

Spitfire: The Legend, Part 3

MALTA BESIEGED AND AN UNLIKELY HERO

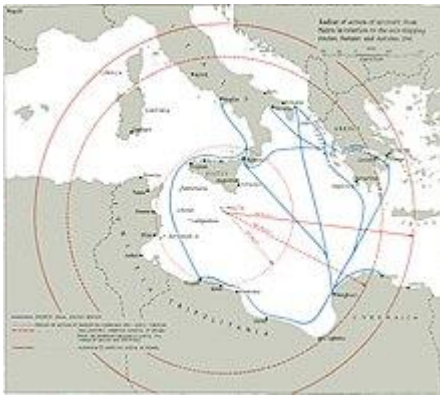
By Alex Valz

Target Malta: Britain's Vital Mediterranean Base



This part of the Spitfire discussion will concentrate on the siege of Malta, which lasted 29 months from June 1940 to November 1942. Malta would turn out to be one of most heavily bombed places during World War II, enduring 3,000 raids concentrated around the island's Grand Harbor. In a repeat of the Battle of Britain two years earlier, the Spitfire again proved to be the deciding factor in the struggle for air supremacy over this strategically important island.

British possession of Malta was absolutely critical to the Allies' war effort in the Mediterranean and North Africa. The loss of Malta would have meant that the British could no longer sail from Gibraltar to Alexandria, Egypt, to supply and reinforce their army and naval forces in Egypt. Moreover, Britain would lose control of the Suez Canal and access to its possessions in the Far East. The map below shows the effective radius of Allied air operations from Malta. As well as providing airfields for the RAF, Malta had been an important British naval base dating back to the time of Lord Nelson.



In the early years of the war, Malta had no air defenses. The RAF was reluctant to station any fighter squadrons outside of the United Kingdom, especially during the Battle of Britain. If Malta were to be equipped with aircraft, it would have to be through the Royal Navy's initiative. In April 1940, the Air Officer Commanding on Malta, Air Commodore F.H.M. Maynard, received permission to use four crated Gloster Sea Gladiators that had been left on the island by an aircraft carrier earlier in the year. In June 1940, ten Italian SM.79 bombers appeared over the island and the Sea Gladiators rose to meet them. And so the two and a half year ordeal of the Maltese people began.

During June 1940, 15 Hurricane fighters arrived on the island. These planes were designated No. 261 Squadron. Other air elements on the island included Wellington bombers, Maryland reconnaissance planes, Sunderland flying boats, and Swordfish torpedo planes. Even though the British were optimistic about Malta's survival in 1940, this would change with the arrival of the Germans in the Mediterranean in 1941.

The Germans Arrive

Disappointed by Italy's dismal performance in North Africa, Greece and the Mediterranean, Hitler sought to bolster his ally by sending the Afrika Korps under General Erwin Rommel to North Africa. Additionally, he sent X Fliegerkorps to Sicily to deal with the British forces in Malta. X Fliegerkorps contained 80 Ju-88A and 50 He-111 bombers along with 80 Ju-87R-1 dive bombers. An undisclosed number of Bf-110C heavy fighters were also sent as escorts for the bombers. In January, 1941, these forces wasted no time in attacking a British supply convoy consisting of four merchant ships escorted by the Royal Navy's Force H. Based at Gibraltar, Force H included the aircraft carrier *Illustrious*, which was hit by six 1,100 pound bombs dropped from the Ju-87's, but managed to limp into Grand Harbor. The ten days during which the *Illustrious* took refuge in Grand Harbor became known as the "*Illustrious* Blitz". The Luftwaffe and the Italian Regia Aeronautica conducted numerous sorties against the *Illustrious* during this time but failed to sink her. To counter these air attacks, the RAF and Fleet Air Arm could only muster a few Hurricanes, Sea Gladiators, and Fulmars. Finally, the *Illustrious* sneaked out under cover of darkness and made her way to Gibraltar.

With German domination of the Eastern Mediterranean now complete, the X Fliegerkorps was transferred from Sicily to bases in Greece, Crete, and Rhodes. This move gave Malta's embattled defenders some much needed rest. The RAF's fortunes began to improve after the end of the Axis bombing campaign. A supply convoy made it through from Gibraltar in March, 1941. In April, 35 Hurricane IIA's flew off the deck of the aircraft *Ark Royal* and into Malta. RAF bombers from the island began to fly anti-shipping strikes again, and the Royal Navy sent four destroyers to operate from Malta.

Malta on the Offensive

Air Vice Marshal H.P. Lloyd arrived to take over command from Maynard in May 1941, and Malta's defense was augmented by an additional 47 Hurricanes. By early summer 1941, Malta had once again become a base from which Axis supply lines to North Africa could be attacked and disrupted.

By October and November 1941, Malta-based ships, submarines, and planes sank 127,000 tons of shipping per month (20% of all materials sent from Italy to Axis forces in North Africa). In order for Axis forces to succeed in North Africa and Russia, a new offensive to capture the oil fields in Middle East and Southern Russia would need to be undertaken. A preliminary objective of any new offensive by Rommel and his desert army would be the elimination of Malta.

Kesselring Arrives in Sicily

The vulnerability of the Axis supply line and the retreat of Axis forces after the Allied "Crusader" offensive led to rethinking of the Luftwaffe's aerial strategy in the Mediterranean Theater. Luftflotte 2, under the command of General Feldmarschall Albert Kesselring was transferred from the Central Russian Front to Sicily in preparation for a new offensive against Malta. Kesselring would station II Fliegerkorps, led by Major General Bruno Loerzer and containing 400 aircraft, in Sicily.

Arrayed against three squadrons of Hurricane II's (36 aircraft plus a number in reserve) were 160 Messerschmitt Bf-109F-4's of JG 53 and JG 3. These fighters would screen 200 Ju-88A-4's and 40 Ju87D-1's. The German battle plan was straightforward: achieve air superiority over Malta's numerically inferior fighter squadrons. Then the Luftwaffe's bombers would destroy installations and military targets on the island.

The Hurricane II's equipping the three fighter squadrons on the island were outnumbered 4:1 by the Bf-109's and were outclassed by them, too. Bf-109 pilots taunted Hurricane pilots by dropping in front of them out of the effective range of their guns. If the Hurricanes tried to chase the Bf-109's, they could simply speed up and get farther out of range. The Germans' lack of respect demonstrated the need for Spitfires to defend Malta. Lloyd repeatedly pleaded with RAF headquarters to send Spitfires that could counter the Bf-109F, but to no avail.

In February, 1942, a group of seven British pilots who would later enjoy success in Malta arrived aboard a flying boat. The most important of these pilots was Squadron Leader Stanley "Bull" Turner. He had seen action over Dunkirk and during the Battle of Britain. In 1941, Turner led Spitfire equipped "Circus" operations over the English Channel. Turner was assigned to command Squadron No. 249 where he immediately imparted his knowledge of RAF Fighter Command's latest tactics.

Spitfires into the Breach

About this time, Air Vice Marshal Lloyd's repeated demands to bolster Malta's air defenses were finally heeded. Sixteen Spitfire VB's were packed into crates and shipped to Gibraltar accompanied by 18 pilots and supporting ground crews. These Spitfires were equipped with Vokes air filters for desert conditions. After some delay, the Spitfires were loaded aboard the HMS *Eagle* and began the 700 mile journey to Malta on March 7, 1942. Upon arriving they were painted blue grey which was better suited to maritime operations.

First combat for the Spitfires came on March 10 as nine Ju-88's entered Malta's airspace with Bf-109 escorts. Twelve Hurricanes and seven Spitfires were scrambled. The Squadron 249 pilots climbed to 19,000 feet and bounced the enemy fighters, downing one and claiming two as

probables while losing one of their own. Later that day, another raid was intercepted and two Ju-88's were damaged.

Spitfires and Hurricanes continued to harass the much larger German formations, and several kills were claimed on the following days. But on March 20, the Luftwaffe launched a massive four-day blitz against Malta's four airfields. Maltese airfield losses were heavy as Takali Airfield was put out of action. The aircraft stationed there were flown out to Luga on March 22. No. 249 squadron was now down to only two serviceable Spitfires. An additional nine Spitfires later replaced some of the losses. Delivery of aircraft to Malta by carrier became more frequent as USS *Wasp* dispatched 47 more on April 13. But the Germans had watched the delivery. Many of the replacement planes were either destroyed on the ground or were shot down as the Germans still enjoyed numerical superiority. By evening of April 21, the number of airworthy Spitfires on Malta totaled 17.

Between March 20 and April 28, 1942, the Germans flew 11,815 sorties against the island and dropped 6,557 tons of bombs. During that time, the Germans lost 173 aircraft to the island's defenses, including not only RAF fighters but planes shot down by the island's anti-aircraft batteries. On the British side, not only were many of the defending aircraft destroyed but the British lost 19 submarines which had inflicted heavy losses on Axis convoys up until that time.

Malta Saved by USS Wasp and HMS Eagle Deliveries

Relief was on the way for Malta in the shape of the two aircraft carriers that had already made much needed deliveries of Spitfires. On May 9, 1942, the *Wasp* and the *Eagle* delivered 64 more Spitfires in Operation Bowery. This gave Malta five full Spitfire squadrons. The impact of the additional fighters was apparent. On May 9 and 10, the Italians and Germans lost 102 aircraft in large air battles over the island. On top of the May 9 deliveries, *Eagle* made three more runs from May 18 to June 9 carrying another 76 Spitfires to Malta. With the May and June deliveries the RAF finally had the firepower to defeat any Axis attacks.

In March and April 1942, the Axis air forces were at their maximum strength with over 400 fighters and bombers. By May, the Luftwaffe forces had been reduced to 36 fighters and 34 bombers. The RAF had finally won air superiority.

Air attacks were much reduced in August and September, 1942, as much of the Axis airpower was shifted to North Africa. The intense pressure on the island during the previous months had given Axis convoys a chance to re-supply the Panzer Army in Africa. Rommel was now able to go on the offensive, and soon he was in Egypt at El Alamein.

Despite a reduction in the attacks on Malta, the situation on the island remained serious. Food and water supplies were greatly reduced as the bombing had damaged pumps and distribution pipes. Although the civilian population toughed it out, the threat of starvation was real. Soldiers' rations were also cut in half.

Supply Convoys to Malta Offer Some Relief

In June, 1942, the Royal Navy sent two convoys, Operation Harpoon from Gibraltar and Operation Vigorous from Haifa and Port Said. The western convoy lost a destroyer, three supply ships, and a tanker after being attacked by two Italian cruisers supported by destroyers and Axis aircraft. Two supply ships reached Malta and unloaded supplies. The eastern convoy was forced to turn back after a series of naval and air engagements. A cruiser, three destroyers and 11 supply ships were sunk. This time Malta struck back by sending Bristol Beauforts to engage the Italian fleet and German U-Boats attacking the convoy. The Beauforts torpedoed and sank the heavy cruiser *Trento* and damaged the battleship *Littorio*.



Undeterred, the Royal Navy conducted Operation Pedestal which brought some vital relief to the besieged island, but at a heavy cost. A huge force of German and Italian aircraft made relentless attacks on the Pedestal convoy. Particularly effective were the Italian SM.79 torpedo bombers. Out of the 14 supply ships sent, nine were sunk. Additionally, the aircraft carrier *Eagle*, which had rendered vital assistance to Malta, was sunk along with one cruiser and three destroyers. The American Texaco tanker S.S. *Ohio* (shown above in Valetta Harbor) made it into the harbor after a heavy pounding. She delivered a large amount of aviation fuel which would allow the island to fight on. British submarines also made a substantial effort to supply Malta. The ability of submarines to carry large loads enabled them to be of great value in the campaign to lift the siege.

Keith Park Arrives

In July, 1942, Lloyd was relieved of the RAF command on Malta. It was felt that a man with past experience in conducting fighter defense operations was needed. Vice Marshal Keith Park was Lloyd's replacement and arrived by flying boat on July 14, 1942.

Park was an old adversary of Kesselring and had commanded 11 Group during the Battle of Britain. During that time, Park had advocated sending small numbers of fighters into battle to meet the enemy. The reasons were because smaller groups were easier to coordinate and keep together. Also, he had to preserve his smaller force of fighters by avoiding casualties. During the second half of 1942, things over Malta were quite different, leading Park to reverse these tactics. With plenty of Spitfires now on hand, Park could be proactive by intercepting the enemy away from the island and breaking up their formations. Improved radar and quicker takeoff time plus improved air-sea rescue made all of this possible. Park's "Forward Interception Plan", issued on July 25, forced the Axis to abandon daylight raids on Malta within six days. Kesselring's response was to send fighter sweeps at high altitudes to gain tactical advantages. Park retaliated by stationing Spitfires no higher than 6,100 feet. This forced the Bf-109's to descend to an altitude more advantageous to Spitfires. Keith Park had won another chess match with "Smiling Albert."

British Offensive Operations Expand

In September 1942, Malta strike forces consisting of the RAF's Beaufort bombers and the Royal Navy's submarines had a devastating impact on Rommel's supply lines. The Axis organized a convoy to deliver fuel and ammunition to Rommel, but their communications were intercepted by Ultra (Britain's top-secret cracking of the Germans' Enigma code system). Five out of the nine Axis supply ships sent were destroyed by Malta's forces. During September, the Germans received only 24% of the 50,000 tons of supplies needed to carry on offensive operations. No fuel reached North Africa during the first week of October. On October 25, three Axis tankers and one cargo ship loaded with fuel and ammunition were sent with heavy naval escort. Ultra code breakers again intercepted the convoy route and alerted Malta's air units. Three of the convoy's vessels were sunk

by October 28. Consequently, Rommel lost the Battle of El Alamein which turned the tide in the North Africa campaign. It is hard to overestimate the value of Malta during the 29 month siege. Malta's defenders' stubborn resilience and determination tied down huge Axis resources and ultimately was a determining factor in defeating the Axis in the Mediterranean.

George Beurling, "The Knight of Malta"



George Beurling was born to fly. He pursued it at an early age and perfected his skills as a young man. His mastery of flying fighter planes enabled him to be arguably Britain's greatest fighter ace of World War II. He was the top ace from Canada.

Beurling's background seems unlikely for the prominence that he reached as a fighter pilot. He was born in 1921 in Quebec, Canada. He grew up in an extremely conservative religious group that had absolute and literal faith in the Bible. Alcohol, tobacco, and virtually all pleasures were forbidden. Because of his strict upbringing, Beurling never swore, drank or smoked. Flying was his sole passion. He was treated coldly by his parents. He was banished to his room for playing hooky from school and going to the airport. He spent hours in his room building model airplanes. With the money Beurling received selling these, working odd jobs

and selling newspapers, he paid for weekly flying lessons. He was 12 when he first took the controls of an airplane and 17 when he flew his first solo flight in 1938.

He dropped out of high school, jumped a train, and rode the rails to Gravenhurst, Ontario, where he worked as a navigating co-pilot carrying freight into the bush for mining companies. He picked up valuable experience on these supply flights and was soon able to obtain his pilot's license. Beurling began transforming his passion for flying into a promising livelihood.

When World War II broke out in 1939, Beurling found a new purpose. He tried to enlist in the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) but was rejected because of his mediocre school record.

After sailing to England to enlist in the RAF, he was rejected because he did not have his birth certificate. Undaunted, Beurling returned to Canada to get it. Upon returning to England, he was accepted by the RAF. He performed brilliantly in training school. The RAF offered Beurling a commission, but he turned it down as he preferred to live and work with the sergeant pilots.

After completing his training, Beurling was posted to No. 403 Squadron. He was again offered a promotion but declined it once more. His commander thought little of him and gave him a "Tail End Charlie" flight position. This meant that Beurling would bring up the rear where the Germans usually first attacked. After a short stint in 403 Squadron, Beurling was transferred to

another squadron, but he was again forced to fly the same risky position. Flying over Calais, his squadron was attacked by five FW-190's which shot out his two 20 mm cannons but left his machine guns untouched. Beurling's flying skills saved his life as he zoomed straight up into the sun. The FW-190's followed but they lost Beurling in the sun's blinding glare and streaked right past, enabling him to shoot down one of them.

Two days later over Calais, Beurling's incredibly sharp vision allowed him to spot attacking German fighters before anyone else saw them. He radioed a warning but it was ignored. Beurling then broke formation without permission and attacked the incoming German planes, shooting down their leader. Beurling's initiative was considered to be insubordination, and he received another reprimand.

Fed up with the arbitrary and vindictive nature of his commanding officers, Beurling offered to take the place of a married pilot who did not want to be sent to Malta. Since Malta was anything but a plum assignment and the RAF's contingent on the island desperately needed pilots, his request was promptly accepted.

On June 9, 1942, Beurling flew his Spitfire off the deck of the HMS *Eagle* and landed in Malta. Upon arriving in Malta, he was assigned to No. 249 Squadron, where his reputation as a troublemaker preceded him. After sizing Beurling up, Wing Commander Laddie Lucas judged that what Beurling needed was encouragement instead of being smacked down. "I promised that I would give him my trust and that if he abused it, he would be on the next aircraft out of Malta," Lucas reported. Beurling never let Lucas down during his time on Malta.

Beurling soon shot down a Bf-109, but nobody saw it crash, so it was unconfirmed and he received only a "probable" in the scoring system. A lull in the action followed; this down time allowed Beurling to spend countless hours working out the principles of deflection shooting, that is, how far ahead of the enemy he had to shoot for the targeted enemy plane to fly into his bullets. He reportedly used some of the unfortunate lizards on Malta to substitute for 109's as his pistol targets.

His self-training seemed to have worked out. On July 6, three sorties resulted in three confirmed kills: two Italian Macchi 202's and a Bf-109. Added to his two victories over the English Channel, the three kills made Beurling an ace. On July 27, 1942, he shot down Italian ace Furio Doglio Nicolt and his wingman in their Macchi-202's. On July 29, it was another Bf-109. By the end of July, Beurling was credited with 17 confirmed kills, 15 during the "July Blitz." He was awarded the Distinguished Flying Medal and a bar by the end of the month. Since Beurling was now a leading ace, he was forced to accept a promotion to Flying Officer.

About this time Beurling earned the nickname "screwball" because of his outrageous behavior. In his book, Laddie Lucas recalled, "He possessed a penchant for calling everything and everyone---the Maltese, the Bf-109's, the flies---'those goddam screwballs.'"

After being awarded another medal in September, 1942, Beurling reeled off eight victories in five days during his "October Blitz." On October 10, he flew his last mission over Malta. He led three Spitfires in an attack on eight Ju-88's that were protected by 50 fighters. Beurling shot down a bomber but bullets from his foe's tail gun hit him in a finger and forearm. Then two Bf-109's closed behind him and shattered his canopy. He dove for the water at 400 mph and shook them off, then shot down another 109 as he came out of his dive. More Bf-109's jumped him and he was wounded several times by gunfire and shrapnel. As his engine began to catch on fire, he climbed out of his cockpit and managed to jump off his left wing. Beurling landed in the water and was rescued by a water launch.

No matter how much Beurling wanted to continue to fight he was too badly wounded to return to combat. He was patched up and readied for evacuation to Gibraltar. During his four month stay in Malta, he had compiled 28 victories. With two more over the Channel, his total now stood at 30.

On November 1, 1942, Beurling was one of many pilots and civilians who boarded a B-24 Liberator bomber bound for Gibraltar. But to add to his ordeals, the Liberator crash landed in Gibraltar with many casualties. Beurling survived the crash by swimming 160 yards to shore while wearing a heavy plaster cast on his injured foot.

Already a national hero in his homeland, Beurling was ordered back to Canada by the Canadian Prime Minister to campaign on behalf of the Third Victory Loan fundraising drive. But he was a disaster at public relations and was soon sent back to England. The RAF made Beurling an aerial gunnery instructor, but he was a failure at that also. Finally, he applied for admission to the RCAF which accepted him. He was assigned to 403 Wolf Squadron flying sorties over France where he bagged two more victories over FW-109's. However, his behavior became intolerable, and the RCAF finally gave him an honorable discharge.

From there, Beurling's life spiraled downward as his marriage failed, and he lost three civilian jobs. For a time, Canada's greatest air ace, with 32 confirmed kills, begged on the streets of Montreal.

In 1948, Beurling's luck turned. The newly formed state of Israel was struggling to create an air force. Israel was searching the world for planes and pilots and Beurling volunteered. After some Israeli reluctance, they signed him up. However, he never flew a fighter plane for Israel. On May 20, 1948, the Canadian-built Noorduyn Norseman aircraft he was piloting to Israel crashed near Rome. Though it was never proven, sabotage was suspected. Beurling was buried in Israel along with four other Canadian Christian veterans who died fighting for Israel. To this day, his grave is a place of honor in Haifa's military cemetery.

Whatever Beurling's many foibles were, he should be remembered for what he accomplished under the nicknames of "The Falcon of Malta" and "The Knight of Malta." He remains a legend of Canadian aviation. George Beurling was a flawed but truly gifted and courageous individual and proof that heroes can come in any form.

