

33 Squadron's Centenary Year

LOYALTY

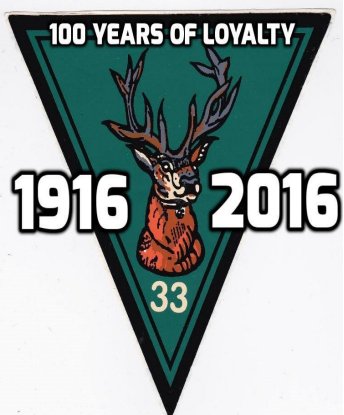
No 33 Squadron RAF Association Newsletter Issue 4 Summer 2016

**PHOTOS: 33 Squadron at the 75th Anniversary
Commemorations in Crete**

**NZ officer breaks
rank over the
Battle of Crete**

Interview with Major General Sandy
Thomas

Reflections: former OC
33 Sqn Dick Lacey



**75th Anniversary
The Battle of Crete
May 1941**



Centenary Whisky



33 Squadron Association have produced a Limited Edition Whisky in partnership with The English Whisky Co. The whisky is the Classic Single Malt 700ml, 43% vol. presented in an engraved decanter with the 33 Squadron Crest. It also features the number in the limited edition run. The cost for one of these bottles on a first come, first served basis is £61. This covers the cost of the Whisky with a small amount of profit that the Association is planning to use in support of the Squadron with the 75th Anniversary of Crete celebrations. The cost includes delivery to Benson, where you will be more than welcome to collect. The cost for delivery to an address in the UK will be £69.



The Whisky is available on a first come first served basis so if you are interested in obtaining a bottle please email

33sqnassociation@gmail.com



From the Editor...

Welcome to the new look 33 Squadron Association Newsletter..

Preparing this edition has been an interesting experience for me over the last few months., with many evenings on a 'teach yourself' crash course using a product I had not realised was on my computer. Unlike many of the young, computer-literate aircrew students I meet regularly in my classroom, all young enough to be my children and who pick up the computer mouse as if it is a museum piece from a bygone era, the process proved to be a challenge for one of advancing years and computing skills that were once just sufficient enough to meet RAF IT requirements. No CBT in those days!

Like so many people facing change, I went through Tuckman's 'Form, Storm, Norm and Perform' process and now I think MS Publisher is excellent. I find a similar reaction in non-Puma crossover students who constantly queried the Puma design and operating methods in ground school, yet they all now seem quite at home and enjoy flying the Mark 2 version, which has many new features that Puma 1 veterans would love to have seen introduced years ago. On 17 February the Puma 2 fleet passed the

major milestone of 10 000 hrs in the air, which is quite an achievement.

This newsletter is a special edition, marking the 75th anniversary of a key event in the Squadron's history. Among the articles I am pleased to offer two different perspectives on the Battle of Crete; the long-term strategic effect and a senior Army officer's critical and personal opinion of why the island was lost, an opinion that General Thomas waited over 70 years to voice.

Please let me know what you think of the new layout, any improvements that could be made and any features that you would like to see. For instance, do you want a Letters or Personal page to track old colleagues? The Association is a two-way process, so your feedback and involvement is essential if we want to see this Association prosper and grow.

I look forward to seeing some of you at the Four Horseshoes in June and discussing the plans that the Committee are working on for the future. Let's hope that we get some weather like the team enjoyed in Crete during the commemorations.

Proud to be ...33,

Dave Stewart



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From the Chair ...

As I sit in my study surrounded by Royal Air Force memorabilia, most of which is from the fruits of serving 11 out of my 38 years of Service on 33 Squadron, I contemplate my first submission as Chairman of the 33 Squadron Association at the significant time of our 100th Anniversary and 75th Remembrance of the Battle of Crete.

A little over three years ago, a Chief Technician whose Loyalty to the Squadron knows no bounds, hatched the idea of founding the Association for 33 Squadron. Some will say it's long overdue and not before time, but as with all of these things, it takes someone to get off their arse and make it happen, which is exactly what Paul Davies did. Thanks to him, we are now three years down the line with 153 members, which consists of, 25 Honorary members (all ex OCs and Sqn WOs), 24 Currently Serving members, and 104 'old sweats' like you and me, most of whom are Loyal to our cause.

I say most of the membership is Loyal, there are unfortunately a few that struggle to give up their £12 a year! Please remember that £12 is the minimum amount requested to maintain your membership. Honorary membership is free, yet still some of these members donate more than the annual fee to support their Association!

As you know the Chair was initially accepted by the then OC 33 Sqn, Wing Commander Mark Biggadike, who secured the Association's place within the Squadron that we enjoy today. As the time came for Mark to move on, I was asked to consider assuming the post, something of course I am delighted and honoured to do. I very much look

forward to working with the new OC 33 Sqn, Wing Commander Andy Baron, someone who, I know, is keen to develop the Squadron / Association relationship further.

My first meeting with the committee, revealed a keen and energetic group of Loyal individuals, who want to work hard to maintain and grow OUR



"It's a deal!" WO Rick Burke-Smith takes charge of the 33 Sqn Association from the outgoing OC, Wing Commander Mark Biggadike.

Association. As with all committees a change of Chair can ring some changes, which resulted in Bogy Webster tendering his resignation after doing an excellent job as publicity member. Dave Stewart, a previous 2ic for the Sqn, has kindly volunteered to replace Bogy in the new role of Editor.

We have had an excellent start to the year celebrating the Squadron's 100th Anniversary with a superb dinner in the hangar, where your Association helped to set up the event and provided the port for the Loyal toast, in addition to sourcing a commemorative Whisky to mark the event.

The 75th Remembrance of the Battle of Crete will be marked this year by a Squadron presence on the

island during Commemoration Week, where Association wreaths will be laid by a Serving Association member.

Some excellent detective work undertaken earlier this year by our Treasurer, Jez Reid, has resulted in the discovery of the final resting place of 33 Sqn's OC at Maleme, Wing Commander Edward Howell, who is buried in St Andrews. I hope to write more about this discovery in a later edition of the Newsletter.

And as I write now a 'Battlefield Tour 2017' is being organized by Dave Stewart for next year. We hope to visit Zeeland in the Netherlands, as 'Walcheren', you will recall, is one of the Squadron's Battle Honours from 1944 yet is very much a forgotten battle for many historians. While researching Dave has found the grave of a 33 Sqn pilot buried in a local cemetery, one of the three pilots who were shot down on the same day, and we plan to lay a wreath there during the visit. The Gold Bullion Wire '33 Sqn' Badges are now on sale for that 'Battlefield Tour' blazer, so don't forget your cheque books for your badge and a deposit!

So we are all here for you, the emphasis is on **OUR** Association, and I see our job as providing for what you as members would like the Association to do. A fine example of this is after several members' requests, this year's function will be held at the Ponderosa (*aka* The Four Horseshoes Pub) on 4th June. Please continue to let us know what you would like to do, and we will do our best to facilitate your requests.

See you all on the 4th June?

RBS

Loyalty



No 33 Squadron's Standard, with Battle Honours emblazoned.

Home Defence 1916-1918*

Palestine 1936-1939

Egypt and Libya 1940-1943*

Greece 1941*

El Alamein*

France and Germany 1944-1945*

Normandy 1944*

Walcheren*

Rhine*

Gulf 1991*

Iraq 2003.

(Honours marked with an asterisk, may be emblazoned on the Squadron Standard)



From the Hart...



Wing Commander Biggadike (left) handing over to Wing Commander Baron

It is an honour to write a short piece for the 33 Squadron Association newsletter as the newly in-post OC 33 Squadron. I took command after the Squadron's centenary celebrations in mid-January, and since then have been fortunate enough to deploy with 33 Squadron on operations in Afghanistan and, more recently, I have just returned from a month in the United States as the Commanding Officer of the UK's Joint Helicopter Force (United States); commanding environmental training deployments on behalf of the Joint Helicopter Command.

This is my third tour on 33 Squadron; my first was as a baby pilot going through the Operational Conversion in 2001; my second as a Flight Commander in 2008 – 10 (alongside the Association Chairman!), and now as the OC. I thoroughly enjoyed my time as a Flight Commander on 33 Squadron and look forward to trying to replicate the success on operations, the aircrew engineer interaction and the professionalism I believe we showed back then.

My first impressions are that the Squadron is a lot smaller than it was when I was on it last, although we are still in a period of growth post the transition from Puma Mk 1 to the impressive Puma Mk 2. This smaller Squadron footprint brings with it a number of significant challenges that both aircrew and engineers must overcome as the 'ask' has not diminished.

As for my intent during my tour; to maintain the high standards of 33 Squadron, to excel when called upon on operations and to continue the growth and development of Puma Mk 2. If all this goes well, then I have no doubt that 33 Squadron will be at the forefront of UK Defence for another 100 years!

OC 33 Sqn

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33 Squadron update...



'A' Flight, under the command of Squadron Leader Jim Hamilton, has returned from a 4 month stint as part of Operation TORAL in Afghanistan, supporting NATO's Resolute Support Mission in and around Kabul. The aircraft and crews chalked up a considerable amount of flying hours during which they encountered everything from blue skies and sunshine to snow storms! They have been replaced by C Flight 230 Squadron, which in turn will hand over to B Flight 33 Squadron at the end of June. The detachment continues to provide the vital capability required to safely transport coalition personnel by air, in and around the area of operation.

Meanwhile other members of 33 Squadron deployed to the Naval Air Facility at El Centro (NAFEC) in Southern California, near the USA/Mexican border, as part of Exercise IMPERIAL ZEPHYR. This was to allow vital desert environmental training qualifications for the aircrew to be completed before they deploy to Afghanistan, or indeed any other region with similar conditions. It also allowed the engineering and support teams to become familiar with preparing, servicing and sometimes fixing (!) the aircraft after they have flown in harsh desert conditions. For some squadron personnel this could mean having to spend an arduous 8 weeks away.

Of particular note was the achievement of the much - acclaimed capability to deploy Puma 2 by air (by RAF C-17 in this instance) and have her ready for flight within 4 hours of unloading, an achievement that all of those who were involved with can feel justly proud. It goes without saying that the opportunities to visit some of the fantastic

locations that 'SoCal' has to offer, and enjoy some downtime, was fully exploited by all on the detachment. No doubt with some legendary tales of daring do to be told in the bar....Or maybe not!

Unfortunately the majority of the Squadron personnel who will be around at the time of the Association function on 4th of June have been tasked to support an all day event at RAF Benson, and will be flying up to 700 Air Cadets as part of the ATC's 75th Celebrations. Although many of us won't be there with you at 'The Ponderosa' in body, our thoughts will be with you, so please raise a glass or two on our behalf!

MACR Gareth Attridge

LOYALTY

We will remember them...



Above: No 33 Squadron personnel proudly standing with Cretans in national dress at the Australian memorial site on the island. WO Geraghty (front row, first left) and MALM Attridge (front row sixth from left) also represented the Association and laid wreathes on our behalf.

Below: The CWGC Cemetery at Souda Bay





CWGC Souda Bay



The Association and Squadron wreaths at Maleme

To coincide with the commemoration services being held at Maleme in Crete, ten hardy souls braved the rather less clement weather conditions here in the UK to pay respects on behalf of the Association at the 33 Squadron Association tree in the RAF Wood at the National Memorial Arboretum near Alrewas, Staffordshire. At 1000 hrs, Paul Davies read out the speech that he had given to Prince Michael of Kent at the 70th Anniversary in 2011. Dick Brewster then read out the names of the thirty No 33 Squadron personnel listed on the joint memorial at Maleme before Dave Stewart laid the wreath against the tree.

The 150 acre National Arboretum, home to over 300 memorials and 40 000 maturing trees, provided an excellent backdrop for this smaller commemoration; it is easy to get to and has ample parking and facilities. As finding the time to travel across to Crete is often inconvenient and expensive, it is hoped that Association members will consider using this central location as an annual gathering point in the future. Unfortunately the centrepiece of the Arboretum, the Armed Forces Memorial which lists over 16 000 names of personnel



Our Tree, RAF Wood, Zone 72, Tree 1179



Back Row L-R): Dick Brewster, Sqn Ldr and Mrs Neil Scott (former SEngO 33 Sqn) and children, Dave Stewart.
Front Row (L-R): Paul Davies, Stan and Gill Matheson. Photo by Lorraine Stewart.

killed on duty since the Second World War, was closed for renovation work, but the temporary Memorial walls near the Chapel listed all of the Squadron's personnel whom many of us had served with and remembered.

I was interested to read that No 30 Squadron Association, which had formed in 1985, dedicated the first memorial to a current flying squadron at the Arboretum on 10 September 2008, with the Squadron's Battle Honours engraved on the reverse. In



commissioning of, a suitable and permanent memorial for our Squadron at the UK's Centre of Remembrance. While we already have a memorial in front of the Squadron hangar at Benson, access for friends and family is limited. In recognition of 100 years of proud service around the globe, and hopefully many more years of service to come, there should be a memorial at the National Memorial Arboretum that can be visited by anyone associated with No 33 Squadron at any time of the year.

my opinion, one of the main priorities for our Association should be the raising of funds for, and the Proud to be ...33

No 33 Squadron and the Battle of Crete

Paul Davies' brief to HRH Prince Michael of Kent in the 33 Squadron History Room on 5 April 2011

Greece

In January 1941 33 Sqn was withdrawn from North Africa and sent to reinforce the Commonwealth forces assisting the Greek Forces against the invading Italians. For 2 months the Squadron, led by Sqn Ldr "Pat" Pattle inflicted losses on the Italian and German Air Forces. Unfortunately, in March 1941, Hitler ordered the German invasion of Greece. Faced with German superiority in troops, aircraft and armour, the Allies were forced to withdraw. Despite many desperate air battles and last minute moves to improvised bases, 33 Sqn remained a thorn in the Luftwaffe's side. However, after a massive air battle over Athens the Sqn's losses were judged too severe to continue operations. 33 Sqn evacuated to Maleme in Crete. This evacuation was undertaken without the inspirational leadership of Sqn Ldr 'Pat' Pattle, who died in battle on the 20th April at Eleusis Bay, South of Athens.



**Sqn Ldr Pattle and Flt Lt Rumsey (Adj), Larissa, Greece
1941.**

(Photo: IWM (ME)(RAF)1260)

Available RAF Aircraft

At the end of April 1941, the number of serviceable aircraft at the disposal of the RAF in the Middle East had fallen to a dangerously low level. For commitments in Libya, Syria, Iraq, Cyprus, Egypt and Crete, Air Chief

Marshal Longmore had available to him 90 bombers and only 43 single engine fighters, of these, 23 bombers and about 20 fighters were at Maleme and Heraklion. These were the aircraft and crews which were the remnants of squadrons evacuated from Greece, consisting of 30 Sqn and 203 Sqn with Blenheims and the remnants of 33, 80 and 112 Fighter squadrons which were completely worn out. The fighters had been used daily for convoy protection and were all in a dangerously unserviceable condition; there were only twelve Hurricanes among them.

Available Axis Aircraft

In contrast the enemy strength in the Aegean was 315 heavy bombers, 60 long range fighters, 270 single engine fighters, and 240 dive bombers. No RAF units were established in Crete until the evacuation from Greece began on 28th April 1941.

Hurricane Unit Crete

On 1st May, 1941 the aircraft strength of 33 Sqn consisted of 4 Hurricanes, with 8 pilots and an ample number of groundcrew, no spares and two toolboxes. Since the strength of the Sqn was somewhat depleted as a result of the evacuation from Greece, the Sqn joined forces with the remnants of 80 Sqn, with their remaining four Hurricanes and 3 pilots and became known as 'The Hurricane Unit, Crete'. 80 Sqn had no groundcrew so all maintenance was undertaken by 33 Sqn.

Early May

The early weeks of May saw numerous attacks, battles and engagements. The unit claimed multiple kills but at the expense of a number of aircrew and aircraft.

New arrival

The fighter defence at Maleme underwent a complete change on 11th May when Sqn Ldr Edward Howell arrived to take command of 33 Sqn. With him were three relatively inexperienced pilots. The majority of 33 Sqn pilots were now about to leave, as it was intended that

more replacements would soon fly in with new Hurricanes. Sqn Ldr Howell was a highly experienced fighter pilot, but had not flown on operations, or even flown a Hurricane. Sqn Ldr Howell later wrote: "At the end of the airstrip three Hurricanes were lined up, ready for take-off at a moment's notice; one of them was mine. I clambered awkwardly into the unfamiliar cockpit. I had never flown a Hurricane before, but I did not want anyone to know that. I had managed to conceal the fact from the C in C when he had given me 33 Sqn. The truth was that I had flown Spitfires in England and nearly every other type of aircraft then in use, but somehow a Hurricane had never come my way. I was especially anxious to conceal my inexperience from the Sqn – it was bad enough being new to the job and I had the further disadvantage of taking over from Pat Pattle. Succeeding Pat would have been difficult for anyone, even under normal circumstances, and my task was even harder. I had come to take over the remnants of a famous fighter Sqn, which had been cut to pieces in Greece. 33 Sqn had been decimated. Even with the remains of 80 Sqn – our great rivals – we could now only muster five Hurricanes, of which we were lucky to have three serviceable. We had lost all our spares and equipment during the evacuation from Greece two weeks earlier"



Sqn Ldr Edward Howell

Half the personnel had gone straight back to Egypt and the other half had gone to Crete. Now, after countless engagements against hopeless odds since arriving in Crete, the pilots and groundcrews were exhausted, having gone from day to day without even a change of clothes, constantly harried by enemy air raids, operating from dawn to dusk without relief. Sqn Ldr Howell

continued, "I had come over from Egypt in a Sunderland with some rested pilots to relieve the hard pressed garrison, who returned to Egypt with the Sunderland. I found we were lodged at Maleme - the little airstrip belonged to the Fleet Air Arm and was commanded by a naval officer. The remains of the Navy fighter sqn was also there. They had 2 or 3 old Gladiators and a couple of Fulmars. We also had the remnants of 30 Sqn with us for a few days – 2 or 3 clapped out Blenheims that could only just get off the short strip. With this motley array of aircraft we had to defend the West of Crete, including the great natural harbour of Souda Bay. With improvised radar warning and fighter control equipment, we had little hope of seriously reducing the scale of enemy attacks. We could only nibble at them. The Blenheims and Gladiators were useless against the more modern aircraft of the Luftwaffe and the Fulmars would not stand a chance against the Bf 109s. So the defence of Crete fell to the few Hurricanes of 33 Sqn at Maleme with a few more belonging to 112 Sqn at Heraklion, some 70 miles to the East."

19th May

On the 19th May, as a precursor to the impending invasion, 40 Bf 109s attacked Maleme. Attacks were incoming all day. Between these attacks Orders came through that Sqn Ldr Howell was to despatch all airworthy Hurricanes from Maleme. 33 Sqn immediately despatched the only airworthy Hurricane to Egypt.

Invasion

On Tuesday 20th May at 0530hrs, the Germans launched the world's first airborne invasion when the first of almost 500 heavily laden Ju-52s began taking off from airfields in Greece.

Defending Maleme that morning were 620 New Zealanders, 85 Marines, 229 Officers and men from 30 and 33 Sqs and 3 Officers and 50 ratings from 805 Sqn, a total of 1087 men.

The officers and men of the two RAF sqns were congregated in small parties, mainly on the lower slopes of Kavkazia Hill, known as Hill 107, so called because it was 107 metres above sea level. It was proposed that in the event of invasion, Officers and NCOs of the two units, would defend allocated sections and be responsible for small groups of airmen.

At Maleme more Germans died in the first half an hour

than had been lost during the previous 18 months of war. Airmen fought gallantly alongside New Zealanders and Marines in defence of the air strip and the hill that dominated it. They killed the invaders by the score as the paratroopers fell around the hill. Many Junkers 52 transport aircraft were on fire or out of control, while glider crew's crash -landed on top of the defenders' positions.

Aircrew Perspective

Following the initial landings, Sqn Ldr Howell made his way to 22nd NZ Battalion HQ where he discussed events with Cdr Beale and Col Andrew. Coming under sniper fire the three carried out reconnaissance of the forward area; Col Andrew, expressing his satisfaction, returned to his command post. Sqn Ldr Howell and Cdr Beale, accompanied by a handful of airmen, continued to the area where the gliders had landed when suddenly a shot rang out and Cdr Beale fell with a bullet in his stomach. At the same instance Sqn Ldr Howell was hit by machine gun fire, one bullet smashing his left shoulder, a second striking his right forearm; an airman was also hit in the ribs.

Now under continuous fire, the wounded Cdr Beale, aided by an airman, managed to apply a tourniquet to Sqn Ldr Howell's right arm and dragged him to his feet to get him under cover. They placed him in a hollow dug in the hillside. Two airmen volunteered to remain with their CO but one was sent to gain safety (he was subsequently captured). So severe was the pain and loss of blood suffered by Sqn Ldr Howell that he begged the remaining airman to shoot him. When his plea was refused, Sqn Ldr Howell ordered him to escape, but he too was captured. When a rescue party eventually arrived they found Sqn Ldr Howell unconscious, soaked in blood and covered in flies. Believing him dead, they left him where he lay. Sqn Ldr Howell described what happened, "I lay where I was, intermittently conscious, for two days and nights. On the third day I was found by German Parachute Troops who covered me in a blanket and gave me water. Later I was carried to the nearby village where I found the 33 Sqn Medical Officer attending wounded on both sides."

Groundcrew Perspective

Eight airmen, isolated in the RAF camp, held off attacks by glider troops all morning from a slit trench, killing several but losing AC Bank and Dixon. Out of ammunition, AC Eaton left his trench to search a tent but

he was also killed. Undeterred, AC Jones managed to collect a 50 round bandolier of ammunition that had been left hanging from a tree. Eventually the three remaining survivors – AC Jones, Cpl Mackenna and FS Firman – crept past the Germans and escaped. In the mid -morning the Germans used some 40 RAF prisoners as a 'human shield' in an unsuccessful attempt to gain the hill. Several airmen were killed or wounded but half of them managed to escape up the hill. By the end of the first day the Germans had made no gains but the following afternoon Alpine troops crash -landed Junkers 52s on and around the airstrip, overwhelming the defenders. On the 23rd May the survivors of 33 Sqn, alongside the New Zealanders lead a bayonet charge that almost recaptured the airfield. Casualties were heavy. A further withdrawal was necessary and a Cpl Banfield found himself in command of 50 men. His party was cut off from the main body at Maleme and had to fight its way through the encircling Germans. In this operation, Cpl Banfield displayed not only bravery, but a very good knowledge of tactics. Enemy posts were outflanked, destroyed and prisoners captured. The 33 Sqn groups on the ground at Maleme had fared badly. One pilot had been killed, four captured (including the admin officer) and one seriously injured. The injured were flown to Athens in Ju-52s where Sqn Ldr Howell was to make a remarkable recovery.

Evacuation

A party of retreating 33 Sqn personnel led by Flt Lt V C 'Woody' Woodward arrived at Souda Bay on the 26th May, with many tales of frightening experiences, as Flt Lt Woodward recalls "We crawled, at one point, through part of new Zealand anti-personnel minefield in a vineyard, much to the consternation of the New Zealander troops who were watching our progress through binoculars."

Woodward was on standby to fly out by Sunderland that evening but was directed, at the last minute, to take charge of a party of walking wounded and lead them to a rendezvous with an evacuation ship in Souda Bay. Three warships took a total of 930 wounded and surplus personnel and evacuated them to Egypt. The warships left Souda Bay during the night of the 26th May.

With Flt Lt Woodward's departure, Flt Lt Mitchell took command of the remaining 33 Sqn personnel. His group now numbered 41 out of an original 102 airmen and they were ordered to make for Sphakia, a small port on the Western end of the South coast of Crete, two trucks

being provided for their transport. In Sphakia, to which they were heading, was the 50-strong 30 Sqn party, who had lost over half of their original number. At 0300 hrs on 29th May, the first departure was made from Sphakia, aboard destroyers of Naval Task Force 'C'. After unloading urgently needed stores and rations they took 744 persons away with them, including the 33 Sqn party under Flt Lt Mitchell's command.

Wavell gave discretion to surrender, fight on, or escape if they could.

Out of the 229 Officers and airmen of 30 and 33 Sqn at Maleme, 50 were killed, 98 became POWs and 81 were evacuated. Following the battle 1 OBE, 2 Military Medals, 1 MBE, 2 BEMs and a mention in dispatches were awarded.



Flt Lt V C 'Woody' Woodward



**AC 1st Class Marcel Gerard Comeau,
recipient of the Military Medal**

As the evacuation ended, some 12,500 troops were left behind, of whom 226 were RAF personnel. Many of these had already been captured, but to those still free General

SUPPLEMENT TO THE LONDON GAZETTE, 17 OCTOBER, 1941

6036

Air Ministry, 17 October, 1941.

ROYAL AIR FORCE.

The KING has been graciously pleased to approve the undermentioned award in recognition of gallant conduct:—

Military Medal.

625329 Aircraftman 1st Class Marcel Gerard Comeau.

In the course of a heavy bombing and machine gun attack on an aerodrome, a bomb exploded on a trench causing 2 soldiers, both Greeks, to be buried in the debris. Aircraftman Comeau, displaying great bravery, left the shelter of his trench and, although the station was under continuous fire, managed to dig them out with his hands. One of them, however, subsequently died. Later on, in the face of enemy fire, Aircraftman Comeau secured from another position a gun which greatly improved the defence of his own position.

The Strategic Importance of the Battle for Crete

by Dave Stewart

To present to the reader an understanding of events prior to, and the consequences of, the Battle of Crete in May 1941, I have scoured the excellent 'Flight' magazine online archive and used articles published in 1941 and 1942 that covered or commented on the Greece and Crete campaigns. The magazine had kept the British public abreast of developments in all things aviation since 1912 and was an excellent source of information. Unlike today, where journalists have the advantage of 24 hour live coverage from around the globe and less stringent censorship, the 'Flight' magazine journalists during World War Two were working under the pressure of strictly imposed national security and censorship with limited resources, interpreting pithy military communiqués and briefings, with a duty to maintain morale on the Home Front. Today we are fortunate to have much more factual information available to us, from a broad variety of sources, that serves to enrich these reports and turnover many misconceptions. Certainly there is now a very different perspective available, as you will read later, where certain individuals are criticized for not defending Maleme robustly or counter-attacking when the Germans' situation was precarious. While the reader will note that the journalistic style of the 1940s was very different, many of the criticisms and questions raised regarding air-land integration and the command, control and use of air power in a joint and combined environment are still relevant today.

Background

On April 13th, 1939 Britain had guaranteed Greek independence, stating that "...in the event of any action being taken which clearly threatened the independence of Greece and which the Greek government considered it vital to resist with their national forces, His Majesty's government would feel themselves bound at once to lend the Greek government all the support in their power."

Following an early morning ultimatum to the Greek government which demanded free access to Greek territory, Italy invaded Greece from annexed Albania on

October 29th, 1940. The Italian land campaign was a disaster and its ground forces had been pushed back inside Albania by November 22nd, 1940, at great cost in men and materiel. However, the Italian Air Force, the *Regia Aeronautica*, were superior in the skies above Greece, employing over 500 fighters and bombers to assault the Greek forces at will.

Despite a lack of decent, usable airfields near the front, on his own authority and with Churchill's endorsement, the AOC-in-C Middle East, ACM Sir Arthur Longmore, deployed three squadrons of Blenheims (30, 84 and 211) and a Gladiator squadron (80). No 33 Squadron, having changed their Gladiators to Hurricanes while at Mersa

Matruh in Egypt, arrived in Greece in January 1941. With No 80 Squadron was Flt Lt Marmaduke Pattle, who was awarded the first DFC of the Greek campaign in February 1941; the following month he was promoted to Sqdn Ldr and given command of No 33 Squadron at Larissa, and received a bar to his DFC. No 112 Squadron arrived shortly after the other squadrons;

being caught in the changeover from Gladiators to Hurricanes they arrived with both types. Air Cdre J H d'Albiac was commanding the RAF force in Greece, and while he saw a valuable role in bombing Italian supply lines and Albanian ports, the Greek command wanted close air support. Consequently, in the first six weeks of operations the RAF was losing bombers at an alarming rate.

In early January, 1941 Britain offered further assistance to Greece, an offer that was initially turned down by the dictator General Metaxas, for fear of provoking a German attack. In February, after Metaxas suffered a heart attack and died, Britain strengthened its offer of assistance, an offer that included 100 000 men, AA units, tanks and more aircraft. While this offer was politically acceptable, British military commanders from CGS, General Dill, down to General Wavell, Commander-in-Chief Middle East, advised against it. Not only would it halt the offensive against the Italians in North Africa, but positioning RAF bombers in Greece would be seen in Berlin as the first step towards

"When the full detailed story of this prolonged battle is known, there will doubtless be many lessons to be studied about the use of aircraft in combined operations."

(Flight magazine, June 5th, 1941)

a bombing campaign against vital German oil sources in Romania, something Hitler would not tolerate.

On March 7th, 1941 the War Cabinet agreed the commitments to Greece offered the previous month. British and Allied forces began the move into southern Greece and then deployed north to the defensive line at Aliakmon. General Wavell had estimated that it would be April before the first troops were in position at Aliakmon, and the end of May before the full force was in place and able to meet any German attacks. While the deployed RAF assets were sufficient to establish local air superiority along the Albanian border, it would not be sufficient to defeat the *Luftwaffe* in Greece.



Spitfires and Blenheim at Duxford—Crete Day 2001

Germany invaded Greece on April 6th, 1941, and once again its battle-hardened infantry and armoured divisions swept all opposition ahead of them. In support, the *Luftwaffe* had established a new command – *Luftflotte Four* – with 1,200 fighters and dive bombers, based at fully supported airfields in Bulgaria and Romania, while the *Regia Aeronautica* was still operating 300 aircraft in Albania and on the Italian mainland. To counter this, d’Albiac had 200 aircraft, of which about 80 were serviceable. His force of Hurricanes, Gladiators, Lysanders and Wellingtons had no poor quality military and civilian airfields to operate from, while the logistic resupply chain was totally inadequate. D’Albiac’s force was short of pilots, ground staff, spares and aviation fuel.

General Wavell was in Greece April 11th -13th and visited General Wilson, commanding the forces in Greece, warning him that there were no reinforcements available and he should start planning an evacuation of British and Commonwealth forces to Crete and Egypt. Wavell sent Wilson the order to evacuate on April 21st and the few

RAF squadrons in country began to leave on April 25th; d’Albiac established his new HQ in Heraklion, Crete. The Greek king, King George II, and his government were evacuated to Crete the same day. During the evacuation Chief Technician Salmon and his Group 1 tradesmen were ordered to fly to Crete and prepare to receive any Hurricanes that might land there. Managing to fly out on a Short Sunderland flying boat they landed in Souda Bay and established themselves alongside No 805 Squadron, Fleet Air Arm, at Maleme aerodrome. By April 30th the evacuation of over 40,000 troops from Greece was complete.

The Germans Prepare to Invade Crete

The Germans reached Athens on April 27th having received Hitler’s Directive No 28 - ***Unternehmen Merkur*** (Operation Mercury) - for the capture of Crete two days earlier. Forces allotted for the invasion included the 7th *Fliegerdivision*, a glider regiment and the 5th Mountain Division. At this point of the war, a large-scale attack on an enemy-held area launched primarily by air was a revolutionary approach. Preliminary air attacks on Crete commenced on April 29th, while the Germans commenced preparations on the mainland. By mid-May they had established ten all-weather aerodromes within 200 miles of Crete, built by POWs and local forced labour. The stage was set for the proposed invasion date of 20th May, 1941. In his book ‘Operation Mercury’, Marcel Comeau M.M, a 33 Squadron airman who fought at Maleme, states that General Kurt Student, GOC 11 Air Corps and the founding father of the *Fallschirmjaegers* “... had 22,750 men already assembled in southern Greece. Of these, 10,000 paratroops and 750 glider-troops were to take part in the initial assault; 5 000 to be flown in. At his disposal was a vast armada of three-engine Junkers transports – 700 of them, as well as some 80 gliders...The remaining 7,000 men were to go to sea in two flotillas....Air protection for the operation was to be given by General Freiherr von Richthofen’s 8 Air Corps – 650 aircraft strong and included three groups of Junkers 88s, one group of Heinkel 111s, three groups of Junkers 87 dive bombers, and two reconnaissance units. Fighter cover was to be provided by 180 Me100s and Me109s. It was going to be quite a party.”

Flight, April 24th, 1941 (Page 294)

Air Power versus Tank Power

“Both in Greece and Libya, the RAF appears to hold the upper hand in the air, while the indications are that in both theatres the enemy has superiority in mechanized forces.

The strength of the German army lies in its development of Panzer divisions, supported in previous campaigns by dive-bombers. In the campaigns in Poland and France these particular aircraft met with no adequate opposition, and the combination of motor vehicles on the ground and motor-driven vehicles in the air proved irresistible. In the campaigns now in progress the enemy is very stoutly opposed in the air, and if he still has numbers on his side, that is the limit of his advantage. The Battle of Britain has shown that numbers of aircraft do not overcome superior quality.

The weakest point about a panzer division is the difficulty of supply. In the parts of Europe where the Germans have hitherto fought that difficulty could be, and was, overcome. The problem is far less tractable in the mountains of the Balkans and the sands of Libya. In the latter it has been reported that the Germans have been using aircraft to bring up the fuel and other supplies for their tanks and armoured cars. They can surely not count on such methods to any great extent. In the Balkans too, the paucity of roads and the activity of the RAF Blenheims ought to make the supplying of the rapid Panzer divisions extremely difficult. Will air power or tank power win? Much depends on the answer to that question.”

Greek Aftermath

News of the successful evacuation began to reach Britain in May, and the editions of *Flight* published on May 8th



General Archibald Wavell

and May 15th both carried a number of stories related to aspects of the Greek campaign: Greek bravery, the use of German parachute troops to outflank the Allies’ defensive positions, German air superiority, a gallant performance by the small and outnumbered force of RAF fighters and the importance of having sufficient aerodromes and temporary landing grounds that were not too close to the enemy yet close enough to counter and inflict damage on them. These would be prophetic words, not only in the month that followed but later in Europe post-D Day. The evacuation brought memories of 1940 and Dunkirk to the fore, and to maintain what we now term a ‘positive spin’ the magazine commented that General Wavell would be glad to have such a large proportion of the Empire forces evacuated safely and back in the ranks of the Allied war effort, bringing vital experience and skill to bear in the Mediterranean war.

Flight, 8th May, 1941 (Pages 323-324)

The Outlook

Another Evacuation

“The number of the British forces in Greece which have been successfully evacuated give cause for delighted surprise. Details of how this second miracle was accomplished will be made known in time, but for the moment one can only marvel and offer up thanks. The conditions were very different from those of Dunkerque, for the sea crossing was longer, and there was no reserve



General Kurt Student

of fighters such as the Fighter Command could and did supply at Dunkerque to hold off the German bombers. In Greece the shortage of fighters was one of the worst British handicaps, and what Hurricane squadrons we had there were gravely handicapped through the overrunning of their aerodromes by the German advance. The Germans had loudly proclaimed their determination that there should not be 'another Dunkerque' and orders to that effect were issued to their bombers. Despite all that, over three-quarters of the Empire forces got safely away.

There is probably some lesson to be learnt, and some moral to be drawn from this incident, but until all the facts are known it would be futile to search for it. One is inclined to ask whether the Junkers dive-bombers always become ineffective when they are required to act on their own instead of as the advance guard of a Panzer division, but one can see no reason why they should fail when not adequately opposed by fighter. We must wait for enlightenment.

Of necessity the Empire forces must have lost many tanks, other vehicles and guns, material which can be ill spared by the Army of the Nile. The possibility of losing it must have been faced when the decision was taken to land troops in support of Greece. But most of the men have been saved, and they are men of great skill and experience in armoured warfare and in desert tactics. Their skill will be useful again when they get new equipment.

It cannot have been possible for us with our limited resources to take away many Greek troops to Crete, and it is tragic in the extreme to think of these amazing heroes becoming prisoners in German hands. Up to the very bitter end Greece has maintained her reputation for chivalry as well as courage. History has little to record of a finer spirit than the Greek note which set the Empire forces free from engagements and advised their withdrawal. Greece will deserve the highest awards when the final day of reckoning dawns."

The Invasion of Crete

On May 20th 1941 the German forces in Greece launched Operation Mercury. They employed the parachute and airborne forces in a massive airborne invasion, attacking the three main airfields at Maleme, Rethymno and Heraklion. On May 24th King George II and his Government was evacuated from Crete to Egypt and after seven days of fighting and tough resistance, the Allied Command in theatre ordered a withdrawal to Sfakia on

the south coast. Once again the Royal Navy would be required to evacuate British and Commonwealth troops. By June 1st 1941 the evacuation of Crete was complete and the island was under German occupation. Despite success, General Student dubbed Crete 'the graveyard of the German paratroopers' and a 'disastrous victory.'

The daily account of the battle has already been covered in detail on page 10, and I commend the short radio clip that Paul Canning has added to the Association's Facebook page, with actual recordings broadcast at the time by the BBC and a New Zealand war correspondent, Mr Robin Miller. Miller describes watching the gliders and parachutes landing around Galatas and Maleme, and the huge amount of German troops that arrived in the airborne assault. He describes seeing scores of German parachutists being picked off by the New Zealand troops, both in the air and on the ground, and goes on to discuss the hand to hand combat between the South Islanders and Maoris against the Germans, involving rifle butts, bayonets, wrestling holds and fists in the semi-darkness of dawn. This counter-attack to dislodge the enemy can be read about in MG Sandy Thomas' article later in this Newsletter, a counter-attack that was going well until the sun rose, allowing German machine gun and mortar fire, plus *Luftwaffe* fighters and bombers, to disrupt the attack and drive the Allied troops back.



Surviving members of the Maori Battalion in North Africa, July 1941. In Crete they suffered 243 casualties. The battalion would earn more individual bravery decorations than any other NZ battalion in WW2 .

War in the Air

Paratroops, Gliders and Air transports Invade Crete

“With the first streak of dawn of May 20th German parachute troops opened a full-scale invasion of the Island of Crete. Why the enemy need to occupy Crete is obvious, because it threatens the flank of any further drive they may make through Syria into Iraq. If Crete is captured by the Germans, then it is to be expected that an attempt will then be made on Cyprus for the same reason.

In order to obtain a clear picture of the pros and cons it is necessary to note the positions of the aerodromes available to the opposing sides. The nearest point of Greece to Crete is only some 60 miles away and the Greek aerodromes are less than 150 miles from the island, On Crete itself there are several areas which are referred to in war communiqués as aerodromes, but these are actually only in the nature of emergency landing grounds.

The three which are of any real account are at Maleme, Retimo and Heraklion. The North African coast from which we must operate is about 200 miles distant. Owing to the inadequacy of the landing grounds in Crete our fighters had been withdrawn shortly before the attack materialized. The Germans opened the battle with terrific

bombing – both level and dive – of the A.A. positions, towns, harbours and military works, and then landed some 1,500 air-borne troops to establish a foothold. These troops, it has been officially stated, were wearing New Zealand battledress, but this has been denied by the Germans who say they have a colonial uniform which may be similar. By midday the same day our military authorities reported the situation to be in hand, with most of the invaders mopped up.

Air Divisions

Later in the afternoon, after further intensive attacks by dive-bombing Junkers Ju 87s and ground- strafing Messerschmitts, another concentration of troops was dropped in the area around Suda Bay. Presumably the idea was to hold the port, the only one in Crete, in order that ship-transported supplies could be unloaded during the night. Within two hours the majority of these men had been accounted for. The actual number of air troops employed by the Germans for the initial invasion attempt is not known with any exactitude, but the expectation is that at least one, if not two, air-borne divisions of 7,000 effectives each, were employed.

A German air-borne division consists of two brigades of infantry each of three battalions, a brigade of artillery with 24 3in. guns, an anti-tank battalion with 37-mm. high-velocity guns and a number of specialized troops. For transport the troops are expected to seize vehicles locally. Each infantry brigade has an infantry-gun



company equipped with four 77-mm. mortars, and a quarter of the strength of each battalion have machine guns as their weapons. The 3in. guns employed by the artillery brigade are what are commonly termed mountain guns. That is to say, they are of a type which can be easily and quickly erected from a number of smaller units of such a size that they can be carried by pack mules. In this case, of course, they are in units which can be dropped by parachute. When men and equipment are dropped from machines in formation the men would be released from the outer machines and the equipment from the centre in order that the unit tended to keep together rather than spread itself more than is necessary. Parachutes of various colours are used to enable the men to identify immediately the piece of equipment with which they are concerned. It has been computed – taking the Junkers Ju 52 as the aircraft used - that some 250 machine journeys are necessary to transport a division of air-borne troops.”

The early stages of the battle are summed up in the short statement made in the House of Commons by Mr.

Winston Churchill after the fighting had been in progress some two days:

“Fighting is continuing in intensity, and although the situation is in hand the Germans have gained some local successes at heavy cost. They are using large numbers of airborne and parachute troops and these are being increased daily.

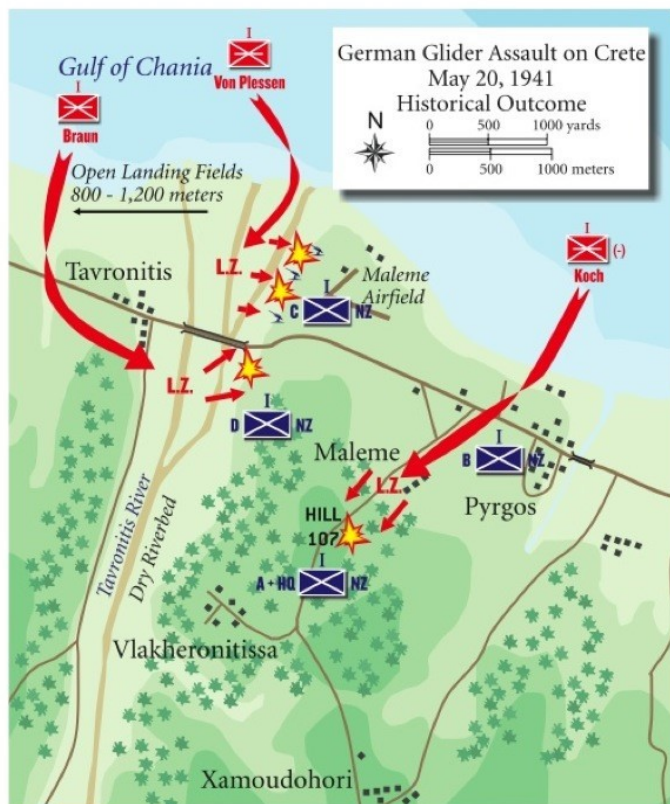
The position at Heraklion is that our troops still hold the aerodrome, although the Germans are now what is called in occupation of the town, which probably means that they are ensconced in certain buildings in that town.

In the Retimo district there is no report of any particular fighting, although the attempt by the enemy to attack the area of the aerodrome earlier yesterday morning was successfully held. In the Canea-Suda Bay sector heavy enemy air attacks in the early morning yesterday were followed during the course of the day by further parachute landings south-west of Canea, which were heavily engaged by our artillery and machine-guns.



Heraklion Bay

At Maleme aerodrome, 10 miles south-west of Canea, it appears that the enemy are now in occupation of the aerodrome and of the area to the west of it, but the aerodrome is still under our fire. Elsewhere in this sector the coastal line remains in our hands.



Convoys Attacked

The fighting is going on and deepening in intensity and will certainly continue for some time. Last night the enemy began to try seaborne landings, but a convoy making for Crete was intercepted by our naval forces. Two transports and a number of caiques, Greek boats which probably contained troops intended for landing operations, were sunk, and an enemy destroyer which was escorting the convoy was also sunk.

But during the course of today very much larger attempts have been made by the enemy to carry an army into Crete, and a convoy of 30 vessels was discerned this morning by our forces and was presumably attacked by them. My information stops at that point. The convoy turned away towards the islands of the Archipelago and was being attacked by our destroyers and light forces.

I have not received any further information as to what happened, except that there has been a great deal of

fighting during the day, the enemy air forces attacking our ships and we attacking the convoy. I am sorry to say I have no definite information as to the results, but I feel that they can hardly be other than satisfactory in view of the naval forces of which we dispose in the Mediterranean.

It is a most strange and grim battle which is being fought. Our side have no air support because they have no aerodromes, not because they have no aeroplanes. The other side have very little or none of the artillery or tanks. Neither side has any means of retreat. It is a desperate, grim battle.”

After six days’ intense hand-to-hand fighting in Crete, accompanied by further reinforcements of the German air-borne troops each day, the military position clarified itself. The Germans hold Maleme aerodrome and the area thereabouts, but the aerodrome is still within range of our artillery. Canea, Retimo and Heraklion have all been held against the air invasion.

In this show-down between the Royal Navy and the *Luftwaffe* military students will draw conclusions as to the relative value of the two arms. If the outcome is not clear beyond any doubt, each side will justify its arm with a series of ‘ifs and buts.’ Actually, of course, the position is entirely freakish. The value of the two arms should be assessed by considering their ability in harness, and not as independent units. Extravagant claims have already been made by the Axis as to the number of ships of the Royal Navy which have been sunk in this action. While it would be ridiculous to expect that we should not have losses, it is, at the same time unwise, to say the least, to place any credence in their announcements.

An interesting feature of this air invasion is that the Axis did not tell their people until the operation had already been going for some three or four days. This betrays a nervousness which has not been noticeable in their invasions hitherto.

During the weekend came communiqués from the RAF Middle East Headquarters in Cairo referring to long range fighters being used to lend some air support to our ground troops. No type of aircraft was mentioned, but it is probable that they are long-nosed Fighter Blenheims. These have a range of some 1,250 miles – possibly more with slight modification – and a speed of 295 mph. Against Stukas, Ju52s and gliders, they are all that is required, but dog-fighting with Me 109s and 110s would

have them at a distinct disadvantage in both speed and fire power.”

Flight, June 5th, 1941 (Pages 389-390)

War in the Air

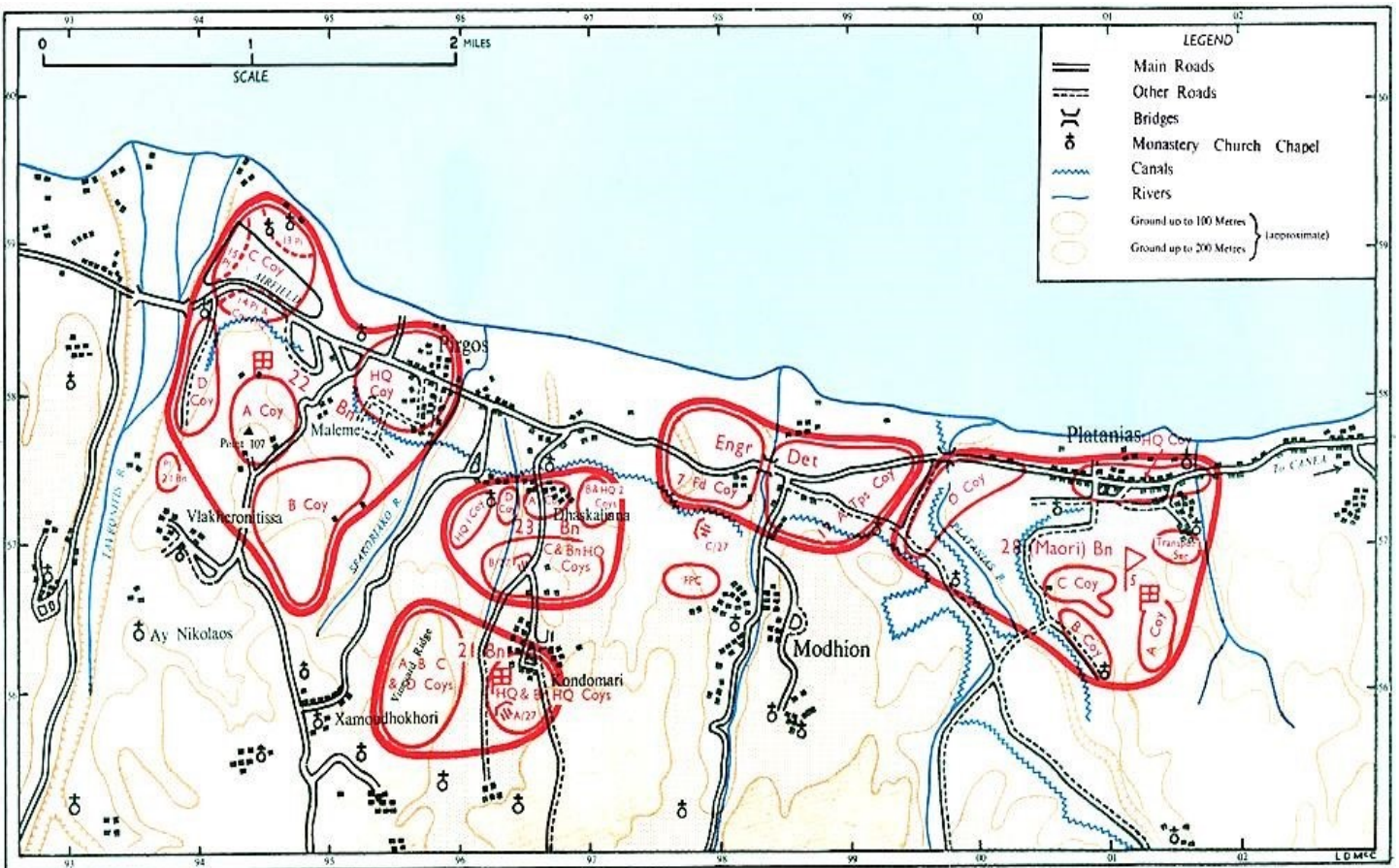
FAA Torpedoes Again : The Catalinas : Air-borne Invasion of Crete : USA Aircraft in the East

After an opening item detailing the success of the Royal Navy in finding and sinking the German Battleship *Bismarck*, a paragraph headed ‘**Deadly TSRS**’, a reference to the torpedo attacks made by F.A.A. Swordfish aircraft to reduce *Bismarck’s* speed, an update on the Crete invasion read as followed:

“Meanwhile, the closing days of the month of May witnessed a battle in Crete such as had never been fought before, and indeed had not been contemplated or foreseen by those who had speculated about the new tactics which the aeroplane must introduce into war. One side, the Germans, holds complete command of the air, while the

British have equally complete command of the sea. In the land fighting the former have no heavy tanks or heavy guns, and cannot have many even light specimens of those two weapons; while the British and their Allies have some artillery, but exactly what and how much is not known. The invaders have poured men in by air, regardless of appalling losses, while the British are contriving to some extent to reinforce their troops in the island by sea. The Germans used their bombers as field artillery to prepare the way for assaults by the troops which had been landed by air. The pilots of the Stukas understand such tactics well, and carried them out with great efficiency and any amount of dash. Their losses, too, were heavy, but they have damped the determination of the pilots. The land fighting has been furious and continuous.

The critical spot has been the aerodrome of Maleme, near Canea. At first it was under fire of the British guns, which took heavy toll of the Ju 52 troop carriers. But parachute troops could come down outside the aerodrome, and the gliders which were towed by the power aircraft could land almost anywhere. A dispatch from Cairo, dated May 28th, said that by then the invaders had practically stopped using parachutes and gliders, which would mean that



MALEME, 5 Brigade, 20 May

Maleme was by then out of the range of the British artillery and that the craters on its landing ground had been filled up. The Germans had driven back the defenders of Canea from their first lines, and no doubt the artillery had had to fall back as well. Precise information from Crete had not been received up to the moment of writing, but it was believed that from two to four gliders, each probably holding from six to eight men, would be towed by one aeroplane.

Of course, RAF bombers attacked Maleme, and it would seem probable that taking off from there must have been a parlous business. It was as a landing ground rather than as a working aerodrome that the Germans were using the place. No doubt a Ju 52 would lose no time in taking off again the moment after it had disgorged its load of soldiers, but many of the troop-carriers were bombed to destruction on the ground by the RAF and many, too, were shot down in the air before they landed.

The Need for Fighters

For the British and Allied troops in Crete it was the same old story of lack of fighter support. In every land campaign in this war the Army has suffered from that heavy drawback. In this case it was inevitable. The fighters which had reached Crete from Greece had to be withdrawn to save them from useless extermination and doubtless General Freyberg, V.C., approved of the step. It is generally admitted now, as a result of our own experiences during the Battle of Britain and also from the case of Stavanger, that air bombing is unable to prevent a well-organized aerodrome from operating; but one in a state of improvisation, devoid of adequate anti-aircraft defences, cannot continue to function in the face of persistent bombing. If our fighters had been left in Crete they would have been in as hopeless a position as the squadrons which tried to operate from frozen lakes in Norway.

So the Stukas were left with things all their own way. Crete is only some 120 miles from Greece (a bit further from the aerodromes in the Peloponnese) whereas the British base in Egypt is about 350 miles distant. Long-range fighters have flown across from Egypt and have taken some toll of the German aircraft over Crete, but their efforts could make no appreciable difference to the continuous influx of German air-borne troops. Of the carriers HMS *Formidable* and *Eagle* not a word has been heard, but it would be rash to expose them to such risks. They have proved themselves invaluable in such actions

as Taranto, but they are not intended to brave or tackle swarms of shore-based bombers.

Admiral Cunningham's fleet has likewise had to suffer continuous bombing without protection from fighters, and two cruisers and four destroyers were sunk by bombs. HMS *York* was bombed in Suda Bay. But at this heavy cost the Navy has retained command of the seas and has prevented any convoy of enemy ships from landing their troops and material on the shores of Crete. The German losses of men at sea have run into many thousands, and in addition large numbers of German bombers have been shot down by the guns of the fleet. When the full detailed story of this prolonged battle is known, there will doubtless be many lessons to be studied about the use of aircraft in combined operations."

Crete Repercussions

The appointment of Longmore's second in command, Air Marshal Arthur Tedder, as AOC-in-C Middle East was reported in June 1941. *Flight* commented that up until Crete, with a small force 'inferior in numbers to that of the *Regia Aeronautica*', Longmore had provided air support to four separate land campaigns in Egypt, Abyssinia, Somaliland and Eritrea. In the editorial we see the first hint of public opinion that had not been heard since May in 1940 after Dunkirk, that the Army had been let down again by the RAF:

Flight, June 12th, 1941

The Outlook

The Middle East Command

"So long as the only opposition came from the Italians, the work was done completely and brilliantly. In the short history of air warfare there has been no such similar case of one Air Force gaining such complete ascendancy over another Air Force of comparable strength...In all the land operations in Africa one of the most outstanding and gratifying features was the extraordinarily good collaboration between the ground forces and the aircraft, and the same can be said of the help given by the Air Force to the Navy at Matapan and elsewhere. It really seemed that the three Services were working in perfect unison, and that in each of the three there was a master mind at the head.

The War In Greece

Then came the unhappy campaign in Greece, when the armies of the British Empire certainly had not enough bombers to check the advance of the German Panzer divisions or enough fighters to deal with the German Stukas. Without fuller knowledge than is available, no adequate explanation of this can be given, though many explanations are possible, and some of them would completely exonerate the Middle East Command...it was in November that the Italians invaded Greece, and that gave time to organize aerodromes in Greece and Crete. It is not known whether indents were sent to Great Britain for the equipment, or whether that equipment, if demanded, was available. In any case, the actual defence of aerodromes is almost entirely a responsibility of the Army.

Whatever the reason, the campaign in Greece and the subsequent struggle in Crete must rank with the campaigns in Norway and France as cases where British armies received insufficient support from the air.

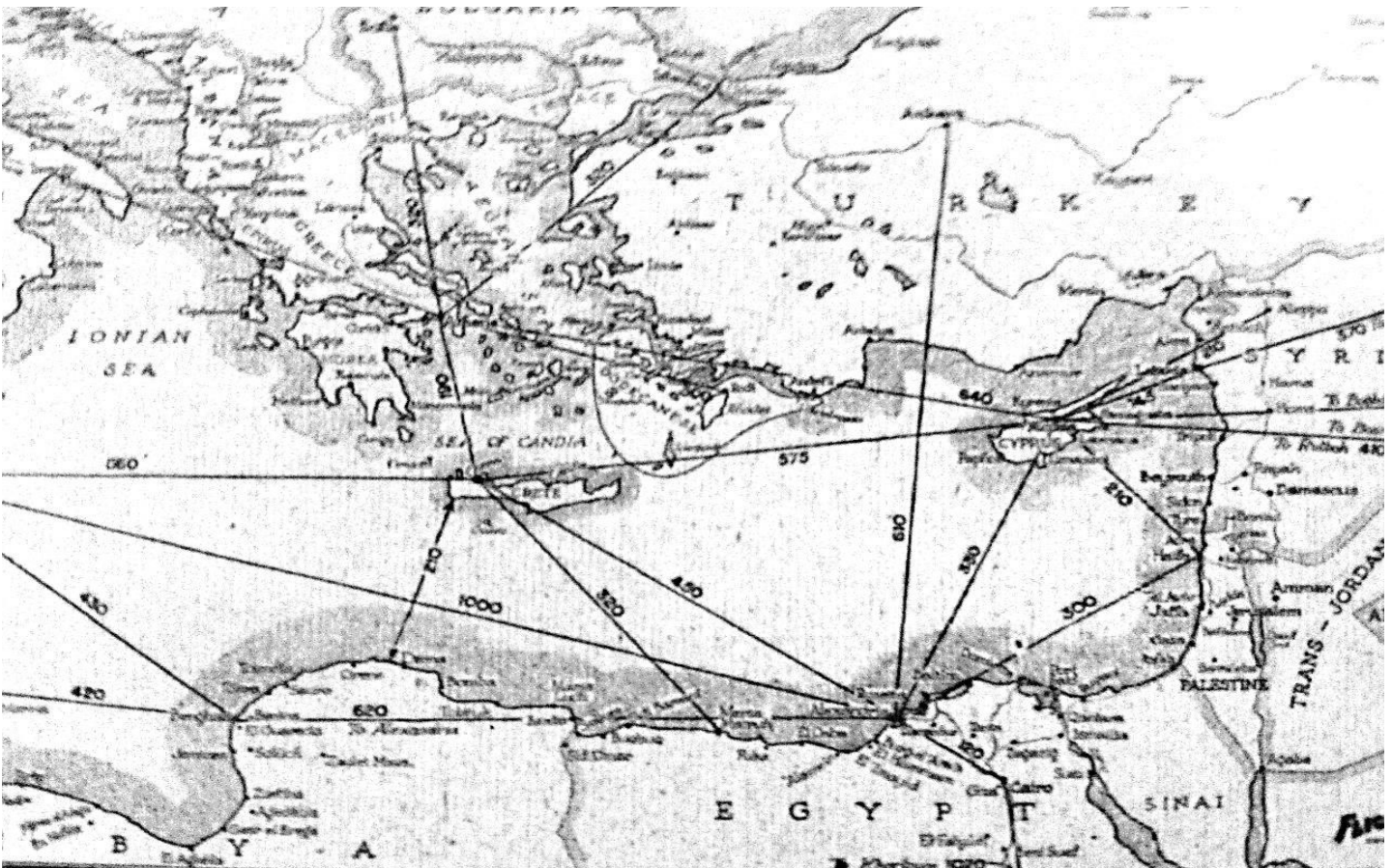
Continuity of Policy

Early in May Sir Arthur Longmore returned to London to

advise and confer with the Air Council. During his absence the Germans invaded Crete by air and overcame the British troops there. All British aircraft were evacuated from the island, which could only have been done with the consent of General Freyberg, but may have been the result of previous lack of preparation. At present it cannot be said whether that lack of preparation was culpable, and, if so, who was the culprit....

The public in Britain is left between the horns of this dilemma; either the Air Council disapproves of Sir Arthur Longmore's conduct of his Command and has honourably removed him from it, or, if the change has been made for other reasons, the Air Council has been exceedingly tactless in announcing the change immediately after the British defeats in Greece and Crete.

There will in due course be further fighting on land between British and German armies. The British public wants to be assured that its Army shall not again be left short of fighters and bombers. Aerodromes must not be left defenceless because the Air Force and the Army are two stools. Steps are being taken in Cyprus to prevent a repetition of Crete. A late beginning was made, but, we hope, not too late."



Flight continued the 'lack of RAF air support to the Army' theme in 'War in the Air' several pages later (pages 399-401):

War in the Air

Greece and Crete : USA Bombers in the Middle East : Iraqi Rebels Quelled

"In Crete, as in Greece, as in France, as in Norway, a British land force has suffered from a lack of air support and particularly from lack of fighter protection. Officers from Crete who have reached Egypt have expressed the confident opinion that the British troops were sufficient to hold the island, and would have done so if they had not been overwhelmed by the masses of German dive-bombers. There were no RAF fighters, or any other British aircraft, left on the island, and the long-range fighters which flew from the bases in Africa (Blenheim fighters and Hurricanes fitted with extra fuel tanks) could do all too little to stop the work of the Stukas....

Taking the circumstances as they were at the time, there was nothing to be done but to withdraw the British squadrons from Crete before the enemy attack developed. Had they remained on the island they would certainly have been lost to no good purpose. Well organized and properly defended aerodromes cannot be put of action by bombing; that has been proved by the cases in Stavanger, Malta and many aerodromes in South East England.... What the British public would like to know is why the aerodromes in Greece and Crete had been left in such an indefensible condition. It was in November last that the Italians invaded Greece, and Crete at once became an outpost of first-rate importance to our Fleet and Air Force.... There was then time to have taken steps to fortify our aerodromes in Crete, and also to provide adequate air support for the army which we decided to land there. Yet when the Germans advanced it at once became evident that we had not enough aircraft on the mainland to give the troops the support which they had a right to expect, and soon it appeared that we could not hold the aerodromes which had been allotted to us by the Greeks. ...The coming debate in Parliament may elucidate the mystery.

The whole operation is a great score for the *Luftwaffe*, but the invasion would not have succeeded if the island had had adequate defences. A strong force of RAF fighters would have made it impossible, and a brigade of

tanks on the island would have wiped out the German troops, who landed without any weapons but what they could carry and some light mortars.... Great credit is due to the detailed organization of the German attack, and to the devotion of the air-borne troops who faced such heavy losses; but a very moderate degree of defence would have defeated the invasion."

On June 10th 1941 the Prime Minister, Mr. Winston Churchill, addressed the House of Commons on the campaign in the Middle East, and the editorial of *Flight* published on June 19th 1941 opened with a report on the Middle East debate in Parliament:

Flight, June 19th, 1941 (Pages 411-412)

The Outlook

The Debate on the Middle East

"The debate on the campaign in the Middle East gave the Prime Minister the opportunity to settle one point which has vexed public opinion. He made it clear that the decision to fight in Crete was taken deliberately with the knowledge that air support would be at a minimum, and also that the paucity of weapons for aerodrome defence was due, not to lack of foresight, but to the actual shortage of A.A. guns in the Empire. These explanations should set at rest any doubts which may have arisen as to the perspicacity of those who direct the British war effort. Now the public also knows that the Home Government's efforts to build up "the largest possible air force in the Middle East" (Mr. Churchill's words) are hampered, not by lack of aircraft or even lack of shipping tonnage, but solely by the time which it takes to get the aircraft delivered on that front.

The debate, however, made it clear that the country has at last begun to realise that all is not perfect in the relations between the Army and the Air Force. For years past *Flight* has sounded the tocsin on that point, though its voice was often lifted up alone in the wilderness. It is probable that the fault was quite as much on the side of the War Office as on the side of the Air Ministry. Occasionally, Army spokesmen have started a half-hearted demand for an Army Air Arm, but in the main the War Office has seemed content to accept the squadrons of tactical reconnaissance aircraft provided by the Air Ministry for its permanent use, and when army

manoeuvres were in progress to borrow a few squadrons of fighters and bombers from the Air Force.

The Admiralty, on the other hand, made firm demands and paid for what it got, which put it in a much stronger position as clearly demonstrated by the Fleet Air Arm. Over and over again we prophesied that when a British expeditionary force moved overseas it would find itself short of bombers and fighters, for the simple reason that the Air Ministry could not afford to lend enough of either. It is a melancholy satisfaction to have to say “I told you so” and nobody regrets more bitterly than we do that our warnings, inspired by concern for the national safety, have proved right.

Reform Foreshadowed

The Army was short of fighters and bombers in France, in Norway, in Greece and in Crete, but so far as the Middle East campaigns go, it is abundantly clear that there has been no lack of cordial collaboration there between the Army and the Air Force. Since operations in Africa began, *Flight* has constantly commented on the success with which the two have worked together. Mr. Churchill, in his speech, told the House that the Chief Air officer lives in the same house in Cairo as the Commander-in-Chief and he knew of no disagreement between them. Incidentally, this leaves one more puzzled than ever by the recent change in Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief. All through the African campaigns the RAF and the Dominion Air Forces gave the most valuable support to the Army, and for his conduct of those operations Sir Arthur Longmore was made a G.C.B.

The Prime Minister, however, foreshadowed a change in the relations of the Army and the Air Force, but his words, though incisive, gave but a vague idea of what the change will be. The following passages seem to be the most pregnant: “It is of the utmost consequence that every division, especially armoured division, should have a chance to live its daily life and training in a close and precise relationship with a particular number of aircraft that it knows and that it can call up at will and need, and under its own command for the purpose of everything that is a tactical operation.” And he then went on: “It is the intention to go forward upon that path immediately and to provide the Army with a considerably larger number of aeroplanes suited entirely to the work they have to do...”

To some extent these words seem to describe the position

hitherto held by the squadrons known as Army Co-operation Squadrons; that is to say, units trained for short tactical reconnaissance. But Lysanders, or other aircraft of that class, could not deal with “everything that is a tactical operation, ” and the words indicate an important new step in organization. Whether the words imply that the Prime Minister is not satisfied with the new constitution of the newly formed Army Co-operation Command and intends to have the position strengthened does not yet appear. We must await developments. It is at least very good news that the Prime Minister, no less than the public, has realized the weakness of the old position – a weakness which has so often been pointed out in these columns.”

Throughout June and July *Flight* reported on the continuing debate over the relationship between the Army and the Air Force, with questions discussing whether dive bombers should be supplied to the Army, should the American Army Air Corps model of having ‘Attack’ sections devoted to attacking ground targets be copied, what exactly did Army Co-operation entail, and what effect would the production of ‘dive-bombers’ have on the production of heavy bombers. The constant message throughout the discussion was that a change was needed in the relations of the Army and the Air Force:

Flight, July 24th, 1941

The Outlook

Building for Victory

“The very important point of whether Great Britain ought to plan for a victory by air power alone or by using aircraft of various descriptions to give the fullest possible support to the British Army is discussed in an article on another page of this issue. Of course, the country could not wisely concentrate upon one of the objects to the absolute exclusion of the other. However strong the War cabinet decided to make the air support to the Army, it would still be necessary to maintain a bombing offensive against the enemy’s production of warlike material; and likewise, even if it were decided to concentrate on the assault on production, the Army must still have far more efficient air help than it had in the Battle of France, in Norway, in Greece and in Crete. But, even with the help of the United States, Britain could not in a reasonable time attain absolute overwhelming air superiority in both these

directions. She can have either one or the other, but not both. It is of the utmost importance that this question, a question of major strategy, should be settled at once, and the programme of aircraft production in Great Britain and the United States framed in accordance with the decision taken by the War Cabinet. ”

In ‘Which Road to Victory: Air Alone or Land Plus Air’ (pages 51-52) Major F A de V. Robertson, ex-Indian Army and R.F.C., described the air and ground supporters within the debate in terms that would still be applicable today:

“Without doubt the Air Ministry and Air Staff will loyally co-operate in any plan upon which the War Cabinet decides as best calculated to give us victory, but they may grieve if the decision is for final victory by land. Airmen, both inside the RAF and outside it, are sometimes swayed by a sentimental affection for the aeroplane. They have a counterpart in some retired cavalry officers who are breaking their hearts because their own regiments have been mechanized, and who sometimes talk as if they would sooner see the war lost on horseback than won behind an internal combustion engine. Horse and aircraft alike evoke an affection which goes beyond all reason, one being an old-established factor in war and the other among the newest weapons.”

In the August 21st edition, *Flight* readers were informed of the debate going on across the Atlantic regarding separate or joint Air Forces, something that Great Britain had decided on at the end of the Great War:

Flight, August 21st, 1941. (Pages 99-100)

The Outlook

The American Air Question

“We learn from U.S. papers that, once again, there is keen discussion on whether the United States ought to institute a separate Air Force by combining into one Service the flying units of the Army and Navy, as did Great Britain in 1918. One gathers from what one reads that, on the whole, the army airmen are inclined to favour such a step, while the naval airmen are against it. If so, that is also a reproduction of the general feelings in Britain in 1918.

It would be impertinent if *Flight* were to advise the United States on what would be best for her. Nevertheless it is

our opinion that Great Britain made a mistake in 1918, not by forming the Royal Air Force, but by omitting to leave the Navy and Army with their own Air Arms when the independent Service was formed. After many years of acrimonious discussion, it was found necessary to restore the Fleet Air Arm to the Navy while, at the present time, discussion is proceeding as to whether the Army ought not also to have its own air contingent. Some people exclaim: “What, three Air Forces?” That expression is misleading. Britain needs one Air Force; Air Arms for the two senior Services are a different matter. Neither Air Arm (if both existed) in any way detracts from the need for maintaining the Royal Air Force. Only the RAF could be entrusted, for example, with the air defence of Great Britain.”

By September, the repercussions from Crete featured less in the magazine’s content. Major Robertson, on September 11th, wrote an article on page 146 entitled ‘After Two Years of War: The Part Played by Air Power’ in which many positives were forthcoming. However, the Greece and Crete campaigns received the following comment:

“When we come to recall events in Greece and Crete we are not so happy. Everybody is agreed that the British Army and the Royal Navy did everything that could be expected of them, but air support was lacking. No slur can be cast on the honour of the squadrons which were in Greece, for they, too, did all that British airmen could do – but there were not enough of them. The full story has not yet been told, and so there is little point in trying to draw morals from our incomplete knowledge. We merely hope that the same thing will not happen again.”

The final comments on Crete came in September 1941. General Wavell made a broadcast from Simla on the anniversary of the outbreak of the war and the September 11th editorial wrote:

“Another passage in General Wavell’s speech which has a bearing on the subject of air power was his assertion that the enemy losses in Crete had certainly cost the Germans Iraq and Syria. The men who fought in Crete are sore that they did not receive due support from the air, but now they have been told by an authority whom few will doubt that their sacrifice had a most advantageous effect on the war in the Middle East. That will be to them a great consolation.”

On September 9th Winston Churchill gave a review of the war to the House of Commons, which was reported in the editorial of September 18th:

The Outlook

Mr. Churchill on the Air

“In his review of the war in the House of Commons on September 9th the Prime Minister gave some interesting information about certain features of the air war which are not generally known, and also made one significant correction of a remark which, had it not been corrected, might have set the hopes of the man in the street on a wrong tack. The Prime Minister spoke of “that broadening stream of heavy bombers now acting against Germany night after night which will play a decisive part, or one of the decisive parts, in the final victory.” But for the correction the belief might have got abroad that the Prime Minister had given up hope of land operations against Germany (in which case why should Lord Beaverbrook be always harping on the output of tanks?) and had come to the belief that strategic bombing by itself would finish the war. In the same passage he mentioned the importance of “the spacious airfields which we have constructed and which we are expanding there (ie in Iceland) and in Newfoundland.” Incidentally, the use of the word “airfield” by the Prime Minister may be noted.

Mr. Churchill confirmed General Wavell’s opinion that our stand in Crete had saved Syria and Iraq for us. “The German parachute and airborne corps which, no doubt, was to have operated in Iraq, and, would have been assisted on their journey across Syria by the Vichy French, had been largely exterminated in the Battle of Crete. Over 4,000 of these special troops were killed, and very large numbers of carrier aircraft were destroyed. This specialist corps were so mauled in the ferocious fighting that, although they forced us to evacuate Crete, they were themselves in no condition for further operations.

Other interesting scraps of air information in the Prime Minister’s speech told us that...in the Middle East we have within the last year built up an Air Force almost as large as that which we had in Great Britain when the war began.”

Conclusion

I end with two more items from *Flight*: an article from the January 1st, 1942 edition, which included comment on the Invasion of Crete, the situation before the invasion and

the effect of its loss on the overall scheme of the war; and a piece from ‘Air Power in 1942: A Year of Recovery’ written by Major Robertson for the December 31st, 1942 edition:

Flight, January 1st, 1942 (Pages b-g)

1941 In Retrospect

“Mr. Winston Churchill, ever since he became Prime Minister, has warned the country that there would be ups and downs in the fortunes of war, and when we look back on the tale of A.D. 1941 we find plenty of examples of both...

In Greece and East Africa

The superiority of the RAF was also clearly manifested in Albania, where the Greeks were steadily pressing back the Italians, though the bad weather of January had slowed up their advance. The number of British fighters, Hurricanes and Gladiators, in Greece was small, but the pilots would attack any number of Italian fighters, and always had the best of the encounters. Blenheims helped the Greek Army in its advance, and British bombers, mostly based on Crete, constantly raided the Italian ports of Valona and Durazzo in Albania, and Brindisi in Italy. Things seemed to be going well there....

The Failure In Greece

But in April the Germans fell upon Yugoslavia and Greece in strength. Their aircraft outnumbered those which the Empire and Greece could muster there, and German air superiority, accompanied by overwhelming numbers of Panzer divisions, speedily overcame all opposition. After hard and gallant fighting, the British troops and squadrons, as well as some of the Greek troops, were evacuated, some to Egypt, some to Crete. During the month of April, 250-odd Axis aircraft were destroyed by the Middle East Command, but too many were left over...

The Germans, at the time, were busy invading Crete by air. We had left no aircraft on the island, and the Navy undertook to see that no enemy troops should reach it by sea. It was decided to try whether our ground troops could hold the place without air support. The experiment may well have been worth making, but it failed. At great loss to themselves, the Germans poured in men by troop-carriers, and gliders, some of them landing by parachute, while Stukas battered our gun posts and infantry. As a result, an

Air Power in 1942

A Year of Recovery : From Defence to Aggression : Britain's Darkest and Brightest Hours : Heroism in Defeat as in Victory

air attack, unsupported by Panzers, overcame a ground defence unsupported by aircraft. A considerable part of our troops was evacuated with the help of the Navy, but our losses were grievous, especially in cruisers and other ships. However, the defence of Crete saved Iraq and Syria.

So the year ends with a mixture of good and bad news. The Russians are doing famously – and perhaps that is the most important thing of all – though it is certainly of first rate importance that we have been doing better of late in the Battle of the Atlantic and that the United States are now fully in the war against the three Axis Powers. In Libya, the long drawn-out battle is ending in our favour, and that may have very great results. In the Pacific things are not going so well at the moment. But still the combined naval power of the British Empire and the United States is far greater than that of the Axis. It can only be a matter of time before the tide in the Pacific turns in our favour. We look forward to 1942 with calm confidence.”

For Great Britain and our allies, one of the key lessons from Operation Mercury was the use of airborne forces. Reports and pictures of ‘Our Air Army’ had appeared in *Flight* in May 1941, before the German invasion of the Crete, describing the employment of British parachutists in Southern Italy in February 1941 and showing them in training, jumping out of Whitley bombers. We now know that while the enormous losses incurred by General Student's elite *Fallschirmjaeger* unit ensured that German airborne troops were never used in such a manner again during World War Two, the Allies studied the use of parachutists, airborne troops and aircraft in combined operations from this point onwards, using them all to great effect from June 1944 onwards in the operations to liberate Europe.

In 1942 the airfield defence question was resolved in Britain by the formation of the RAF Regiment, charged with the protection of RAF airfields. The War Office announced the formation of an Army Air Corps and the allocation to it of a regiment of glider pilots. The dive bomber vs heavy bomber debate subsided as RAF Bomber Command continued its strategic bombing campaign, knowing that the United States was destined to add its manufacturing and fighting strength to the campaign after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour in December 1941 brought America into the war.

And what of the thorny problem of what we would now term ‘Air-Land Integration’?

“The year 1942 has seen a tremendous change in the fortunes of war.....In particular, the year has seen progress made in estimating the proper relation of air power to other forms of conflict...Another feature of the opening months of the year was the initial experiments in Combined Operations by all three Services...These Combined Operations were destined to develop into something much greater and more promising before the year was out. In fact, a steady advance in using Navy, Army and Air Force in combination has been one of the distinguishing signs of progress of the year...”

By January 1942, 33 Squadron's history tells us that it was back in action with the Western Desert Air Force under Tedder's and Coningham's direction, participating with great effect and success in the combined operation with Montgomery's 8th Army that would reverse Allied fortunes and sweep the Axis powers out of North Africa by the end of the year. In describing the Desert Air Victory, Air Vice Marshal Coningham was quoted in the December 17th, 1942 as saying:

“Honestly, I think that in this offensive we have achieved the most complete defeat of any air force there has ever been.”

The RAF's Second Tactical Air Force

(2 TAF)

2 TAF would rise from the ashes of the Army Co-operation Command and create a Composite Group to support the invasion of Europe in 1944. Formed on 1st June, 1943, it took units from both Fighter Command and Bomber Command in order to form a force capable of supporting the Army in the field. The first 2 TAF commander was Air Marshal Sir John d'Albiac, who was replaced in January 1944 by Coningham; two months later Coningham assumed additional duties as commander of the Advanced Allied Expeditionary Air Force (AAEAF). Ironically, at that critical point, two

serious command problems arose. Relationships among the RAF commanders, particularly Coningham, Leigh-Mallory, and Arthur Tedder (Deputy Supreme Commander for Overlord) were strained at best. Much more serious was the breakdown between the RAF commanders and 21st Army Group Commander, Field Marshal Montgomery, who also wore an additional hat as commander of Allied ground forces during the invasion.

While fighting Rommel in the Western Desert, Montgomery had enthusiastically supported air action in the Mediterranean and accepted whole-heartedly Coningham's thoughts on air support. In Europe, Montgomery and the RAF came to disagree over the relationship between the air and the land commander. While Montgomery paid lip service to the concept of independent air action, his actions in early 1944 clearly indicate that he considered his equals in the RAF merely advisers. For their part, Coningham and Tedder nursed grudges going back to the plodding advance after second El Alamein and Montgomery's notorious slowness during the pursuit of Rommel's retreating forces.

For the airmen, the critical question in Operation Overlord was how rapidly Montgomery would advance to seize airfields so Allied tactical air forces would not have to operate across the Channel, from bases in England. The lessons and criticisms of the France, Greece

and Crete campaigns had been noted by the air planners, yet despite the success of a truly joint venture in the Western Desert the Land Component Commander chose not to give sufficient priority to the the Air Component's requirements.

Yet this issue turned out to be far less important than originally thought. Advanced Landing Grounds were quickly hacked out of the Normandy terrain by men of the Airfield Construction Service of 2TAF, Royal Air Force , often only a few thousand yards from opposing German forces. Using innovative materials like square-mesh track, (SMT), prefabricated hessian surfacing (PBS) and pierced steel plank (PSP), a PSP fighter-bomber field could take a month or longer to construct, whereas similar PBS and SMT fields, laid like a carpet, could be constructed in two weeks and one week respectively. Montgomery's planned advance from the beachhead (which the airmen considered too slow) turned out to be over-optimistic; the actual advance was even slower. Given this, Allied air power in Normandy proved all important. As historian John Terraine has noted:

"History insists that the last word, in regard to the Battle of Normandy, must be that the quarrels did not, finally, matter: Allied air power was so overwhelming that the defeat of Allied intentions on the ground never threatened disaster, only delay, and that only in the early stages, well compensated later. But let us be quite clear



Air Vice-Marshal Arthur Coningham and Lieutenant-General Sir Bernard Montgomery

about it: what made the ultimate victory possible was crushing airpower.”

Air –Land Co-operation: Coningham’s Enduring Principles

- 1. Air and Land Commanders must conceive all operations together regardless of rank or seniority.***
- 2. They must work together as equals without any one-upmanship.***
- 3. They must seek higher clarification of who is supported and who is supporting.***
- 4. Headquarters should be co-located.***
- 5. All relevant staff officers and personnel must train to learn the capabilities and limitations of the other service.***
- 6. The air force must secure air superiority. The army must not therefore always expect aircraft above them.***
- 7. RAF forward air controllers must serve in the vanguard units.***
- 8. Air-Army radio communications must be constant and accurate.***

Officer breaks rank over the Battle of Crete

Major General Sandy Thomas says poor leadership shown by Second New Zealand Expeditionary Force commanders on Crete directly led to the loss of the battle for the Mediterranean island in May 1941.

By Tim Donohue 14 May 2011

Mr Thomas has waited 70 years to tell his version of the battle, which involved German General Kurt Student's paratroopers and soldiers from many countries – including Kiwis – out of respect to the descendants of the two New Zealanders he believes contributed significantly to the loss of the battle. The two men in Mr Thomas's sights are Colonel Les Andrew, VC, the commanding officer of the 22nd Battalion, entrusted with the defence of Maleme Airfield, and Brigadier James Hargest. Brigadier Hargest was a Southland politician turned soldier who commanded the 5th New Zealand Brigade on Crete.

Mr Thomas told The Dominion Post that for 70 years since the battle, which he took part in as a second lieutenant with the 23rd Battalion stationed near Maleme, he had steadfastly adhered to the code of loyalty to his fellow officers. For that reason he had never criticised brother officers publicly. "I respect them greatly for their personal bravery." But he had decided now to "tell the truth about the battle".

He was aware he was probably the first former 2NZEF Battalion commander to speak out and criticise fellow commanders for their role in the loss of Crete. He said the troops on the ground slaughtered paratroopers in their hundreds in the first few hours of fighting and knew they had the battle won by 10am on May 20. "The problem was the commanding officers responsible for the defence of Maleme – Andrew and Hargest – did not recognise what was happening on the ground," Mr Thomas said. "In our first major battle [of World War II] our commanders were fighting a war which they did not understand."



The 22nd Battalion managed to hold Maleme throughout the first day of the battle, he said. On the night of May 20, he and his men, along with those of the 28th Maori Battalion, located near Platanias, waited for a Maleme Airfield counter-attack order from Brigadier Hargest. That order did not come till the following day, in broad daylight, by which time, according to Mr Thomas, it was suicidally too late.

Hill 107

"There was only one bit of vital ground on Crete which had to be held, a hill overlooking Maleme Airfield, Hill 107, and the airfield itself. We never got the order to launch the counter-attack on the night of May 20. "That was the reason we lost Crete. There was a feeling of bewilderment among the men when we never got the counter-attack order."

He recalled how Colonel Andrew had contacted Brigadier Hargest about 5pm on the first night with a request to have the 23rd Battalion carry out the pre-planned counter-attack. The reply came back from brigade headquarters that the 23rd Battalion were themselves tied up dealing with parachutists. Mr Thomas said this was nonsense as the 23rd Battalion was under no real pressure from parachutists at the time.

Colonel Andrew told Brigadier Hargest in this conversation that he might have to withdraw from the top of Hill 107 overlooking the airfield. To this Brigadier Hargest responded, "Well, if you must, you must." Mr Thomas said the Battle of Crete was lost as a result of this exchange. He had had 70 years to think about the decision to withdraw from Hill 107 and the airfield.

It's something I've kept to myself for 70 years. It's time to tell the truth about how we New Zealanders performed on Crete."

"You have got to realise VCs are awarded to people like Les Andrew for actual bravery. They don't necessarily make you a born leader. Colonel Andrew should never have left that ground. "Even if he had withdrawn, the battle still was not lost because we still had a completely intact 23rd Battalion ... and Maori Battalion ... nearby." He said Brigadier Hargest, if he was doing his job properly, should have immediately ordered a counter-attack on the airfield and Hill 107 by the 23rd and the 28th Maori battalions.

"All the brigadiers I've ever known in a situation like that would have said ... you take one step backwards and I'll have your balls. I feel awful saying this about Hargest because his son was killed in my battalion later on in the war. "But Hargest lost the Battle of Crete right there [by not ordering the counter-attack]. If we could have held on to that vital ground [the Luftwaffe's] 1200 planes could have done nothing."



Brigadier James Hargest

Mr Thomas said Brigadier Hargest, who died as a result of mortar fire in Europe in 1944, was a gallant soldier. "But he was out of his depth as a brigadier on Crete." According to NZHistory.net.nz, run by the Culture and Heritage Ministry, Mr Hargest is the military leader who has come under the most scrutiny since the battle. "His lethargy and lack of judgment during the first two days of the battle placed a spotlight on how he came to be serving with the 2NZEF. "In 1939 he had been found unfit for overseas service but had secured a commission through his political connections as an MP. The fact that he remained at his headquarters, well removed from the scene of action, has also been criticised."

The delayed counter-attack on the airfield did eventually come, but in daylight on May 21, when the troops were at the mercy of the Luftwaffe's Stuka dive bombers, Mr Thomas said. "That was Hargest again. It was madness. It

makes you weep because our boys, the Maoris for instance, they are terrific fighters at night and the Germans hated fighting at night." We had to attack that airfield at night when their planes could not fly ... It was so silly to attack in daylight. They had no chance of taking that airfield in daytime."

He described the Fifth Brigade's plan round the Maleme Airfield under Mr Hargest as dysfunctional "to say the least". The remnants of four companies from the 22nd Battalion were left on the airfield on the night of May 20 without realising an order had gone out to withdraw from Hill 107 and the airfield itself. In the early morning the remaining 22nd Battalion soldiers, when they realised they were leaderless and the pre-planned counter-attack had not materialised, withdrew through the ranks of the sleeping Germans and the retreat from Crete had begun. "Les Andrew left of his own accord and took the 22nd Battalion off the only bit of vital ground in the whole of Crete. It was terrible," Mr Thomas said.

Student Considered Withdrawal

Meanwhile, back in Athens at his headquarters, German General Kurt Student sent a reconnaissance aircraft out over Maleme early on May 21. "General Student himself was on the verge of ordering a withdrawal but not a single shot was fired at this early morning reconnaissance aircraft. "On the basis of this, the pilot ... a squadron leader type I understand ... went back and told the Germans to continue the attack on the airfield. It was that close," Mr Thomas said.

"My Battalion alone killed 300 Germans. Our soldiers were in great heart. We were ready for the counter-attack. Hargest should have told Andrew to stay where he was. "If we had gone in on that first night we would have won the battle. We had rehearsed the manoeuvre twice. We did not need to hold the ground we were on. We were there to help the 22nd. But of course Hargest said no, you stay where you are."

General Freyberg

During the remainder of the war he often talked to General Bernard Freyberg, the commanding officer of the New Zealand division, about Crete. Lord Freyberg, who became New Zealand's governor-general after the war, "taught me never to criticise senior officers and to stand by them", he said. "But when I went back to Crete a few years ago I thought, God, one ought to come clean on all of this because in future we could make the same

mistakes again. You can't try to fight a war with commanders who were at war 25 years earlier."



General Bernard Freyberg VC

Mr Thomas accepted that Lord Freyberg had not ordered the destruction of the airfield before the battle as he did not want his opposing parachute commander, General Student, to know the allies had cracked German communications systems. Mr Thomas said when his soldiers were ordered to retreat from Maleme they could not believe it. "Our commanders were too old on Crete. We won far more serious battles later in the war. "Loyalty is something which is terribly important in the army. But now I realise it is a mistake not to speak out because if we don't watch it we could so easily do it again."



Colonel Les Andrew VC

He said Mr Hargest and Mr Andrew were clearly outstanding World War I soldiers before taking on their leadership roles in World War II. Mr Hargest was taken prisoner when his headquarters was overrun by German tanks in Libya in November 1941. He was taken before the "Desert Fox", Field-Marshal Erwin Rommel, who told him his men had fought well during the battle (in Libya). He was sent to a prisoner of war camp in Italy. Hargest

escaped and returned to Britain via France. Before D-Day, he was appointed as an official observer, attached to the British 50th (Northumbrian) Infantry Division and wrote perspective reports on the campaign. He was killed by mortar fire in Europe in 1944 and was survived by his wife and three children.

Mr Andrew was a popular commander among his troops on Crete. His men have always steadfastly backed him against all the criticism he received over the years - before and after his death in January 1969. One of his biggest supporters has been the 22nd Battalion platoon commander on Crete, Haddon Donald. In his memoirs, Mr Donald said Mr Andrew had the difficult job of locating his companies to defend a "four-mile perimeter area" round Maleme Airport. Mr Donald described the battle as an epic encounter, unique as an airborne invasion, and never to be repeated by the Germans because of their horrendous loss of elite troops. "It became controversial in later years as our armchair historians tried to lay the blame for its loss on individuals ... These included our 22nd Battalion commanding officer Lt Colonel L W Andrew VC," Mr Donald wrote.

"Published records indicate a considerably greater number of Allied than German forces on Crete. However, the majority of the German troops were front-line fighting men. The majority of our forces were support personnel in charge of supply, aerodromes, parts, etc.

"The crucial matter, to my mind, was the complete domination of the air by the Germans and the fact that, until that time, Hitler had won every battle and was unlikely to accept a defeat," Mr Donald wrote. His memoirs said Mr Thomas, who fought in the battle alongside Mr Donald, was certainly not an armchair historian.



Colonel Haddon Donald

War historian and author Chris Pugsley has been a long-time critic of Mr Andrew's decision to retreat from Hill 107 and Maleme Airfield. Mr Pugsley said in 1991 that Mr Andrew won a VC for bravery in World War I but was "unable to cope with being a battalion commander in the second".

THE PLAYERS

Major General Sandy Thomas (29 Jun 1919 -)

Sandy Thomas was a lieutenant in the New Zealand Division's 23rd Battalion when German paratroopers invaded Crete on May 20, 1941. Seventy years after the battle he has broken ranks by criticising fellow officers and saying it was poor leadership that resulted in the loss of Crete. In particular he has pointed the finger at the commanding officer of the 22nd Battalion, entrusted with the defence of Maleme Airfield, Colonel Les Andrew, VC, and Brigadier James Hargest who, he says, both let the troops on the ground down. Mr Thomas was captured by the Germans at Galatas on Crete after being badly wounded during the battle. He went on to command the 23rd Battalion in Europe after pulling off one of the great escapes of World War II from a German concentration camp on the Greek mainland. After the war, General Thomas joined the British Army and commanded British Forces in the Far East.

Colonel Les Andrew, VC (23 March 1897-8 Jan 1969)

Les Andrew was 20 years old when he won a Victoria Cross for his actions on July 31, 1917, at La Bassee Ville, in France. As the leader of a small assault party he spearheaded two attacks on machinegun posts, putting both out of action and killing several Germans in the process. In World War II he was the first commanding officer of the 22nd Battalion, which was entrusted with the defence of Maleme Airfield on Crete. Mr Andrew's decision to withdraw his battalion from Hill 107 and Maleme Airfield has been criticised by numerous military historians, including New Zealand author Chris Pugsley. Mr Andrew had 600 soldiers under his command on May 20, 1941. There were 302 casualties among his men. Sixty-two died in the battle, 146 were wounded, 175 were taken prisoner (81 were wounded and taken prisoner).

Brigadier James Hargest (4 Sep 1891 – 12 Aug 1944)

James Hargest, who was born in Gore, volunteered to join the New Zealand Expeditionary Force in August 1914 and was seriously wounded at Gallipoli. He went on to serve in France, where he won a military cross in World War I. Between the wars, he was an MP in the

Invercargill and Awarua electorates. Despite an adverse medical report from army doctors, Mr Hargest managed to pull strings with then acting prime minister Peter Fraser and was appointed commanding officer of the 5th NZ Brigade in May 1940. Mr Thomas describes Mr Hargest as a brave man who was in the wrong place at the wrong time as the brigade commander entrusted with the defence of Maleme Airfield and Hill 107 on Crete. Mr Hargest was killed by mortar fire in Europe in 1944. Mr Thomas says he found it "unbelievable" that Mr Hargest stayed mostly at his brigade headquarters, four miles away from Maleme Airfield, throughout the early days of the battle.

Colonel Haddon Donald (20 Mar 1917 -)

Haddon Donald, along with Mr Thomas, is a surviving New Zealand battalion commander from World War II. He now lives in retirement in Taupo. As a platoon commander with the 22nd Battalion on Crete he was seriously wounded on the airfield on May 20, 1941. He has always firmly defended Colonel Andrew's actions. On April 11, 2001 Mr Donald wrote to this newspaper describing Mr Andrew as a hero and saying his personal courage was without question. He described Mr Andrew's judgment as sound in the face of tremendous pressure and a realisation of the inevitable result of this unequal battle. He said New Zealand troops on Crete were tragically ill-equipped largely because of political failures in London and Wellington. Mr Donald commanded the 22nd Battalion in 1944 and 1945.

Reflections: 'A View from the top' - Dick Lacey



April 1992 - Wing Commander Jim Grisedale (left) hands over command to Wing Commander Dick Lacey

Having recently been made aware of the 33 Sqn Association by Dave Stewart, I promised him I would write a piece for the Sqn Newsletter to try to sketch in something of the great times I had while with 33.

I came to 33 from several Wessex tours, almost all of which was spent in or around Northern Ireland. So I was new to both the aircraft and the role, and therefore made the ideal squadron commander! I had been on the ground since October 1986 when I left 72 Sqn, then based at Aldergrove, for a job at HQ PTC in flying training (I'd been a beeper in a previous life). This was mercifully made short by posting to Staff College for a year after which I had been a Personal Staff Officer at HQ STC to the DC in C then C in C during the First Gulf War, a very privileged position from which to view that event.

So after nearly four years on the deck, I was offered a refresher at Shawbury to try to get up to speed again, and thence to 240 OCU. After the Wessex, the Puma was something of a revelation. I loved the acceleration and additional speed, the better view, the easy communication with the cabin and being able to have the loadmaster come up the front to help out with managing the systems and, best of all, simply how the aircraft looked with the wheels up in flight and how it sounded. I was not so keen on retracting wheels (would I remember to put them down again?), the trim system (which I'm not sure I ever fully mastered), the fuel consumption (I was always

thinking about where the next suck of gas was coming from) and the high centre of gravity. But my OCU course through the winter of 1991/2 in the capable hands of Andy Abbott sorted most things out for me. I recall that I ditched the overseas trainer in favour of a four-week detachment to Aldergrove to enable me to learn to operate the aircraft in an environment that I knew well. I was aware that flying time with 33 Sqn would be in short supply and consolidation could be difficult. This turned out to be really useful as well as an enjoyable change.

Then in April 1992 I took over command of 33 from Jim Grisedale. My first surprise was that there was virtually no-one on the squadron with whom I had served before, so the first task was to get to know everyone. This was not easy with three crews permanently detached in Belize! At this time the flight commanders were Duncan Welham (AMF Flt), Jan Janiurek (B Flt) and Paul Redfern (HQ Flt) and Brian Littlely was Crewman Leader. I needed to get up to CR reasonably quickly and with the help of Jan and the two QHIs, Ade Pickard and Ges Charlton, I managed that without cutting too many corners!

The second big thing for me was getting to grips with the diversity of the task facing the Sqn. With the AMF Flt regularly away of exercises all around Europe, the S&D Flt doing Lord knew what, crews in Belize, occasional detachments to Northern Ireland to bolster 230

Sqn plus UK tasking, the breadth was breathtaking. I quickly realised that conventional flying supervision would not work and that delegation and trust would be key. Fortunately, I had inherited a great team from Jim and everyone pulled together and provided mutual support. I was hugely impressed with the whole outfit.

The only fly in the ointment at the time was aircraft availability. This was the time that the barbecue plates that mounted the main rotor gearbox to the airframe were being replaced and the modification and major servicing program had an extra two or perhaps three lines running. Priority clearly had to go to Northern Ireland and Belize, so the OCU and 33 Sqn had to share what was left and we were always short of aircraft. Despite the great work of the Sqn engineers under the very capable leadership of Chris Bushell, we were often prevailed upon to loan aircraft to 240 OCU on a daily basis because we need the trained output from them to keep our crew numbers up to scratch. As a result I recall there were often times when we only had three or four aircraft available.

One small win I recall from my early days was reorientating the OC PMS of the time to be more user-friendly to aircrew. No names, no pack drill, but I learned while on the OCU that the incumbent seemed to have little time for aircrew. I invited him to take my left hand seat for an overnight task on Sennybridge ranges, which he accepted. Things could not have worked out better!

It was to be an early start, so we RV'd at Dingly Dell to find the weather absolutely punk. We prepped and then waited for an improvement. Eventually we launched IFR for a cloud break at Cardiff then set off at low level to Sennybridge only to have to turn back to wait for a further improvement. We made it finally late in the morning and then were put to work immediately. We worked flat out for several hours in really foul weather, so no lunch break! Drumstock refuelling was the order of the day and we finished up at Brecon camp after dark, where we had booked accommodation. By this time it was raining heavily again and I told OC PMS how to help us to put the aircraft to bed. By the end we were all cold and wet. So after a long day it was off to the mess for a bath and dinner - but not so fast! Rooms we had, but the late meals we had booked had been forgotten, no chef available, so no food. So off down town it had to be (oh dear, how sad, never mind!) for a late supper. Over dinner OC PMS asked, "It's been an interesting day, but is it always like this?" "Yes", I lied. Next day dawned clear and bright and we finished the task in good order,

which came as a great relief to all. I'm pleased to say that after that we had no more trouble with OC PMS, who professed himself astonished at what we had on occasion to put up with!

I greatly enjoyed learning the AMF role and joined several of their detachments under the splendid leadership of the estimable Duncan Welham, who was very ably supported by Nick Laird and usually one of the QHIs. I recall exercises at Corlu in Turkey in which I was able to participate both in the exercise and in the ferry home, in Denmark and the winter training periods in Norway and exercises at Bardufoss. What an absolutely brilliant spectrum of experiences those exercises provided. They brought the best out in everyone who took part and the camaraderie and acceptance of responsibility, which was shared and ably carried by all who took part, was something to see. I was hugely impressed with what the team achieved. In particular, I learned that what seems to an outsider to be a rather cushy and fun detachment, was actually hard work, and it enabled me to defend some of the things such as use of hotels while in transit more firmly than had I not taken part. I remember in the transit back from Corlu, which took five or six days, how each day was a long one with early starts and late finishes, and after probably ten days of exercise, just added an additional level of complexity and stress for crews who were a bit tired and just wanted to get home.

While all the AMF activity was going on, B Flt was not inactive. Jan Janiurek, who was one of the most accomplished operational pilots with whom I have flown, was keen to hone operational skills across the squadron, so he implemented a programme of EW and fighter affiliation training, which was as challenging as it was enjoyable. We mounted a number of detachments to the EW range at Spadeadam and called in a number of favours from 100 Sqn in particular for affil training. Dodging fighters was just the best fun ever.

That training came in handy in 1993 when just before the Tornado F3s were sent to patrol the skies over Bosnia, 33 was tasked to send a detachment to Leeming at 24 hours' notice to help them train against helicopter targets. We sent two aircraft up and I followed in a third, when it became available a day later. I don't think Jan Janiurek was available to lead the detachment and when I arrived, I found the detachment a bit glum. When I asked why, I was told that the F3 mates were not listening to anything we had to say (how unusual!). Rather the det had been told simply to fly up and down a set line to act as targets and that the F3s would simply lock their

radars on and claim a kill. Time to play dirty! We found out that the F3 radars had a velocity gate below which slower moving targets were not displayed. So I briefed the team to fly the next sortie at or below that speed. We did that and the F3s never found us for over an hour, while we claimed snapshot after snapshot (the term that meant we were firing our guns at them) whenever they flew close to us, which wound them up a treat. When we landed they were furious and their boss invited me in for a "chat". He launched in at me for wasting their time, so I gave it to him right between the eyes! They had

good French. He and I recce'd all of the 50-odd landing sites in Normandy in advance, brokered accommodation and photographed them all as part of our preparation. The French authorities also insisted initially on a flight plan for every sortie we were to fly, and as there were well over 100 sorties we felt inundated. After some international pressure, this was reduced to us providing a list of every leg that we were to fly with callings routes and times including trips to refuel as nothing that was not pre-booked would be allowed to fly, and even worse, risked being engaged by their air defence systems which had



June 1994 - 50th Commemoration of D-Day, Normandy

wasted their air time because they were not listening to us. After that we ran the training programme and they learned, and by the end we had established some mutual respect. That det confirmed to me that I was glad not to be a fighter mate!

One of the best tasks I recall from my time with the Sqn was the 50th commemoration of D Day. We were given the task of sending eight aircraft to France for 5 days to fly the lesser Royals and ministers around the various sites and ceremonies. By this stage we were beginning to see the first navigators coming through from the Phantom world one of whom, Ian Wright, proved invaluable for this project, not least because he spoke very

been moved into the area to provide protection! Ian and I spent two whole days refining our sortie plan to ensure compliance, but it worked a treat and even received a tick VG from the French authorities.

Come the day, we deployed to a school playing field near Caen, where we had been given the use of the school's gym, so we had hot showers and with our engineering support party and catering wagon, we were self sufficient. The locals took us to their hearts. We hosted visits from the local mayor, the school and other worthies in the area. Many of our folk, the engineers in particular, were entertained in local homes where they were plied with seemingly endless quantities of the potent local ci-

der and Calvados. There were not a few sore heads!

The task began on a Friday, when three aircraft were due to collect the Duke of York from his minesweeper in Caen docks to watch the airborne assault. We arrived well in advance because of other flying activity in the area, and HRH kindly invited us all onto his ship for tea, which was quite an experience! I have to say watching the enactment paradrop by 5 Airborne Brigade was something to behold.

Fortunately, the rest of the flying went off well and I remember at one point having the Foreign Secretary, Douglas Hurd, in my jump seat for a beach bumble. However, I also committed the biggest gaffe of my career to that point during this detachment. At one point, I was working in tandem with the Royal Flight aircraft, who was carrying HM the Queen, and I was to carry the PM. I had agreed with the RF pilot, who shall remain nameless, that he would depart for the next point ahead of me, and I would start up after he had departed and catch him up so we would land and shut down together. All was going well except he was a bit further ahead of me at the landing point than I expected, so I called him on the radio that I was a bit behind and not to shut down until I arrived. I came roaring in to the LP just in time to see him carry out a quick shut down, and I flared to the hover opposite him just as his cabin door opened and HMQ appeared. I had visions of the Royal skirt blowing up over the Royal head, and me spending the rest of my natural life in the Tower, but fortunately all I did was blow endless grass into the cabin - phew!

It was quite a while into my time on the Sqn before I could afford the time to visit Belize. It seemed that there were those who did the AMF stuff and loved Norway, and there were those content to go back and forth to Belize. I thought I'd better have a look at why it seemed so popular in some quarters. My detachment did not start well. On arrival at Brize Norton for the flight out, I discovered OC Standards and his team were going too. I'd not long been "done" by them so another dose I did not need. The VC10 then went u/s in Washington for 48 hours, (sad, eh?), and we arrived finally in Belize in time for night flying. I've never seen anywhere so black at night! Having got through my second Cat ride inside 4 months I was turned loose after a brief intro to the environment.

Wow, did I learn about hot and high, and single engine performance, or should I say lack of it, on the Puma! Navigation over the jungle was interesting, too, and finding some of the clearings was a challenge especially as

the full constellation of navigation satellites was not in place at that time, so GPS was out and it was back to heading and time to find them. The techniques for getting into and, more especially, out of some of those very deep clearings were also very interesting and using every inch of the performance envelope was a must. I think like most I enjoyed the Battle Group South resupply days with the lunch stop on Hunting Cay for a swim as the highlight, though being all salty and sitting sweating in a flying suit for the afternoon took a bit of the gloss off things. I hated the humid conditions in Belize and on balance was not unhappy that I never made it back there.

One thing I did uncover while in Belize was why aircraft coming back from there, which all went into deep servicing on arrival in UK, were taking much longer than planned to come out. The problem was corrosion due to operating over the sea, compounded by salt-laden sand being imported into the cabin on soldiers' boots. The major servicing lines were having to replace corroded parts of the airframe, particularly under the floor, and it was not unusual to remove 200kg of sand that had wormed its way into the structure. No wonder we had challenging performance in the hot and high conditions. The issue came to light for me when I snagged the aircraft on return from a BGS day for a full interior clean and exterior wash as I'd landed at Hunting Cay with the tail boom sticking out over the water. The line chief came running up to say it would be done next Friday (this was a Monday if I remember rightly) because that was when they always did aircraft washes. Unacceptable says I and I won't lift the snag till it's done. Next I'm bearded by OC Eng Wing who repeated the mantra at which point I got a bit shirty. I explained that poor husbandry was depriving the fleet of aircraft and that aircraft could not be left unwashed for nearly a week. We did come to an understanding, but I followed up with Group on return and a lot of changes to husbandry practices followed, mandated from their level.

Another area for which I was technically responsible was the activities of the S&D Flight, led at that time by Ian Rose, who handed on to Arthur Bennett. Some of the tasks, techniques and capabilities were mind-blowing and once again I had to rely on the cool heads of all those on the Flight to ensure that they weighed the risks involved carefully before committing themselves to their various tasks. One thing I did like when I flew their special fit aircraft was the sponson fuel tanks, which gave a much needed boost to the range of the aircraft at the cost of less than 100kgs to aircraft base weight when empty. I thought these so much better than the dreaded

overload tanks as they were properly plumbed into the aircraft fuel system and were gauged. I started a campaign with Smokey Furniss in the MOD to get a mod programme agreed for fitting these tanks to the whole fleet, sadly to no avail.

And finally the most bonkers thing I recall being required to do was to sign off the Puma display each year, which, according to Air Staff Instructions, meant I had to fly with the display pilot to make sure he was safe. Safe - Good grief! Fortunately the display pilots were the QHIs, Ade Pickard and Ges Charlton, so more capable men we could not have had. I recall the first time I rode through Ade's display and at one stage when we were pointing vertically downwards at a scant 200 feet above the ground and knowing we had a 180 degree rotation to do before pulling out, I thought, "I hope he knows what he's doing cos I'm damned if I could do anything to help if he doesn't". It was a great display, but I was distinctly green around the gills at the end and as I walked unsteadily away on the pan, I said to Ade, "well I guess that will have to do because I can't go through that again until next year!"

There were so many high points I recall in my time with the Squadron including a couple of really good Crete Days that the boys put together with some flying displays that would put even RIAT in the shade. But one of the best I recall was the 'Lads and Dad's Night', which was the brainchild of Duncan Welham. All members of the Squadron were invited to bring their fathers along and we gave them a briefing on what we did, a tour of our facilities, a role demonstration and best of all, we flew them all round the local area. I don't imagine that would be possible now. We then had a black-tie dinner in the Mess, which was a great success and I know my father really enjoyed himself.

Shortly after that event it was time, in October 1994, for me to hand the Squadron over to the care of Roger Utley, a day that I knew had to come and yet it was one I dreaded. It was really tough to hand 'my' squadron to someone else, particularly as I had had such a happy and productive time on the unit and with whom I felt we had collectively achieved so much. It was a real wrench to leave such a great bunch whom I regarded as much as friends as subordinates and for whom I had the highest regard. But leave I had to as at last the MOD had caught up with me and required my services, so the fun had to stop.


However, this was not my last encounter with the Squadron as a few years later I was fortunate enough to command RAF Benson where, by then, 33 Sqn was resident

having had to move from RAF Long Sutton, but that is another story!



Above: 'Lads and Dads' Below: Adrian at play!





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