

THE FLEET AIR ARM IN MALTA

Introduction

The history of the Maltese Islands goes back to at least 3,500BC with recorded history starting around 1,500 BC with the Phoenicians. The islands of Malta and Gozo, the latter about half the size, lies right across the main Mediterranean trading route; being about equally distant between Gibraltar and Alexandria. Because of this important strategic position and one of the largest natural harbours in the Mediterranean, they were coveted by many nations. A succession of nations has controlled Malta over the centuries, sometimes for many years, including Carthaginians, Romans, Byzantine, and Arabs. The Norman Count Roger of Sicily ejected the Arabs in 1090. Despite attacks from pirates, Turks and Moslem forces from North Africa over the centuries Malta has remained a Christian stronghold to this day.

The Fleet Air Arm in Malta

Malta has long been associated with the Royal Navy, with the rise of Napoleon and his quest for European domination; a dedicated Mediterranean Fleet has maintained a constant presence, except from 1796 to 1798 because of the risk of England being invaded by the French. Admiral Lord Nelson figured prominently in the Mediterranean with the capture of Malta from the French and his historic victory at the battle of the Nile. From this point the British Fleet regained its dominant position in the Mediterranean and was not to lose it until 1941.

In WW1 a large RN fleet was maintained in the Mediterranean with our Allies the French. Amongst the large variety of RN ships was a new type of vessel, the seaplane carrier *Ark Royal*. This ship would be based in Malta for the rest of the war. A second seaplane carrier, *Manxman* (a fast minelayer of this name would appear in the defence of Malta in 1942), in 1918 *Engadine* also joined. Over 100 seaplanes were operating from Malta in those years, 36 from the three carriers and the rest from the newly opened Malta Naval Air Station.

During the inter-war years the RN maintained a strong fleet in the Mediterranean based at Malta, with ships visiting many ports and immaculate Royal Marines beating the Retreat on the quaysides. Rear Admiral Andrew Cunningham came to Malta in 1934, later to become Commander-in-Chief during WW2, also Lord Louis Mountbatten as the Captain of the Destroyer *Wishart*. The Fleet Air Arm (FAA) was gaining in strength with aircraft carriers such as HMS *Eagle* forming part of the Mediterranean Fleet in 1930. The aircraft in those days were slow biplanes, which was an advantage for deck landings. The new purpose built aircraft carrier HMS *Ark Royal* visited Malta in January 1939, with a 800 foot flight deck and double hangers, she could hold over 60 aircraft.

When WW2 started the fighter defence of the islands were non-existent despite having four airfields, with Hal Far being the one allocated to the Fleet Air Arm. With Mussolini declaring war on the side of Hitler on June 10th 1940 and the surrender of France two weeks later the balance of power in the Mediterranean changed. In those early days the island was defended by biplane Gloster Sea Gladiators. From a stock of 18 aircraft of 802 squadron remaining at Malta after HMS *Glorious* was sunk in 1940, three Sea Gladiators became international legends, "Faith", "Hope" and "Charity". They were part of the Hal Far Fighter Flight, composed of mixed RAF and FAA personnel.

"Faith". Sea Gladiator N5520 of 802 squadron from June to November 1939, she joined the Hal Far Fighter Flight in April 1940. She was quick to defend Malta, and whilst piloted by Flt Lt JL Waters RAF shot down and destroyed an Italian S.79 on 11 June 1940, and the next day on 12 June 1940 destroyed another S.79. She was renamed "Faith" between October 1941 and January 1942. The Fuselage is preserved in Malta.

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"Hope". Sea Gladiator N5531 of 802 squadron from June 1939 to January 1940, joined the Hal Far Flight, and was renamed "Hope on 19 April 1940. She was destroyed in an air raid on 4 February 1941

"Charity". Sea Gladiator N5519 'G6A' of 802 squadron from June-September 1939, she joined the Hal Far Fighter Flight and renamed 'Charity' on 19 April 1940. She was involved in defending Malta over the critical 1940 period but was shot down on 29 July 1940 and her pilot F/O PW Hartley RAF was badly burned.

In August 1940 the old carrier *Argus* flew off 12 Hurricane fighters from a position near Sardinia, so that the island had some modern fighter cover at last. Over the next 2 years the fighter supply would increase significantly and the defence of Malta would cost Britain dearly.

A major success by the FAA was the crippling of some Italian battleships at their moorings in the harbour of Taranto. Swordfish torpedo planes from the carrier *Illustrious* carried out a daring raid against this heavily defended harbour, only two being shot down. The *Illustrious* was severely damaged by German Stuka dive-bombers whilst defending a large convoy from Gibraltar in January 1941. Even when being repaired alongside Parlatorio Wharf she was further damaged and had to sail for the USA for major repairs, not returning until 1943. In October 1941 a squadron of Albacores arrived at Hal Far making 17 sorties with the Swordfish aircraft.

Modern and sufficient fighter aircraft were essential for the defence of convoys and the islands because of the severity and quantity of the Axis air attacks increased. In her short career the *Ark Royal* ferried 327 fighters to Malta before her loss off Gibraltar in November 1941.

For the brave people of Malta and the RN 1942 would be the greatest test of all, the ferocity of the German air attacks would have the object of breaking the will of the people and starving them of essential supplies. In February 1942 the Swordfish of 830 squadron of the Fleet Air Arm carried out 13 sorties, despite Hal Far being heavily cratered by bombs. The German bombing was very accurate so that the damage was tremendous with much of the towns being destroyed.

In the following months 21 RN warships would be sunk in the harbour and a total of 6,700 tons of bombs were dropped on the towns of Malta.

Operational Pedestal in August 1942 was the most hard fought of all convoys, with the carrier *Eagle* being sunk and only five merchant ships getting through; however the tanker *Ohio* delivered her precious cargo of oil. The Axis forces stepped up their efforts as the time for the great land battle of El Alamein approached, 40% of enemy supplies were lost en route, this was a critical factor in the desert war.

The British success at the battle of El Alamein now meant that the Axis forces were now in retreat, Malta's fortune changed quite rapidly with more forces operating from the island and more convoys getting through with supplies. Operation Stoneage was the final convoy, which raised the Siege, all merchant ships getting through. Fleet Air Arm planes from Hal Far continued their sorties, also manning Hurricane fighters, which carried out intruder operations over Sicily. After the capitulation of the Italians and the build up to the invasion of Italy at Anzio, allied forces used Malta extensively. HMS *Illustrious* returned and the new light fleet carriers of the *Colossus* class were seen in Grand harbour, carrying a greater quantity and more potent types of aircraft.

The Admiralty decided that Malta was the only naval base in the Empire where naval air training could be carried out along with general fleet training. Malta's airfields were reorganised, the fighter field at Ta'Qali was used by the navy from early 1944 and was commissioned as Fleet Air Arm (FAA) HMS *Goldfinch*. At the latter, 111 aircraft could be accommodated, including disembarked aircraft from passing carriers. The airfield at Hal Far, on the southern cliffs, was used by the FAA throughout the war and was formally commissioned as HMS *Falcon* in 1946.

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By VE Day the people and personnel in Malta had largely settled into a peace time regime, with food and supplies once again plentiful, the ships continued to crowd into the harbours, many aircraft carriers being amongst them. The Royal Navy finished the war in the Mediterranean on a high note, the fleet's ascendancy had been firmly established, and Malta had been proved once more to be a vital naval base in a unique position.

References : 1) The Cross and the Ensign by Peter Elliott
2) FAA Archive website