



‘SCREWBALL’ BEURLING — A MALTA HERO —

by Robin J Brooks

He became the top scoring fighter pilot in Malta. He was also a non-conformist to rules and regulations and something of a rebel when it came to authority. In all other respects however, George F ‘Screwball’ Beurling was a superb pilot eventually to become a legend on Malta. Until he arrived there during June 1942, very little was known about him except the fact that he was often severely reprimanded for his ‘cavalier’ attitude. Transfer to Malta and in particular attachment to No.249 (Gold Coast) Squadron was to bring out the best in him thus changing the impression that he had so easily created for himself.

George Beurling had applied to join the RCAF in 1940 but lacked the educational qualifications to enable him to become a pilot. Not being content with any other occupation, he worked his passage to Britain and joined the RAF where he was accepted for aircrew training. He was untidy, a non-conformist with a shock of hair and a sallow complexion. Although sometimes very undisciplined, he passed his flying training with no problems and was soon in the thick of the fighting. He gained two early victories but was severely reprimanded

for breaking away from the accepted formation pattern to do so. It seemed that he was hell-bent on shooting down every enemy aircraft himself no matter what methods he used. This of course did not please his superiors who regarded him as somewhat reckless. It was known that the more difficult and individual pilots were sent overseas in the hope that they would learn to conform and would not aggravate the top brass of the RAF in the UK. In the case of Sgt Beurling this could not have been closer to the truth. 249 Squadron was to make him into a hero.

The squadron itself was originally formed in August 1918 as an RNAS squadron equipped with Short 184 seaplanes. It disbanded on 8 October 1919 and reformed as a fighter squadron at Church Fenton on 16 May 1940. Converting from Spitfire Is to Hurricane Is in June, it took part in the Battle of Britain and served with distinction throughout the campaign. Being manned by a large proportion of Commonwealth personnel, 249 adopted the name of ‘Gold Coast’ and for the rest of 1940 and early 1941 carried on with defensive patrols flying from Church



Fenton, Boscombe Down and North Weald. They re-equipped with the Hurricane IIa in February 1941 and in May of that year, the squadron was notified of a posting to Malta. They embarked on the aircraft carriers HMS Furious and Ark Royal and after a rough crossing, flew their aircraft to Ta’ Qali airfield on the 21 May.

Since the dark days of 1940 when Malta had been defended by a force of three Sea Gladiators fondly named ‘Faith, Hope and Charity’, successive convoys to the island had been able to deliver aircraft successfully though with



Left: Spitfires for Malta being loaded onto USS Wasp

Bottom: One of the Malta-bound Spitfires takes off from USS Wasp

some loss. Thus from a small fighting force in the early days, a superior number of fighters were now able to defend Malta and its sister island Gozo and also begin to carry the fight back to the enemy stationed in Italy.

No.249 converted from Hurricanes to the Spitfire Vb and later the Spitfire Vc. It had proved itself an exceptional squadron with a great number of very good pilots flying within its fold. At the end of their tours, these pilots were returned home to be replaced by others fresh from the UK. In early June 1942 the aircraft carrier HMS Eagle was bound for Malta via Gibraltar in

Operation 'Salient', carrying 30 Spitfires and their pilots to replace both lost aircraft and their pilots as well as to strengthen the island's fighting forces. After a successful ferry flight all 30 Spitfires reached Malta on 9 June. Included within their ranks was Sgt George Beurling. No.249 Squadron at that time was led by Sqd Ldr 'Laddie' Lucas, who by the tossing of a coin with David Douglas-Hamilton, the CO of No.603 Squadron, elected to have Beurling join his squadron. Someone had already informed him that here was an exceptional pilot even if a crazy one! He barely looked the part with his

uncombed hair and sloppy attitude to uniform but it soon became obvious that he virtually lived for air combat. Settling in at Ta' Qali, Beurling flew his first operation with his new squadron the next day but it was not until three days later that he first scored in Malta. Although the Luftwaffe had temporarily halted the mass raids on the island due to the need of supporting other fronts, notably Russia, a force of Messerschmitt Bf109's came over shortly after dawn in the hope of catching the airfield by surprise. The radar station at Dingli had picked up the raid approaching as 249 were scrambled to intercept. In the ensuing battle, Beurling scored his first success on the island when he damaged one of the enemy aircraft. The rest of the month was fairly quiet but with July about to break, Axis plans for a renewed onslaught and possible surren-



Right: The Macchi C.202 shot down by Beurling over Gozo on 27 July 1942

Bottom: Ta' Qali airfield with the scars of air attacks clearly visible

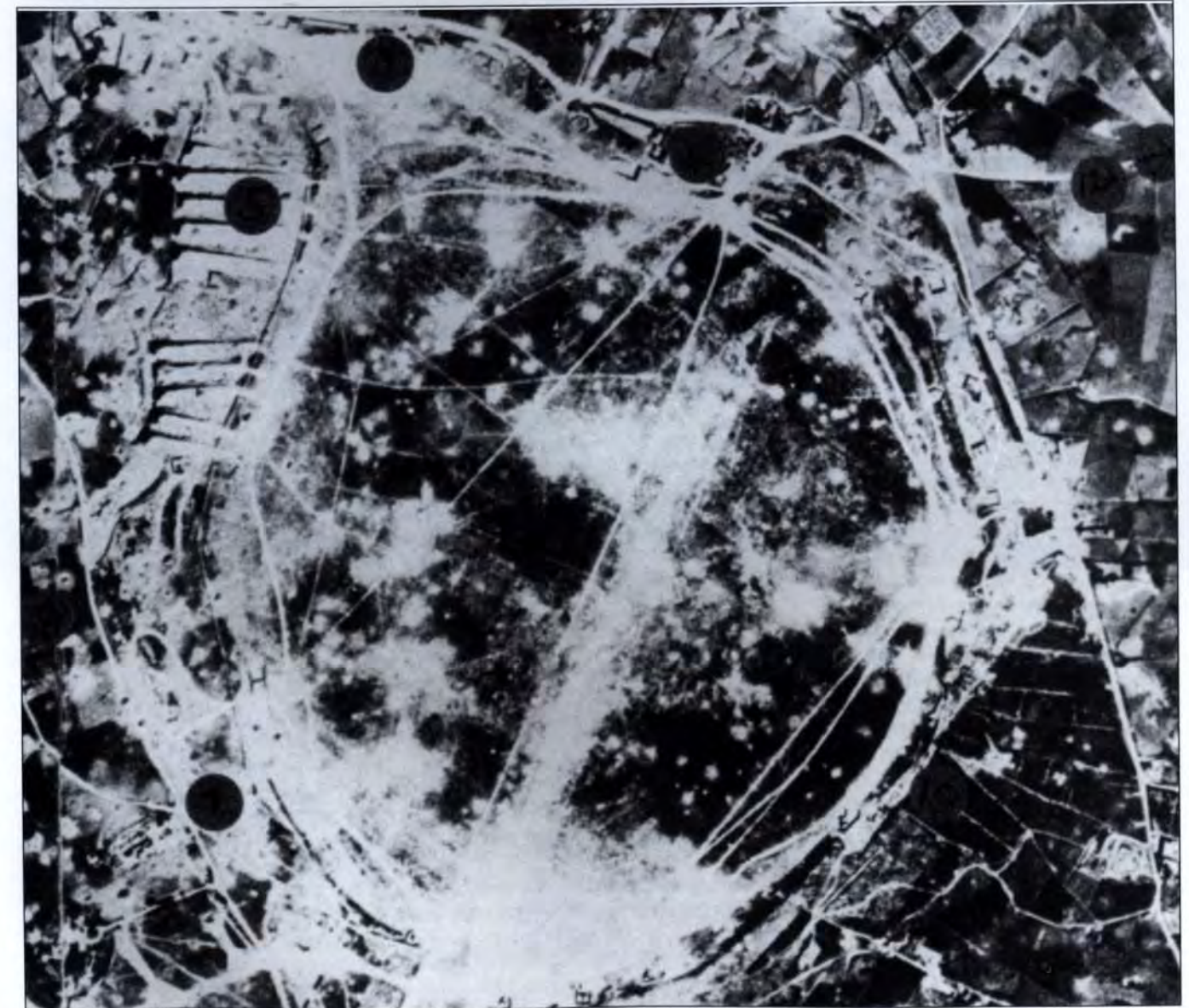
der of Malta were accelerated. Junkers Ju88s of II and III/KG77 and Bf109s of I/JG77 were moved to Sicily from the Russian front and together with further units of the Regia Aeronautica, the new offensive began.

6 July dawned fine and clear, as mass raids on the island began from mid-morning. Both the Luftwaffe and the Regia Aeronautica were over Malta in force as every fighter squadron from Ta' Qali and Luqa rose to defend the island. Eight Spitfires of 249 were scrambled from Ta' Qali and met a large force of



bombers escorted by fighters over Gozo. In the thick of it, Beurling managed to shoot down a Macchi 202 and

two minutes later shot down another. Landing to refuel and re-arm, he took off again and this time shot down a Bf109



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and damaged a Cant Z1007.

By this time he had acquired the nickname 'Screwball' and this was based on the fact that when the adrenaline was flowing, he would constantly utter the phrase 'the goddamn screwballs!' Thus the name stuck with him throughout his service career. On 27 July, Beurling had an even greater day when he claimed two Macchis, two Bf109s with two more damaged. One of the Macchis was shot down when his Spitfire's cannon jammed and he was only able to bring his four machine-guns to bear upon the Italian. At the debriefing, back at Ta' Qali, Beurling told the Intelligence Officer just what had happened. Unable to believe that machine-guns alone had shot down the Macchi, he awarded Beurling a probable until a report came through from Gozo that a Macchi had crash-landed after being shot down by machine-guns from a Spitfire. Sgt Beurling was given his kill! The following day, 28 July, Beurling's award of the DFM came through.

Slowly, day after day as the relentless onslaught on Malta and Gozo continued. Beurling, commissioned on 30 July, added to his score. By August it

was approaching 16 and no other pilot on the island could admit to such a score in such a short time. Earlier in the month one of the most important convoys for Malta had left Gibraltar. C o d e - n a m e d 'Pedestal', it was essential that this convoy reached Malta in order to lift the siege-like conditions the people, both civilian and military, were suffering. The Luftwaffe and Regia Aeronautica carried out massive attacks on the ships by day and by night with the result that out of 14 in the original convoy, only five made it to Malta, one of them being the precious oil carrying tanker 'Ohio'. The Malta squadrons gave the ships all

the protection they could and although they shot down many enemy aircraft, the convoy suffered badly. Once again 249 were in the thick of the fighting and Operation 'Pedestal' gave Plt Off Beurling more kills.

On 4 September he was awarded a Bar to DFM. He seemed invincible and to many other pilots on the island, he was becoming a legend. September and early October brought his score to 26 and a half and it seemed as though he would go on forever. On the 14 October 1942, Dingli radar plotted a force of eight Ju88s escorted by about 50 109s approaching the island. 249 were scrambled and managed to meet the enemy off the Gozo coastline. Beurling immediately weaved in amongst the bombers and promptly shot one down. Pulling up to attack the fighters, he fired at a 109 which also went down but not before one of the Ju88s had sent a burst across his cockpit hitting his hands and forearm.

Putting his Spitfire into a dive in order to get clear and return to base, he noticed one of his fellow pilots being chased by a 109. With no thought for his own safety or his injuries, Beurling

wheeled his aircraft round and fired his guns into the belly of the 109. Unfortunately an unseen 109 also had Beurling in his sights and raked his aircraft with cannon fire. The Spitfire fell out of control as the shell splinters reached the legs and heels of Beurling. Realising his aircraft was out of control, he ejected his canopy and wrenched at his straps as he prepared to bail out. Despite his injuries, he found himself swinging beneath a canopy of silk and prepared for a landing in the sea.

The cool salt water soothed his wounds as he clambered into his dinghy and noticing the coastline just a short distance, felt that he must have been seen to fall into the sea. Minutes later, High Speed Launch 128 was approaching having watched the Spitfire fall and a parachute open and gently splash down near St Paul's Bay. As the airmen on the launch reached out and pulled him aboard, Beurling expressed concern that he could not find a Bible that his mother had given him. He had carried it on every sortie and was sure that it had brought him good luck. It was eventually found and with a sigh of relief, he fell into a deep sleep.

'Screwball' was taken to the Mtarfa Military Hospital where he reluctantly received the news that his tour of duty on Malta was over. Despite the award of the DFC (16 October 1942) and later the DSO (3 November 1942), he felt rejected and sad that he was to leave his beloved Malta. Furthermore, he had been told by the doctor that he would remain in hospital at Mtarfa for at least a fortnight and would not be flying for some time to come. On 1 November 1942 he left Malta for the UK in a Liberator. Approaching Gibraltar, the aircraft crashed into the sea but Beurling survived.

On Malta his magic lived on. He was credited with 27¹/₃ victories whilst with 249 Squadron at Ta' Qali thus becoming the highest scoring Allied pilot on the island. He eventually added two more kills to his total before finally being killed in 1948 whilst delivering an aircraft to Israel.

'Screwball' Beurling became a legend on the island of Malta and in one small corner of the National War Museum at Fort St Elmo, Valetta, his memory is forever engraved. For a tribute to this great pilot, we may look no further than the citation given upon the award of the DSO. 'This Officer's skill and daring are unexcelled'. He was indeed, one of the greatest pilot heroes of the war and of Malta.