft sent out following the non-arrival of these aircraft. Skua L2987, before running out of fuel, sighted land through the mist. It was Isola delle Correnti, near Cape Passaro, where the aircraft made a successful forced landing, avoiding the ack-ack fire from a nearby battery. The engine completely detached itself from the fuselage in this incident. The Pilot, P.O. Stockwell and his navigator Lt Neil were taken to the Regia Aeronautica seaplane station in Augusta and then were sent to a POW camp. The Skua was wrongly identified as a Blackburn Shark and it was transported to the air-station, where it was mounted on its undercarriage for examination. It was later scrapped.

20th November 1940

On the 20 November 1940 a Malta-bound Wellington bomber from Gibraltar made a forced landing in the countryside

near Syracuse. This aircraft carried Air Marshall Boyd, Deputy Air Officer Commander-in-Chief Middle East, one major, three junior officers and two other ranks. On landing the Wellington was purposely set on fire. All of the passengers and crew were taken to Augusta, where the Commanding Officer of the seaplane base prepared a special meal for the Air Marshall, whilst the others were treated to the war rations of the Italian officers.

7th January 1942

On the 6 January 1942, a transit OADU Beaufighter, en route from Gibraltar to Malta, flying along the Sicilian eastern coast, was hit by ack-ack. fire and ditched off Syracuse, its crew being picked up by a boat and taken prisoner. On the following day, another Beaufighter T4887 experienced a similar navigation mishap, which was probably caused by the CRIRA interference, which lured the aircraft to Sicily instead of to Malta, its intended destination. The fate of the second Beaufighter was however different, because on approaching the coast of Augusta at slow speed and low altitude, it gave the impression it was searching for a suitable landing area. Consequently the air defence batteries did not open fire. The aircraft headed towards Magnisi, a flat, arid, one kilometer long peninsula, a few miles

Beaufighter T4887, which mistook Penisola Magnisi for Malta on 7 January 1942



*Facing Page: Airmen disassemble Skua L2987 prior to its transport to the seaplane base in Augusta
Right: Model of Spitfire BS367, presented by Harry Coldbeck to the Augusta museum. He is seen (bottom) filing a sortie report on the wingtip of his recce Spitfire at Malta, March 1942*

south of Augusta. situated on its north shore was an anti-aircraft battery, no. S.S. 361. The aircraft landed there and the gunners ran towards it with their rifles at the ready, in case the Beaufighter attempted to take off again. In fact, when Flt Sgt Jones, pilot and Flt Sgt Bold, the navigator, realized their mistake, they tried to get away but were restrained by the threat of arms.

While the two prisoners spent the next few days at the seaplane station enjoying their captors' hospitality including gifts of oranges, their aircraft was kept under guard and a couple of days later flown to Guidonia (the Regia Aeronautica experimental station). In the meantime many pilots of No. 83 Recce group, deployed in Augusta, examined it. All knew how dangerous this type of aircraft was when in action against their flying boats and seaplanes. But this event was also seen by them as sweet revenge for that Cant Z501 that had landed at Gozo by mistake on 25 January 1941 (see Flypast no 2 page 245). After evaluation, the Beaufighter was issued to a unit that was to be given a night fighter role, as a crew trainer. 24 June 1942

One of No. 826 Squadron's Fleet Air Arm Albacores was bound for Malta from Egypt but, having lost its way and being short of fuel, ditched in the Gulf of Noto. Although the aircraft remained afloat, the crew took to their dinghy and waited to be rescued. A seaplane from Augusta sighted them and radioed the base to send out a rescue boat. In order to keep their place of departure secret, the crew told the Italians that they had engine trouble whilst on their way back to Malta from a night recce on Messina. After two days, the Albacore T8941 coded 5K was recovered from the sea (see opening photo, taken to Augusta and, after inspection, was later scrapped.

10th November 1942

Flt Lt Harry Coldbeck, a New Zealander, was posted from U.K to Malta in March 1942 and was attached to No 69 Squadron, the same unit in which Warburton served. On 10 November 1942, he was briefed to carry out a



reconnaissance of Augusta harbour to confirm the presence of three Italian cruisers which had arrived from Navarino. On this mission he flew Spitfire PR. MK IV BS367, which was unarmed. Coldbeck was shot down by Anti-aircraft fire whilst flying over the harbour.

He narrates what occurred: "As the flight commander of the Spitfire reconnaissance flight, it was my responsibility to ensure that the Italian fleet was covered three times daily, at first light, mid-day and as near last light as practical, - the latter considering the location of Malta.

"The particular last night sortie I was undertaking on 10 November 1942 included Taranto, Messina and Augusta before heading home. Cloud had been a problem at the first two harbours and again at Augusta. It was necessary for me to sight the three cruisers moored in Augusta harbour and I had just done this and was heading at low level away from the harbour at about 400 mph. There was a loud heart-rending noise from the rear and the aircraft did a violent nose down 'butt' type manoeuvre which threw me through the Sutton harness and the

canopy. I have a recollection of the windscreen breaking in front of me, as I was thrown out.

"I regained consciousness outside the aircraft as I fell through the air. Now bare-headed, with the wind whistling past my ears - helmet and headphones, etc had gone - but fortunately, I found my parachute was still intact, but understandably misplaced. I looked down at one stage and saw the boiling circle of



sea where I presumed my aircraft had gone in. It was a new one! I was rescued from the sea by the crew of a small steam vessel and quickly transferred to a naval launch, which arrived on the scene soon after. The crew included a padre clad in his long black habit with a round hat showing his rank.

"An ambulance with doors open ready to receive me on a stretcher, waited at the wharf. After what seemed a long wait, I was taken and laid before an assembly of armed service officers. The commander claimed the naval artillery had shot me down. He also told me that he had visited Wellington during his service as a pilot of an aircraft aboard an Italian cruiser. I was put to bed in a

room with the light on and with one guard in the room and another outside. I was given a nice Italian meal complete with wine. I didn't eat much but my guards finished it off during the night.

"The next day the medical officer dressed my head and face again. One or two days later the commander sent a message to offer me the choice of a shower or bath. I chose the latter because my head was still bandaged. I was allowed to use all the first class facilities of the nice bathroom with three guards present, one inside and one each outside the door and window.

"During 1942, on our daily flights, to all the main harbours on an approximately 500 miles radius, we had often

wondered what it would be like to be on the ground (or amongst the Cants on the water) at these places. Our own conditions were austere in the extreme.

"My closely guarded imprisonment came to an end after several days. An armed corporal and a private escorted me to an ancient graceful limousine and we sat in the back seat with me in the middle waving back to the bystanders as we drove by on our way to the railway station. I was wearing my uniform which had been returned to me, dried and pressed, along with my flying boots and wrist watch ruined beyond repair by the salt water; I could not tell the time before 1945.

"As I sat on the a railway platform, between my two guards and surrounded by curious bystanders, the crowd suddenly parted and I was confronted by an ageing gentleman dressed in a naval blue suit. "Do you remember me?" he asked in English. When I replied in the negative, he said I should have remembered him because he was the master of the small steam vessel, which, as he said had saved my life. I believe I attempted an apology.

"The train arrived and an Italian officer assumed command of our little party and we sat in a compartment of our own. As the train pulled away from the station I remember the blue limousine still parked by the railway fence with the occupants giving me a last cheerful wave as I went on my way to two and half years as a POW under greatly changed conditions.

"The commander at Augusta had had the kindness to provide me with a toothbrush, soap, cigarettes and a barber to shave me and, to cap it all, a parcel of food for the journey. A wonderfully benevolent and caring man. I have often wondered down the years, if he survived the war. I presume the peacefulness that appeared to pervade Augusta at that time probably disappeared during 1943. I saw nothing of the town itself, apart from the railway station and building in which I was confined although I had been seeing it almost daily before I was shot down, from 25000 feet up during 1942 with the Cants and the naval ships riding at anchor. The warmth of my feelings for the place has not diminished over the years."

Postscript – In 1992, after 50 years, Harry Coldbeck returned to Augusta, visiting the town and the naval base where he had been hospitalised. In 1997, he published his book "The Maltese Spitfire". A year later he died in Auckland.

