

The First Hijack

A Wartime Story



By David Spiteri Staines

The First hijack of an aircraft is not what is recorded in the Shell Book of Firsts as having happened in 1948, but one that occurred in wartime in 1942.

On 28 July 1942, a number of Beaufort aircraft took off from Luqa on a mission to attack Axis shipping supplying Rommel's Afrika Korps, who here at that time advancing triumphantly across Libya. The Bristol Beaufort was a twin-engine torpedo bomber and was manned by a four-man crew. One such aircraft, Beaufort L9820, was flown by Lt Ted Strever South African Air Force, navigated by Pilot Officer Bill Dunsmore, a Britisher with Sgt Wilkinson, wireless operator and Sgt Brown gunner, the last two being New Zealanders. Their average age was 24. They managed to trace the Italian freighter, the 5333-ton *Monviso*, escorted by the destroyer *Freccia* and the torpedo boat *Calliope* near the Greek Island of Levkas, and successfully torpedoed the freighter. However the plane was hit in both engines from the convoy's fighter escorts it had to ditch.

All four crew managed to get into their dinghy and were picked up from the sea half an hour later by a Cant Z 506B floatplane flown by Ten Mastrodicasa of 139a Squadriglia. They were taken to Prevesa, a Greek harbour just off the island of Levkas. The captive airmen were given civilian clothes into which to change. They were well treated and given a splendid meal of macaroni and steak in the officer mess followed by

brandy and cigarettes. They also played table tennis with their captors. Having been informed that on the morrow they would be flown to Taranto, Italy, that night they decided that they would attempt to escape at the first opportunity and planned to seek the right moment during the flight.

At 0940hours on Wednesday 29 July, they were given a good breakfast and were taken on board another Cant Z 506B (MM45432) '13', a tri-engined seaplane. Ten Mastrodicasa was the pilot, Mariscallo Alessandro Chifari second pilot, Sergente Trento Losi engineer and Aviatore Sc Marc Antonio Schisani Wireless operator/Air Gunner were the crew. Carabinieri Giulio Scarciella joined the part as the captives' guard. The latter carried an enormous long-barrelled revolver on his hip.

The Beaufort prisoners were huddled into a small windowless compartment with the soldier standing guard on a high step at the entrance, completely blocking the narrow passage. They were indeed in a very tight corner. Not even the intensive RAF escape drill, which stressed their duty to attempt to escape, if captured, could be of any help in a situation of this nature. But escape was on their minds. How?

The seaplane droned on – flying at 2,500 feet above the sun-drenched Ionian Sea. The situation was being studied – albeit silently – by all four RAF men. Glances were continuously being exchanged. They noted that the guard was enjoying himself glancing through

the window at the passing scenery. It seemed that this was his first ever flight, he seemed mesmerized by what he was seeing from the aircraft's window. The wireless operator seated nearby was engrossed with work at his desk.

Acting on his own initiative one of the two New Zealanders (Wilkie) made the first move. He stood up tapped the wireless operator on his shoulder and pointed dramatically out of the window. Startled, the Italian looked up. Instantly Wilkie burst into action. His right fist caught the wireless operator's jaw pinning him down by his vest. Meanwhile the big revolver was whipped away from the guard, and in a matter of minutes the Britisher had taken full control of the seaplane.

It was only natural that their minds should now turn to Malta, with visions of a quick flight southwards. However, they had no illusions about the risks involved in the 300-mile plus flight to Malta. Indeed they were fully conscious of the hazards this entailed. The main concern was emphasised by the Italians themselves on learning of their intention by exclaiming "Spitfires, Hurricanes" – a hazard greatly amplified by the decision to risk an unannounced approach to the best defended island in the Mediterranean. Because trying to operate the radio to let Malta Flying Control know what was happening would mean enabling the enemy to fix their position. Another source of concern was fuel. In fact it was questionable whether they had enough to cover the distance and

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Left: The Italian aircraft at St Paul's Bay soon after it's landing

that included the reserve tank's contents. These factors though serious enough received only cursory considerations for it was quite plain that their minds were set - it would be Malta or bust.

"What we've got to do" explained Dunsmore, "is to fly due west till we hit Italy. Coast all the way down till we hit Sicily then strike south for Malta." Hardly had they started doing so, when something they had hoped they would not have to contend with did happen. A Junkers Ju 52 was approaching fast from behind! As it closed in on them, one of the new Zealanders climbed into the rear-gun position and wagged the Cant's guns up and down in the recognized RAF 'friendly aircraft' signal. To their relief it worked and the Ju 52 turned north and vanished. Not long after this encounter they crossed the Straits of Messina and soon reached Capo Passero, with just 60-odd miles separating them from Malta the fuel gauge was pointing near empty. In fact it became

extremely doubtful whether they had enough to cover the short distance. Was it going to be a case of "so near and yet so far?"

Eventually land was sighted and as they got nearer it was practically a foregone conclusion that radar would have picked them up. They put the most experienced man at the controls the Italian captain, then backing word with graphic gestures he was told "when we shout put the plane down."

They did not have long to wait long before a shout of "Spitfires, Spits" came from the upper gun position. Four of them (from 603 Squadron) in line astern roared down to attack. The Italian captain at the controls was immediately belloyed at "Down, down, down." The Cant's nose dipped sharply towards the sea. Within seconds the sharp staccato of machine guns was heard as also the screech of ripping metal and then the heavier explosions of cannon followed by thumps of shells hitting the plane.

The floats parted the water into

sheets of spray. The engine cut, whether switched off by the captain, or because the tanks had run dry, it was not known. Dunsmore whipped off his shirt and vest - the only white article he had and waved out of the window. The Spitfires needed to be in no doubt; the Cant had surrendered. Leaving one as sentinel, the fighters returned to base. The Cant received 20 machine gun hits and eight cannon shell bursts into the wing. The crews were grateful to the Spitfire boys for having spared the fuselage. With nine of them packed into it they could hardly have missed.

And so the world's first "hijacking" was accomplished - six years before he first official hijacking was recorded. Rescue launch HSL 107 appeared two miles away from the shore and the crew crouched at their guns. But as they drew alongside they giggled in disbelief. "You are RAF?" gasped one of them. "Blimey, we thought it was old Mussolini coming to give himself up."

HSL 107 picked them up from the water. The captured Cant floatplane was taken in tow, first into St Paul's Bay and later on into Grand Harbour. Finally it was taken to Kalafrana where it was later impressed as part of RAF Kalafrana's aircraft and repainted in British colours.

Three years later, in October 1945, Dunsmore received a letter from the

Cant's skipper who was at a prison camp in Derbyshire, written in the friendliest of terms and ending with "I hope you are well".



The Beaufort and Cant crews posing for a photograph on 29 July 1942, before going their different ways. Left to right: PO W. Dunsmore RAF, Italian corporal, Italian flight engineer, Lt E.T. Strever SAAF, Italian second pilot, Sgt J. Wilkinson RNZAF, Ten Pil Mastrodicasa, Sgt R.A. Brown RNZAF and Italian wireless operator

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