

## The evening they bombed Valletta

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Tuesday, April 7, 1942: This Luftwaffe photograph dramatically records the moment at 6.30 p.m. when the Luftwaffe deliberately bombed the length and breadth of Valletta, destroying various monuments and residential buildings, including the Royal Opera House and the railway tunnel (1), Lascaris Ditch (2), the Auberge de France (3), the Governor's Palace (4), the market (5), Victoria Gate (6), and, at Floriana, the scouts headquarters, the government school and part of St Publius parish church (7), and King George V Hospital (8). In the harbour, silhouetted by the setting sun, are the wrecks of various ships, Pampas (A), Talabot (B) and HMS Gallant (C). The patches on the surface are from the oil leaking from the ships of convoy MW10 sunk on March 26.

A rare photograph of Valletta under attack, taken by one of the enemy aircraft on the evening of April 7, 1942, features in the first of 13 issues that will comprise volume five of Malta At War.

The picture in question shows bomb explosions along the length of the city, with huge columns of smoke shrouding the buildings, including the Royal Opera House, the Auberge de France (where, later, the headquarters of the General Workers' Union was built), the Magisterial Palace, the market and other prominent landmarks, as well as the scouts headquarters at Sarria, Floriana.

Various ships were sunk in Grand Harbour, including the Talabot and Pampas, which had been hit a fortnight earlier in mass attacks by the Luftwaffe, determined to destroy the two survivors of a convoy from Alexandria that had been safely delivered by the Royal Navy after defeating a vastly superior Italian Navy squadron in the Second Battle of Sirte.

March 1942 had seen the Luftwaffe unleash a massive blitz to neutralise the island's offensive against the Axis convoys carrying troops and supplies to the Afrika Korps whose commander, General Erwin Rommel, was envisaging an offensive to advance from Cyrenaica into Egypt. The German fighters and bombers carried out the first carpet bombing of the war against the airfields and also targeted the anti-aircraft sites.

The first Spitfires to operate outside Britain had arrived a few weeks earlier but were too few to contain the formidable and vastly more numerous assembly of German aircraft that daily carried out hundreds of sorties, sowing high-calibre bombs over the airfields and the dockyard and against ships in harbour.

Among the historic buildings destroyed was the chapel of Tal-Ħuġġieġa in the bay where St Paul is reputed to have landed. Three paintings depicting the shipwreck dating to 1615 were almost irreparably destroyed.

These were recovered from under the rubble and, with dedication, were restored after the war and now hang inside the rebuilt chapel. The full illustrated story features in this issue of Malta At War.

One of the wartime fighter aces, the Canadian Flight Lieutenant Buck McNair, describes the tragic death of six of his brother fighter pilots at Rabat when their billet at the Hotel Point de Vue received a direct hit.

He writes: "I put my hand against the wall but it slithered down it. It had seemed dry with all the dust but when I took my hand away I found it was covered with blood with bits of meat stuck to it... I did get one chappie on to a stretcher.

"He was still alive but I couldn't recognise him. I put a cloth over his face and then a stupid orderly took it off. It was the most horrible sight I've ever seen and I've seen chappies with heads off and gaping wounds and horrible burns..."

One of the victims, an American nicknamed Junior because of his age, lost a leg and was blinded and died later in hospital. Several other Maltese were killed at Rabat, including two of the internees who had remained behind at St Agatha internment camp after the others had all been sent to Uganda.

This issue, which sells at €4.31, is again extensively illustrated with wartime photographs.

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