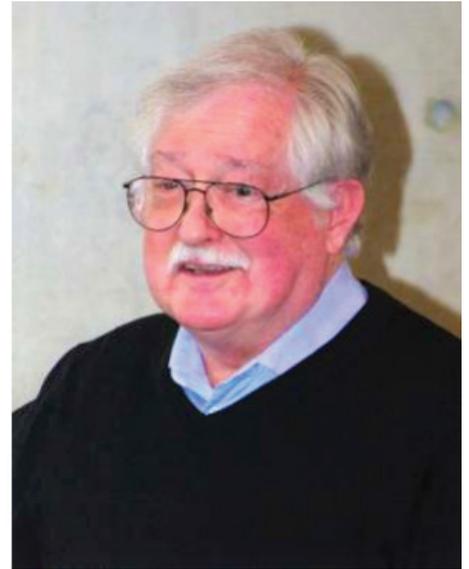


Air Battles of WWII – Malta

Author / – Richard Banigan (2012)

This year of 2020 has certainly been one of surprises and unexpected results. The onset of COVID-19 was swift with its impacts and affected all organizations, such as CAHS, that held regular public events and meetings. The CAHS Toronto Chapter obeyed the public “Lockdown” order and cancelled the April and May meetings. This action resulted in the cancellation of “Flypast” V. 54 No. 7 for May. Since no meeting was held in April, we had no content to publish for the May issue. But the good news is that you now have in your hands or keyboard the V.54 No. 7 issue of “Flypast” which now completes Volume 54. Coming to our aid was one of our former speakers and friend of the Chapter, Richard Banigan. Richard, of course, was one of the three original founders of the “Toronto Aerospace Museum”. Richard last spoke to the Chapter in March of 2013, about “Canada’s New Fighter Comparisons”, a topic still before the Canadian government with no decision to date. Richard’s presentation of that date is still very valid, and is worthy of another read and can be found in **“Flypast” V.47 No. 6, April 2013**. At the end of that meeting Richard gave the Chapter a copy of his “Air Battles of WWII – Malta” (2012) presentation. Richard said that the presentation could be used if the Chapter ever lacked a speaker or presentation. The Chapter has been very fortunate to always have a speaker booked for our meetings until the present situation. Many thanks Richard for your gracious gift!



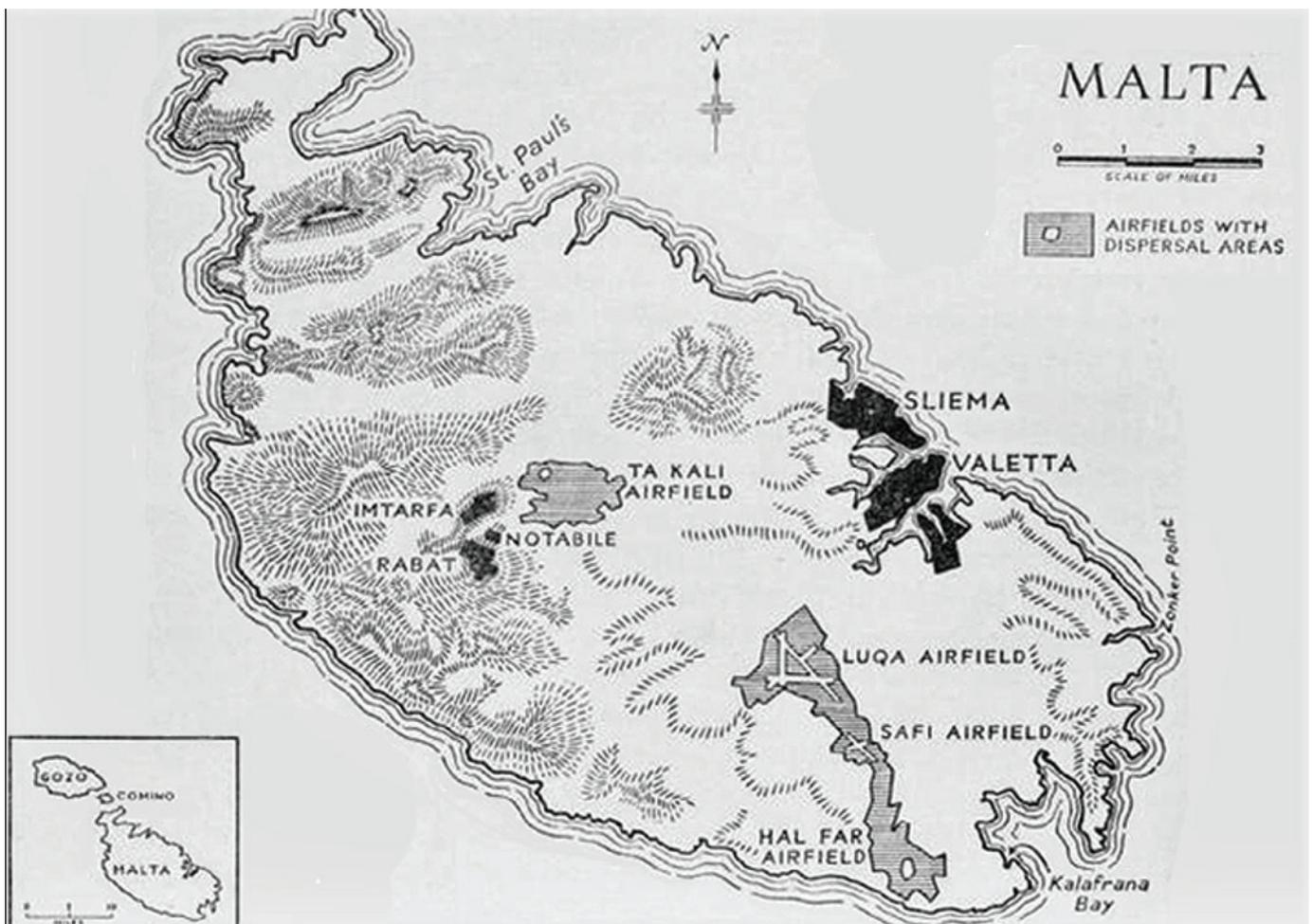
Speaker - Richard Banigan
Photo Credit - Neil McGavock

Background

The country of Malta, comprising the islands of Malta and Gozo, plus a few smaller islands, has had a long and fascinating history and was first inhabited as early as 5900 B.C. A civilization that around 3850 B.C. built the Megalithic Temples, which are today among the oldest surviving buildings in the world. Malta, located on an underwater ridge, spanning between the Island of Sicily and Africa, has been a strategic military and political strongpoint for many centuries. The next occupying peoples were the “Bronze Age Warriors”. Around 700 B.C. Malta was colonized by the Phoenicians who ruled the islands until they fell to the Roman Republic in 218 B.C. During Roman Rule, on 60 A.D. **St. Paul** was shipwrecked on the island on his way to Rome and he then brought Christianity to Malta. Present day St. Paul’s Bay on the northeastern coast (See map) is named in his honour. The Arab nations conquered the island in 870 A.D. and left an important mark on the Maltese language. Until 1530 A.D. Malta was an extension of Sicily which was ruled by the conquering Normans, Aragonese and others who ruled Sicily, also governed Malta. It was Charles V, the “Holy Roman Emperor”, who bequeathed Malta to the “Sovereign Military Order of St. John of Jerusalem” who ruled over Malta from 1530 to 1797. The “Knights” took Malta through a “Golden Age” of cultural and artistic life, by bringing in famous artists to embellish churches, palaces and auberges (Inns). The eight-pointed “Maltese Cross” owes its origin to the “Knights of Malta” and is used by the St. John’s Ambulance Service in Canada as its symbol as well as in many other countries.



In modern history Malta became a British Protectorate in 1813 and this was later confirmed by the Treaty of Paris in 1814. Malta then developed as an important naval base for Britain and as headquarters for the Mediterranean fleet. Malta's geographic position in the "Straits of Sicily" gave Britain control of almost all east-west sea traffic from Gibraltar to the Suez Canal, creating a major military advantage. This British asset was a detriment to Italy's ambitious nationalistic plan to expand its southern national boundary to North Africa by expansion of its existing colonies in Libya. This massive plan included the annexation of Egyptian lands all the way to Suez. As an obstacle to Italy's plans, Malta, therefore became a prime target. Italy then asked its Axis partner, Germany, to help in the removal of Malta as a threat to the completion of Italy's ill-advised bold annexation attack on other nations. Germany saw the advantage of the plan as a partner to Italy, since German participation would divert scarce British war resources from the European Theatre. After many centuries of domination and being ruled by others, Malta finally became an independent republic in 1974. Now that we have had an introduction to the incredible "Malta Story", please read and view the following shortened version of Richard Banigan's presentation starting in 1940.



Malta is basically a rock with an excellent harbour at Valetta and a vital strategic position.

1940

The opportunistic fascist dictator of Italy, **Benito Mussolini**, had declared war on France and the U.K. in the evening of June 10, 1940. At 0430 the next morning the bombing of Malta from nearby Sicily by the **Regia Aeronautica (Royal Italian Air Force)** had begun. With the battle of France raging and the Battle of Britain looking inevitable, it was not at all clear if it was desirable or possible to defend Malta. Nevertheless, the token hard-pressed RAF team on the island managed to scrounge some Gloster Sea Gladiators biplane fighters packed in crates from the docks at Valletta's Grand Harbour that had been intended for the Royal Navy Carriers. So began the legend of "Faith, Hope and Charity", the names given to the first three Sea Gladiators assembled. Actually, there were six Sea Gladiators immediately available, and more modern Hawker Hurricanes fighters began arriving within days from elsewhere in the Mediterranean. The Hurricanes began to decimate the unescorted Italian Savoia Marchetti bombers, while only one Gladiator was lost in combat, variable pitch propellers were eventually fitted to the Gladiators to improve performance. After the Battle of Britain was won, British forces gradually made headway against the Italians around Malta and in Libya. In late 1940, F/L Adrian Warburton in a specially modified Martin Maryland bomber photographed Italian ports, including Taranto, from Hal Far, Malta. The famous Fairey Swordfish raid on Taranto from HMS Illustrious occurred on the night of Nov. 11 and 12, 1940, that crippled the Italian fleet.



Malta was attacked at 0430, June 11, 1940, hours after Mussolini declared war on Britain.



The Gloster Sea Gladiator was even slower than the Fiat C.R. 42 at 257 mph.



A Hawker Hurricane Mk. IIA of 261 Sqn., hastily organized at Takali, Aug. 8, 1940.



◀ The Martin 167 Maryland Mk. I was faster than some Italian fighters at 278 mph.



Fairey Swordfish Torpedo Bombers

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1941

The Luftwaffe joined the air battle for Malta in 1941, no doubt recognizing the strategic importance of the island in the Mediterranean theatre. Air superiority then shifted back to the Axis for the next few months. Without proper revetments, the RAF lost many aircraft on the ground, especially the larger Wellington bombers. The solution was to reinforce Malta with the latest Hurricane Mk. IIA/B fighters, brought part way by carrier from Gibraltar. The Hurricanes often had to fight their way into Malta, and might end up destroyed on the ground anyway. By April, however, Mussolini was getting bogged down in Greece, and Adolf Hitler was forced to initiate campaigns further east, from the Balkans to Crete to North Africa. **Erwin Rommel, the “Desert Fox”**, was sent with the Afrika Corps to Libya to bolster Italian forces there. By June, Hitler could wait no longer for “Operation Barbarossa”, the invasion of the USSR. This drew the Luftwaffe away from Malta for the time being, and allowed the RAF to regain control of the air. Blast pens and dispersals for aircraft were hastily constructed. The RAF and FAA were able to go on the offensive, sinking over 160,000 tons of Axis shipping by November. The Luftwaffe returned to Sicily in December, commencing a savage blitz and blockade on the island that would last for almost a year.



Messerschmitt Bf 109E-7s of JG 26 at Gela, Sicily, 1941. The Luftwaffe arrived Jan. 8.



S.M. 79s from 193 Squadriglia, 87 Gruppo, 30 Stormo, from Sciacca, Sicily, early 1941.



Wellington IC of 40 Sqn., at Gibraltar enroute to Malta. Destroyed on ground Dec. 29, '41.



A Hawker Hurricane from Malta scrambles to intercept incoming Italian bombers.



Italian ship Pietro Querini torpedoed off Tunisia by HMS Union, photographed by 82 Sqn.



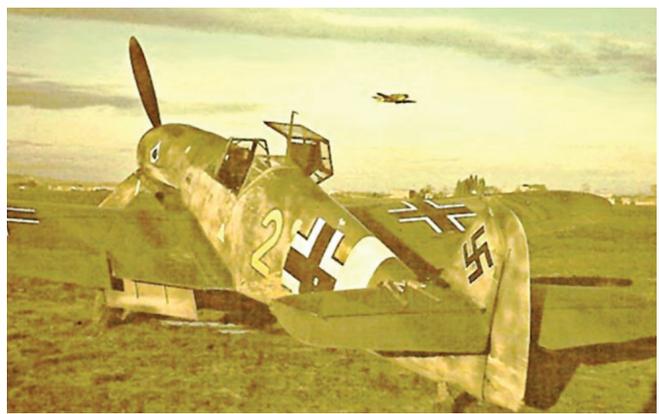
Junkers Ju-88A-4s from 3/LG 1, 1942. This training group was often used to bomb Malta.

1942

The air war over Malta rapidly escalated in 1942, resulting in starvation and homelessness for the Maltese people. New aircraft such as the Macchi M.C. 202, and the latest Messerschmitt Bf 109F and G models, were far superior to the Hurricane. The RAF needed the Spitfire Mk. V on Malta, but it was not known if high performance Spitfires could take off from the small British carriers. However, trials were successful and by March 7th Spitfires and veteran pilots slowly began to arrive. **PM Winston Churchill** personally appealed to **President Franklin Roosevelt** for help in supplying Malta. In April and May, the large fleet carrier, USS Wasp, was used to ferry much larger numbers of Spitfires. Malta soon became “a fighter pilot’s paradise” according to **George “Buzz” Beurling**, Canada’s greatest ace of WWII. For most others, Malta was “Hell’s Island”. After taking Tobruk in May, the overextended Rommel was finally halted at El Alamein in June, practically on the doorstep of Suez, and was forced to begin the long retreat back to Tunisia. **Operation Pedestal** in August was a maximum effort by the Royal Navy to break through the blockade, resulting in some of the bitterest fighting of the campaign in the Mediterranean. **Operation Herkules** of the same month was the Axis plan for the actual invasion. Malta was very close to surrendering at this time.



Macchi M.C. 202



Messerschmitt Bf-109F in Sicily 1942



Spitfire taking off from a Carrier. Wood blocks were used to jam the flaps down.

Canadian Flying Officer George Buzz Beurling adding victory crosses to his Spitfire.



1943

Operation Torch, the Allied invasion of Algeria on Nov. 8, 1942 had effectively ended the blitz on Malta. Within days the Luftwaffe was tasked to defend Rommel's flank in Tunisia. Hitler's obsession with invading the USSR had overstretched German forces in the Mediterranean, and he never did get around to invading Malta. Italy proved quite unable to replace its losses in ships and aircraft. Rommel was finally expelled from

Tunisia in May, 1943. Fighters from Malta devastated Luftwaffe JU 52 and Me 323 transports evacuating troops to Sicily. The Desert Air Force moved up to Malta. The amphibious assault on Sicily began July 10th with Malta as the primary base for allied air power. Italy surrendered by September. Spitfire pilots had claimed they were shooting down twice as many enemy fighters as they were losing, but official records showed that the opposite was true. The Spitfire VC Trop had been outclassed by the latest Messerschmitt Bf 109F/G models. The faster Spitfire



The Special Erection Party at Gibraltar. Some of these Spitfires used in Operation Torch.

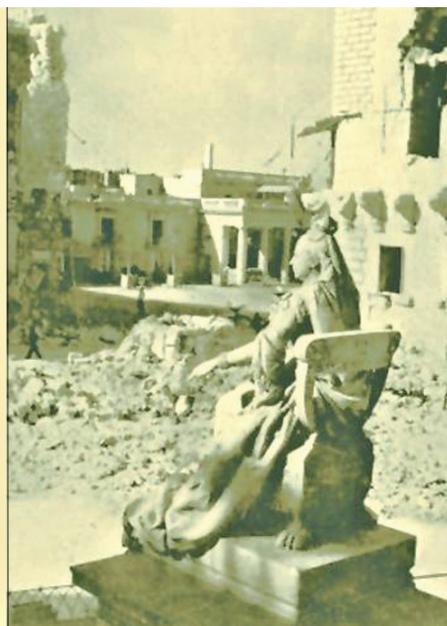
Mk. IX only appeared after the main air battles were over. Malta had been successfully defended but at huge cost, especially to the people. You could say the victory was mostly because of events happening elsewhere. But, the courage and fortitude of the Maltese people are undeniable. Malta achieved its independence from Britain in 1964, and became a republic in 1974. Richard's presentation on the **Air Battles of WWII – Malta** can be seen in its entirety on the Toronto Chapter's website as.... www.torontoaviationhistory.com/blogsandreferences/bobsblog/airbattles.



Italy surrenders but Feldmarschall Albert Kesselring vows to fight on, Sept. 8, 1943.



The people of Malta were awarded the George Cross in 1942. Queen Victoria survived.



Footnote

As is known and confirmed, Malta was one of the most heavily bombed areas in all of WWII. The Luftwaffe and the Regia Aeronautica flew a total of 3,000 bombing raids, dropping 6,700 tons of bombs on the Grand Harbour at Valletta alone. If the Axis had succeeded in destroying the port and airfields, they were planning to invade the country by launching an amphibious operation coded “Operation Herkules”. With the resolve of the British Forces and the courage of the Maltese people that did not happen, and resulted in the successful defence of Malta. The major military achievement resulting from the securing of Malta was the singular major contribution to the Allies Victory in the North African Campaign. Further insights to the conflict can found in the 1953 Movie, “Malta Story”, available on YouTube. The DVD of the movie and a book on Buzz Beurling called “Malta Spitfire” (2002) are available on Amazon.



Chapter News & Views

Folded Wings

CAHS Toronto Chapter was saddened to learn of the passing of two long time members, namely **Douglas Broadribb, Member #2155** and **Albert Wallace, Member #3924**. Douglas was also a National CAHS member. Doug, as he was known to his friends, passed away at home in Hamilton on April 4th. He was just shy of 87. Doug was a native of Brantford, ON, where his British-born father was an air maintenance engineer. He was a good friend of fellow Chapter member Osborne Love, CAHS #80, who first met Doug more than 35 years ago when they attended air shows. Doug exemplified keen enthusiasts who, camera in hand, loved the action of an air show or fly-in and conversing with colleagues on the latest news. Doug built an impressive collection of prints & slides as he travelled with Os Love and Gord McNulty, enjoying aviation activities throughout southern Ontario and adjoining American states. Over time, he met Toronto Chapter CAHS stalwarts as Jack McNulty and Bob Finlayson building friendships with top photographers such as Gus and Clara Corujo, Frank Ertl and more.