



# The epic air battle of Malta

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Entertainment

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Wing Commander E. J. Gracie's article published in The Sunday Times of Malta edition of September 27, 1942. Photo: Malta National Library. Right: The Royal Air Force uniform button above the airmen's silver Maltese Cross. Photo: Denis Darmanin

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Just like the Great Siege of 1565, the epic air battle of Malta during World War II is recorded in the annals of history as the turning point of the war in the Mediterranean, if not of the war in North Africa, followed by that in Europe.

The Battle Honour 'Malta 1942' was conferred to a number of ships and regiments that had participated in the defence of the island in various ways, but the Royal Air Force shared an equal glory.

The first bombs on the island were dropped on June 10, 1940, hours on the same day when Benito Mussolini declared war on the UK and France. In total, 55 bombers and 21 fighters of the Regia Aeronautica flew over Malta and dropped 142 bombs on the three airfields – Luqa, Hal Far and Ta' Qali, followed by another wave of 10 Savoia-Marchetti SM.79s and 20 Macchi C.200s.



A member of Malta Command wearing the Maltese Cross on his RAF summer KD uniform. Photo: [www.maltacommand.com](http://www.maltacommand.com)

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Since all aircraft units were withdrawn from Malta, any air defence was non-existent. But as luck would have it, the Royal Navy had left a number of crates with dismantled Gloster Sea Gladiators and parts, from which three aircraft were assembled, and a fourth was held in reserve. The Gladiators held off the Italian attacks for 17 days and were reinforced by four Hawker Hurricanes towards the end of June.

The real battle for the strategically important island of Malta was fought between 1940 and 1942. Due to its location in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea from which all sea routes passed, the new campaign in North Africa in mid-1940 brought Malta into the theatre of war.

Ships transporting vital supplies and reinforcements from Europe to Axis troops in North Africa were subject to attacks by the Malta-based Royal Navy and the Royal Air Force. From January to April 1941, the Axis sent 321,259 tons of supplies to Libya and all but 18,777 tons safely reached port.



Ground crew rearm a Supermarine Spitfire Mark VC of No. 601 Squadron and refuel it using four-gallon petrol tins. Flight Lieutenant Dennis Barnham is in the cockpit. Photo: ww2today.com

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Although heavily bombed and with barely any air defence, Malta continued to strike back. During the first week of January 1941, Junkers Ju 87 (Stuka Gruppen) units of the German Luftwaffe's Fliegerkorps X (Flying Corps 10) composed of Sturzkampfgeschwader 1 and Sturzkampfgeschwader 2 (Group Dive Bomber Wings) from the Russian Front reached Trapani on the southern coast of Sicily. These were battle-hardened veterans and the raids on Malta intensified when a squadron of Messerschmitt Bf 109 E-7 fighters of 7. Staffel Jagdgeschwader 26 (26th Fighter Wing) also arrived during February, resulting in heavy losses of lives, ships and buildings. In July alone, the handful of RAF planes defending Malta faced attacks from the 200 enemy aircraft based in Sicily. Only one Gladiator and one Hurricane were lost. Reinforcement came on August 2 when 12 Hurricanes and two Blackburn Skuas arrived in Malta.

Between March and April 1942 thousands of tons of bombs were dropped indiscriminately on both military targets and civilian locations. Food, fuel and ammunition were running short as very few ships, if any, could survive running the gauntlet to Malta. To encourage the morale of the Maltese and servicemen and women alike, on April 15, King George VI awarded the George Cross to the island of Malta.

HMS Eagle made desperate attempts to deliver the much-needed aircraft to defend Malta. A contingent of 16 Supermarine Spitfire Mk Vs flew to Malta from the aircraft carrier as

part of Operation Spotter. A further nine Spitfires were again delivered by Eagle but these were not enough to combat and last against the German air superiority.

Sir Winston Churchill turned to Britain's ally, the US, and asked President Franklin D. Roosevelt for assistance to relieve the situation in Malta. Codenamed Operation Calendar, the aircraft carrier USS Wasp was assigned to ferry 48 Spitfires VCs and enable them to fly to Malta from a location north of Algeria. The Axis were aware of this attempt, as the planes had hardly landed and were being refuelled when the airfields were bombed and just about all the aircraft were destroyed while on the ground.

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By early May 1942, Malta was literally on its knees. Britain made another request to the US government. On May 9, a convoy named Operation Bowery set sail to deliver more aircraft to Malta, once again including USS Wasp and accompanied by HMS Eagle, which together carried 64 Spitfires. The planes took off about 550 miles from Malta headed towards the stricken island.

There were only two mishaps, one unfortunately fatal. The first aircraft piloted by Sgt/pilot Herrington lost power soon after take-off and plunged into the sea. Both pilot and plane were lost. The Spitfire piloted by P/O Jerrold (Jerry) Alpine Smith landed back on the deck of USS Wasp because the auxiliary fuel tank would not function.

This time, the ground crews in Malta were ready with little air cover to protect them. The new planes were refuelled very quickly and in seven minutes took off to meet the invading enemy. It was an organised operation of the likes that was never seen before in Malta.

On the next day, some 100 enemy aircraft were recorded approaching the island off Comino. Little did they realise what was awaiting them. Apart from the anti-aircraft batteries on the ground, a total of 37 Spitfires and 13 Hurricanes had scrambled to meet the enemy.



Ground crew of No. 249 Squadron RAF taking a break from maintaining their Supermarine Spitfire Mark VCs at Ta' Qali, to observe the activity on the airfield. Photo: Crown Copyright

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First in the air were 20 Spitfires and Hurricanes of 601 Squadron, followed by nine more of 126 Squadron. Another eight Spitfires from 185 Squadron joined them a short while later and again seven more from 603 Squadron and five from 249 Squadron. Six Spitfires of one squadron commanded by Squadron Leader S.B. Grant DFC, took off to engage the enemy within nine minutes of landing on the island.

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The Sunday Times of Malta of September 27, 1942, carried an article by Wing Commander E. J. Gracie titled 'A story of the Battle of Malta; in nine minutes we got six Spitfires up to fight'. It was a story told to the Daily Express after the lifting of the siege and Gracie's departure from Malta. Conditions were extreme.

In Gracie's own words: "We had no hangars, no shelters, little equipment and suffered a boiling sun. We had no petrol to transport the airmen to and from their work, no means of repairing boots and shoes, no stockings could be bought at any price". And "under these conditions we operated several squadrons of Spitfires from one airfield, with a total of 650 NCOs and airmen of all trades, including clerks, cooks and butchers and other trades against a total figure in Britain for an equivalent force approximately 3,000."

He continued by complementing the British and Maltese soldiers who helped on the airfields, particularly to the King's Own Malta Regiment and referred to them as "...a first-class body of troops. They had back-breaking jobs for which they were certainly not trained and they did them without any murmur".

He went as far to say that any pilot who was guilty of bending an aircraft through stupidity or carelessness would receive no mercy, and in the words of Victor Beamish would be treated as a traitor to his country.

As to the pilots themselves, Gracie said: "I have known many fighter pilots and I have no hesitation in saying that the Malta fighter force is the most efficient for its size in the world". He concluded his article with the following:

"We Will Win

Let me list these essentials for you:

First-class equipment – Spitfires.

Ground organisation. We gave each Spitfire a complete crew, entirely responsible for the maintenance of the aircraft.

Co-operation between the services.

Enthusiasm. No enthusiasm can be raised without the knowledge that hard work can be put to good effort.

We had 'em all and we won the vital phase in the battle. And will continue to win it."

The article sported only one photograph at top centre of the page. It consisted of a uniform button of the Royal Air Force above a small Maltese Cross badge. The caption stated: "This cross has been in the Battle of Malta. Only operational fighters defending the island may wear it. It is one of the most cherished badges of the RAF."

These small silver Maltese Crosses were made by local silversmiths for fighter pilots as described earlier. It is also likely that some locals had them specially-made to present as gifts to the pilots in recognition of their exploits. This particular cross was made for No. 185 Squadron RAF, which was based at Hal Far from May 1941 to May 1943 and at Qrendi from June to September 1943. On each of the branches of the cross is an inscription – 'Malta' is

on the left branch, 'Ft,er' (Fighter) is on the top, '1943' on the right and 'SQDRN' on the bottom one.

Also on the bottom branch on the reverse is '185'. The badge is fastened by means of a simple pin clasp. The motto on the badge of the 185 Squadron is one of a few in Maltese – Ara Fejn Hu (There He Is). It was the expression of Maltese children when looking up at the sky and spotting a plane.



A Martin Baltimore bomber No 69 Squadron destroyed while on the ground at Luqa in 1942. Photo: Imperial War Museum

The cross was not recognised as an official badge but to the airmen who wore it meant their great sacrifices and the losses of their comrades to save this beleaguered island from surrendering. Unfortunately, the authorities would not allow the badge to be worn officially anywhere else.

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Although the frequency of air raids changed, Malta was still suffering great losses. The RAF could only manage some 16 planes to combat the enemy.

On July 14, 1942, Air Vice Marshal Keith Park arrived as the new commander of the RAF in Malta, replacing Hugh Pugh Lloyd. Park reversed the role of the British fighters and placed them on the attack, which gave good results, inasmuch that air raids were halted for a number of days and the Luftwaffe also had to change its tactics.

Between August and October 1942, as part of three convoys – Operation Bellows, Operation Baritone and Operation Train, HMS Furious delivered a total of 85 Spitfires to Malta. Malta was now on the offensive.

The RAF squadrons operating in Malta during the war consisted of Nos. 126, 185, 229, 249 and 1435 Squadrons. No. 1 Squadron South African Air Force was based on the island between June and July 1943.

The airmen who defended Malta were mainly of the Royal Air Force and of other countries within the Empire, as well as others of the Royal Naval Air Service. Their nationalities varied, but they all had the same aim in mind: For King and Country and to save Malta from the Axis. The fighter ace George Beurling, known as the Knight of Malta, shot down 27 Axis aircraft in just 14 days over the skies of Malta. Many have the sea as their grave and others are buried in the land they helped to protect and save.

Just like the Maltese Cross featuring on the badge of No 185 Squadron, a number of other squadrons of the Royal Air Force also bare the cross mainly because of their association or service in Malta. No 22 Squadron RAF was formed at Fort Grange, Gosport, in September 1915. In October 1935, as part of Britain's response to the Abyssinia crisis, the squadron was deployed to Malta, returning to Britain in July 1936 after the threat of war between the UK and Italy receded.

No 1435 (Night Fighter) Flight was first formed at Malta as a night fighter unit on December 4, 1941, by re-designating the Malta Night Fighter Unit. The squadron was unique among RAF squadrons. Its designation was not officially approved until after the unit had been operating for some time. It began operations as a squadron on August 2, 1942, at Luqa, with Spitfires and pilots transferred mainly from No 603 Squadron, which had recently received the new Spitfire.

As the new unit was considerably larger than a flight, it became known as No 1435 Squadron and this designation was later approved by the Air Ministry. Operations had begun on July 23, 1942, as a flight and until the end of the year it was engaged in fighter defence duties. In January 1943, it became a fighter-bomber squadron and flew sweeps over Sicily until the Allied landings. In October 1943 it was moved to Italy.



A short-lived unit was No. 283 Squadron. It was formed at Algiers on February 11, 1943, as an air-sea rescue squadron and responsible for air-sea rescue along the North African coast. The squadron moved to Palermo in August 1943 to provide cover for the campaign in southern Italy. The squadron reequipped with the Vickers Warwick in February 1944 and moved to RAF Hal Far where it remained stationed until the end of the war. The squadron disbanded at Hal Far on March 31, 1946.

No 126 Squadron was formed on March 1, 1918, within the Royal Flying Corps. It became a unit of the newly-established Royal Air Force a month later but was disbanded on August 17, 1918. Reformed in 1941 as a fighter unit equipped with Hawker Hurricanes, the squadron was stationed in Malta to provide air defence for the island. It was re-equipped with Spitfires and then operated from Sicily and Italy, and moved to the UK in April 1944. The squadron was disbanded on March 10, 1946.

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Malta Command is a World War II heritage interpretation group whose aims are portraying the life of men and women serving in the British Forces during the Battle of Malta.

The Royal Air Force in Malta during the war is one of the branches interpreted by the group and each member proudly wears a copy of the cross on his uniform jacket in tribute to the airmen who fought in the skies of Malta during those turbulent years. The cross was specially made for the unit.