

*Malta.*

62. Early in January, the arrival of the German Air Force in Sicily and Southern Italy changed the situation at Malta very considerably. Whereas the Italian air effort against Malta had been half-hearted, the Germans made determined and persistent attacks on the Grand Harbour, aerodromes and flying boat anchorages.

As these attacks by day, and later more frequently by night, became more numerous and intense, the defence of the Island and of the aircraft base there became more difficult. Some of our aircraft were damaged on the ground, as also were hangars and buildings, although casualties to R.A.F. personnel were fortunately light.

At the beginning of January there were operating from Malta:—

No. 261 (F) Squadron—Hurricanes, No. 228 (F/B) Squadron—Sunderlands, No. 431 G.R. Flight—Glenn Martins and No. 148 (B) Squadron—Wellingtons.

The aircraft strength of these units varied, but seldom, if at any time, were they up to establishment. Moreover, repair and maintenance under conditions of constant bombing became extremely difficult. Flying boats at their moorings were particularly vulnerable. Also, a certain amount of congestion resulted at times on the aerodromes when reinforcing flights which used Malta as a "stage post" arrived from England en route to Egypt. It was necessary to pass them on without delay in spite of enemy interference.

63. Under these circumstances I considered it advisable, after discussion with A.O.C. Malta, temporarily to reduce the number of aircraft based on the Island. In deciding which units to retain, the needs of the Navy had to be considered as well as the requirements of local Fighter Defence. The spirit of the garrison and the morale of the Maltese reacted remarkably to the Hurricanes' successes in air combats over Malta. This was a most important consideration, and it was obvious that as many fighters as possible should operate whilst the "game" remained plentiful and enterprising.

Next in importance came the reconnaissance of enemy ports, their approaches, and of the Eastern Mediterranean itself. The former was done by the Glenn Martins at Malta, within their limited capacity—there were seldom more than three serviceable. A P.R.U. (Photographic Reconnaissance Unit) Spitfire, which was at Malta for special photographic work, proved invaluable for this port reconnaissance, but after its loss, through a forced landing in Italy, no replacement was made available from home. The Sunderlands of Nos. 228 and 230 (F/B) Squadrons on their Ionian Sea and Eastern Mediterranean reconnaissances, could still carry on from Alexandria and Suda Bay, and the work of the Wellington Squadron operating against objectives in Italy, Sicily and North Africa could still be done, though on a reduced scale by Wellingtons "on passage". Thus, No. 228 (F/B) Squadron returned to Alexandria and the Wellingtons of No. 148 (B)

Squadron moved to Egypt, detachments being left behind to maintain such Sunderlands as occasionally used Malta, and the Wellingtons on passage to Egypt.

64. In spite of these reductions it was still found possible to operate "passage" Wellingtons occasionally from Malta. An especially successful attack was made on Catania aerodrome on the night of 15/16th January, when 35 German aircraft which had recently arrived were reported to have been destroyed on the ground by 9 Wellingtons.

The Glenn Martins of No. 431 G.R. Flight reconnoitred and photographed Sicilian and Italian Harbours and aerodromes as far North as Naples and Brindisi. They also searched the sea for enemy shipping between Malta, Tunis and Tripoli as well as the West Ionian Sea, supplementing the wider strategical reconnaissance of No. 228 Squadron.

During the period of our occupation of Cyrenaica, Tripoli had remained within range of Wellingtons and Blenheims operating from Benghazi area which reduced the calls on Malta in that direction. However, after the Italian-German counter-offensive in Cyrenaica, which led to our withdrawal to bases outside the range of Tripoli, it became essential to resume operations against that objective from Malta. A detachment of No. 148 Squadron (Wellingtons) was accordingly sent back to Malta during early April, and aircraft of this detachment made 34 night sorties against Tripoli between 13/14th and 24/25th April, dropping upwards of 50 tons of H.E. and incendiary bombs on harbour facilities and shipping with successful results. Fleet Air Arm Swordfish also made torpedo and bombing attacks on convoys off the Tunisian Coast and against shipping at Tripoli.

Towards the end of April Malta was reinforced from home by Blenheims of No. 21 (B) Squadron which made two very effective attacks on enemy shipping. On 1st May, 6 Blenheims of this Squadron bombed and obtained several direct hits on a destroyer and a merchant ship of 3,000 tons near the Kerkenna Islands off the Tunisian Coast. On the following day four Blenheims made another effective bombing attack on a convoy of Italian Naval and merchant ships South-west of Malta, obtaining direct hits on a destroyer and three merchant ships.

65. During the whole period under review the enemy continued to make persistent and heavy scale air attacks at frequent intervals on the Island. The enemy's main objectives appeared to be the Grand Harbour and naval dockyards, as well as the three aerodromes and flying boat anchorage. Especially severe fighting took place over the Island during the repeated dive-bombing attacks on the Grand Harbour and aerodromes on the 16th, 18th and 19th January, and on the Aircraft Carrier H.M.S. "Illustrious" and convoy ships which had arrived in the Harbour on 10th January. The first attacks were recklessly pressed home, and the enemy suffered heavy losses from our fighters and A.A. Batteries. It is reckoned that between the 10th and 19th January, 196