

THE SECOND WORLD WAR 1939-45

AIR WAR IN THE MEDITERRANEAN

In June 1940, when Italy entered the War there were less than 300 front-line RAF aircraft in service throughout the Mediterranean and Middle East. British forces suffered a series of early defeats starting with the invasion of Greece in April 1941 and Crete the following month. Although RAF forces fought valiantly against the Germans and Italians, the RAF was heavily outnumbered and was soon forced to withdraw to Egypt to regroup.



Men of the new RAF Regiment in battle dress

The strategically important island of Malta also came in for sustained bombardment by the Italian and then German Air Forces.



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determination and courage of the island's population. Their heroism during the siege and bombardment of their island prompted King George VI to award Malta the George Cross, Britain's highest civilian decoration for bravery. Malta remained a critical staging post throughout the war.



Maltese civilians repair airfield August 1942

The war that saved Malta was fought in the air and on and under the sea. In the early stages of the conflict in Malta, Spitfires and Hurricanes were flown off aircraft carriers (with varying degrees of success) in the Western Mediterranean to reinforce the island's air defence force of 3 ageing Gladiator biplanes. These had been purloined from the Fleet Air Arm who had left them crated up on the island for "collection later". Faith, Hope and Charity, as the 3 Gladiators were known, became legends and a symbol of the spirit of defiance exhibit by Servicemen and women and civilians alike on the beleaguered Island.



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Subsequently Malta served as the base for a concerted assault by RAF and Fleet Air Arm aircraft and Royal Navy submarines against the Axis supply lines across the Mediterranean from Italy to North Africa.



Beaufighter departs for an anti-shipping strike July 1942

These attacks played an important part in hampering Rommel's forces in North Africa and greatly assisted General Montgomery in his final drive for victory which began at El Alamein in October 1942. It was from Malta that reconnaissance sorties were flown which led to the destruction of the Italian Fleet at Taranto by the Fleet Air Arm.



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FORMATION OF THE RAF REGIMENT

The German parachute and glider assault on RAF airfields in Crete had a lasting effect in that it started developments that led to the creation of the RAF Regiment. The fall of Crete combined with the invasion of Norway and Greece, made it clear that the Army, with its resources stretched severely, could not cope with the added burden of defending RAF airfields and installations. Churchill advised that theatre airfields should be the "stronghold of fighting air-ground men, and not.....protected by detachments of soldiers" and it was decided to create a new corps to specialise in airfield defence. On 1 February 1942 the Corps of the RAF Regiment was officially formed by Royal Warrant from King George VI. Initially, the RAF Regiment's task was essentially defensive but as the war progressed, the Regiment adopted a more aggressive role. On 15 September 1943, RAF Regiment squadrons were air transported to Cos and Southern Italy. Squadrons were also landed at Salerno and later became involved in the battle for Monte Cassino. In the European theatre, the Regiment landed squadrons on Juno Beach in the early hours of D Day + 1.

By the end of the war, the RAF Regiment had seen service in North Africa, the Middle and Far East, the Mediterranean and Europe and had a fighting force of over 85,000 men.



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SICILY, ITALY AND THE BALKANS



Airfield bombed Sicily July 1943

Once North Africa had been secured, the Allies turned their attention to the invasion of Italy. Sicily was the first step and the RAF played a major role in achieving air superiority over the island before covering the airborne and amphibious assault known as Operation HUSKY in July 1943. A combination of bad weather, navigational problems and friendly fire disrupted the airborne phase of the operation, but the RAF and USAAF were able to paralyse the German and Italian air forces to enable a rapid Allied occupation of Sicily.



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The invasion of the Italian mainland in September 1943 was preceded by bombing raidson military and transportation targets throughout Italy. After Italy's surrender the German forces continued to resist the Allied advance through Italy, however, the Gemans were continually harried by RAF and USAAF fighters and bombers. Thousands of air interdiction missions were flown which had a cumulative effect on the ability of the German Army to manoeuvre and redeploy its forces. The air/land cooperation system that had worked so well in North Africa was adapted for use in Italy leading to the more efficient use of air power resources. As the Allied advance through Italy allowed the RAF to occupy enemy airfields, attention was tuned to the Balkans. An international force, known as the Balkan Air Force, was set up under the command of the Mediterranean Allied Air Forces and included aimen from Britain and the Commonwealth, the USA, Greece, Italy, Poland, Russia and Yugoslavia. From its new bases in Italy the RAF attacked Axis forces in Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Albania and Greece. RAF transport aircraft flew supplies to the Yugoslav Partisan Army and, during the Warsaw Uprising of August and September 1944, RAF and Commonwealth aircrews suffered heavy losses while attempting to resupply the Polish underground army. There is no doubt that Allied air power contributed significantly to ultimate victory in Italy and the Mediterranean. Many of the air lessons learned at some cost in these theatres were later applied during the invasion of Northern Europe.

