

= John Plagis =

Ioannis Agorastos " John " Plagis , DSO , DFC & Bar (1919 ? 1974) was a Southern Rhodesian flying ace in the Royal Air Force (RAF) during the Second World War , noted especially for his part in the defence of Malta during 1942 . The son of Greek immigrants , he was accepted by recruiters only after Greece joined the Allies in late 1940 . Following spells with No. 65 Squadron and No. 266 (Rhodesia) Squadron , he joined No. 249 (Gold Coast) Squadron in Malta in March 1942 . Flying Spitfire Mk Vs , Plagis was part of the multinational group of Allied pilots that successfully defended the strategically important island against numerically superior Axis forces over the next few months . Flying with No. 185 Squadron from early June , he was withdrawn to England in early July 1942 .

After a spell as an instructor in the UK , Plagis returned to action in September 1943 as commander of No. 64 Squadron , flying Spitfire Mk VCs over northern France . He took command of No. 126 (Persian Gulf) Squadron in June 1944 , and led many attacks on German positions during the invasion of France and the campaign that followed ; he was shot down over Arnhem during Operation Market Garden , but only lightly wounded . After converting to Mustang IIIs , he commanded a wing based at RAF Bentwaters that supported bombing missions . He finished the war with the rank of squadron leader and remained with the RAF afterwards , operating Gloster Meteors at the head of No. 266 (Rhodesia) Squadron .

Plagis was the top @-@ scoring Southern Rhodesian ace of the war , and the highest @-@ scoring ace of Greek origin , with 16 confirmed aerial victories , including 11 over Malta . Awarded the Distinguished Service Order and other medals , he was also one of Rhodesia 's most decorated veterans . The Southern Rhodesian capital , Salisbury , honoured his wartime contributions by naming a street in its northern Alexandra Park neighbourhood after him . On his return home after retiring from the RAF with the rank of wing commander in 1948 , he set up home at 1 John Plagis Avenue , opened a bottle store bearing his name , and was a director of several companies , including Central African Airways in the 1960s . He contested the Salisbury City constituency in the 1962 general election , running for the Rhodesian Front , but failed to win . He died in 1974 , reportedly by suicide .

= = Early life = =

John Plagis was born on 10 March 1919 in Gadzema , a mining village near Hartley , about 110 kilometres (68 mi) south @-@ west of the Southern Rhodesian capital Salisbury . His parents , Agorastos and Helen Plagis , were Greek immigrants from the island of Lemnos ; he had five siblings . Christened with the Greek name Ioannis Agorastos , Plagis used the English form of Ioannis , John , from childhood , and attended Prince Edward School in Salisbury .

Having been interested in aviation since he was a boy , Plagis volunteered for the Southern Rhodesian Air Force (SRAF) soon after the outbreak of war in September 1939 . He was turned down because he was the son of foreign nationals and therefore not a citizen , despite having lived in Rhodesia all his life . After Italy invaded Greece in late October 1940 , bringing the Greeks into the war on the Allied side , Plagis applied again ? this time to join the Royal Air Force , which had absorbed the SRAF in April 1940 ? and was accepted . Training first in Southern Rhodesia , then England , Plagis passed out with the rank of flight sergeant in June 1941 with above @-@ average ratings in all of his flying assessments .

Though he was officially in the RAF as a Greek (he became a Rhodesian citizen only after the war) , Plagis considered himself a Rhodesian flyer and wore shoulder flashes on his uniform denoting him as such . He named each aircraft he piloted during the war after his sister Kay , and painted that name on the side of each cockpit . After briefly flying Spitfires with No. 65 Squadron RAF , Plagis joined No. 266 (Rhodesia) Squadron , an almost all @-@ Rhodesian Spitfire unit , on 19 July 1941 . He served in the UK for about half a year , during which he was commissioned as a pilot officer , before being posted to the Mediterranean theatre in January 1942 .

= = Air war in Europe and the Mediterranean = =

= = = First tour of operations = = =

Plagis 's first major operation was Operation Spotter , the first of many British endeavours to reinforce the besieged island of Malta in the face of German and Italian assaults during the Battle of the Mediterranean . Malta was considered to be of vital strategic importance , and its defence was looking increasingly precarious in March 1942 . Spotter was a plan to strengthen its British garrison with 16 new Spitfire Mk Vs , which would be carried part of the way from Gibraltar on the aircraft carrier HMS Eagle , then flown to Malta ; the pilots would then become part of the severely depleted No. 249 (Gold Coast) Squadron . The team of pilots comprised eight British airmen , four Australians , two New Zealanders and two Southern Rhodesians ? Plagis and his close friend Pilot Officer Doug Leggo .

The operation , carried out on 7 March 1942 , was largely successful and 15 of the 16 Spitfires reached Malta . Plagis and Leggo arrived to find a third Rhodesian , Flight Officer George " Buck " Buchanan , already attached to the squadron . A further delivery of 16 Spitfires , Operation Picket I , was attempted on 21 March , but this was less successful ; only nine of the planes arrived . Thirteen Spitfire reinforcement operations were ultimately launched between March and October 1942 , playing a key role in the siege . The Luftwaffe and the Italian Regia Aeronautica meanwhile attempted to bomb Malta into submission , turning the airfields into " a wilderness of craters , the docks ... a shambles , Valletta a mass of broken limestone ... "

The Luftwaffe launched a major attack against key Maltese airfields at dawn on 20 March . Leggo , who had not slept for over 24 hours , returned to the airfield in the early hours having spent the night with a girlfriend . As the German planes approached he was ordered to prepare to fly . Plagis attempted to stop his friend from going , but Leggo insisted on flying , and took off at 08 : 05 as part of a group of four Spitfires and 12 Hurricanes aiming to intercept a squadron of Messerschmitt Bf 109s . He was soon seen to be flying poorly . A German pilot noticed this and attacked Leggo from close range , seriously damaging his aircraft and forcing him to bale out . Another Bf 109 then swooped and either fired at Leggo or collapsed his parachute with its slipstream , causing him to fall to his death . When Plagis learned what had happened , he was inconsolable , holding himself responsible . In his journal , he vowed to " shoot down ten for Doug ? I will too , if it takes me a lifetime " .

Plagis shot down his first enemy aircraft on 25 March 1942 , and on 1 April achieved four more aerial victories in a single afternoon , thereby becoming the Siege of Malta 's first Spitfire ace . His downing of four enemies in a few hours won him much praise from superiors and reporters , and contributed to his growing reputation as an aggressive but skilful combat pilot . He was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross (DFC) on 1 May 1942 , the citation noting that he had " destroyed 4 and probably destroyed a further 3 hostile aircraft " . " With complete indifference to odds against him , he presses home his attacks with skill and courage , " it continued ? " He has set an outstanding example . "

On 11 May , Plagis attempted to down an Italian Reggiane Re.2001 by flying straight at it to ram it ; taking erratic evasive manoeuvres , the Italian aircraft stalled and almost crashed into the sea . Thinking he had downed the enemy , Plagis claimed afterwards to have achieved an aerial victory without firing a shot , but the Italian flight reported no losses . Plagis 's Spitfire was lightly hit during this engagement , and the Rhodesian had some luck returning safely ; he landed with only three gallons (14 litres) of fuel left . On 16 May , Plagis and an English ace , Pilot Officer Peter Nash , destroyed a Bf 109 for a shared kill that became No. 249 Squadron 's 100th victory over Malta . Amid the continuing siege , the need for a major supply convoy to Malta was becoming urgent ; the Governor Lord Gort warned Britain in early June that if no supplies came by August , he would have to surrender to prevent a famine .

Plagis was promoted in the field to flight lieutenant on 4 June 1942 and transferred to No. 185 Squadron to command " B " Flight . He shot down two Re.2001s two days later to bring his tally of victories to ten (thereby fulfilling his pledge following Leggo 's death) , and destroyed a Bf 109 on 7

June . A month later , he received a Bar to his DFC , having been adjudged to have shown " exceptional skill and gallantry in combat ... Undeterred by superior numbers of attacking aircraft , he presses home his attacks with great determination . " Plagis left Malta when his tour expired on 7 July 1942 , flying first to Gibraltar , then the UK . The British finally delivered vital supplies to Malta on 15 August with Operation Pedestal (known in Malta as the " Santa Marija Convoy ") .

On arriving in England , Plagis was found to be suffering from malnutrition , scabies and physical and mental fatigue . He briefly convalesced in a nursing home , then spent a year as an instructor in England . He was promoted to probationary flying officer on 1 October 1942 .

= = = Second tour of operations = = =

Plagis returned to action in September 1943 , when he was appointed commanding officer of No. 64 Squadron , then flying Spitfire Mk VCs over northern France from RAF Coltishall in Norfolk . Plagis downed a Bf 109 over France on 24 September 1943 , then a Focke @-@ Wulf Fw 190 on 23 November , and formally received the rank of flight lieutenant on 8 December 1943 .

At the start of June 1944 , Plagis assumed command of No. 126 (Persian Gulf) Squadron , flying Spitfire Mk IXs that had recently been moved from Malta to assist in the invasion of Normandy . Six of the squadron 's planes had been purchased by the Persian Gulf Spitfire Fund , and duly named after the donating sheikdoms ; Plagis 's aircraft , which he chose because of the large letter " K " on its tail (echoing his sister 's name) , had " Muscat " painted in English and Arabic script on its side . He added to this a full rendering of " Kay " and other personal decorations .

After leading No. 126 Squadron on raids into Normandy during the Allied invasion , Plagis took part in many of the attacks on German positions in northern France and the Low Countries that followed over the next few months . He was shot down over Arnhem in the Netherlands during Operation Market Garden in September 1944 , but suffered only minor injuries and quickly returned to action . He received the Distinguished Service Order on 3 November for his " participat [ion] in very many sorties during which much damage has been inflicted on ... [German] shipping , radio stations , oil storage tanks , power plants and other installations " . The citation particularly stressed an engagement in which a small group of Allied fighters led by Plagis had taken on a far superior force of enemy aircraft and shot down five of them , Plagis himself downing two . Plagis was described as " a brave and resourceful leader whose example has proved a rare source of inspiration " .

Plagis converted to Mustang IIIs along with the rest of his squadron at RAF Bentwaters in Suffolk during December 1944 and January 1945 , and spent the rest of the war flying bomber escort missions at the head of Bentwaters Wing , which included No. 126 Squadron . He was promoted to squadron leader on 28 March 1945 . Germany surrendered on 7 May , ending the war in Europe .

Plagis finished the war with a tally of 16 enemy aircraft confirmed destroyed (including two shared victories counted as half a kill each) , two shared probably destroyed , six damaged and one shared damaged . This made him Southern Rhodesia 's highest @-@ scoring ace of the war , as well as the top @-@ scoring ace of Greek origin . He was one of the most @-@ decorated Southern Rhodesian servicemen of the war .

= = Post @-@ war service and later life = =

Plagis stayed with the RAF following the end of hostilities , and from September 1946 to December 1947 commanded No. 266 (Rhodesia) Squadron in England and Germany , flying Gloster Meteor F.3s. He was awarded the Airman 's Cross by the government of the Netherlands in October 1946 . After retiring from the military with the rank of wing commander , Plagis returned home to Southern Rhodesia in 1948 . A street in the north Salisbury suburb of Alexandra Park had been named after him in recognition of his wartime exploits ; he moved into the house at the end of the road , 1 John Plagis Avenue . He married in 1954 and had three sons and a daughter .

Plagis set up and ran a bottle store bearing his name in Salisbury , and was involved in several businesses during the next three decades , serving as a director on company boards , including Central African Airways from 1963 to 1968 . He joined the Rhodesian Front on its formation in 1962 ,

and was its candidate in Salisbury City in that year 's general election , losing to the United Federal Party 's John Roger Nicholson by 631 votes to 501 . According to a report published by the Zimbabwe African National Union in 1969 , Plagis was by then working in the office of the Rhodesian Prime Minister Ian Smith (himself a Second World War Spitfire pilot) , with responsibility for the premier 's written correspondence .

In later life , Plagis became a friend of British ace Douglas Bader , a prominent supporter of Rhodesia 's Unilateral Declaration of Independence in 1965 . Bader , Smith and Plagis often socialised . Plagis also knew L Ron Hubbard , the American founder of Scientology , who briefly relocated to Salisbury in 1966 . Hubbard initiated numerous business schemes in Rhodesia , including the purchase of the Bumi Hills Hotel at Kariba . Plagis was one of two local businessmen who partnered with Hubbard in the Bumi Hills deal . He also sold Hubbard an interest in his holdings before the American was deported .

Plagis died in 1974 , aged 54 or 55 ; according to Lauren St John , an author from Gadzema , he had committed suicide , having never truly readjusted to civilian life .