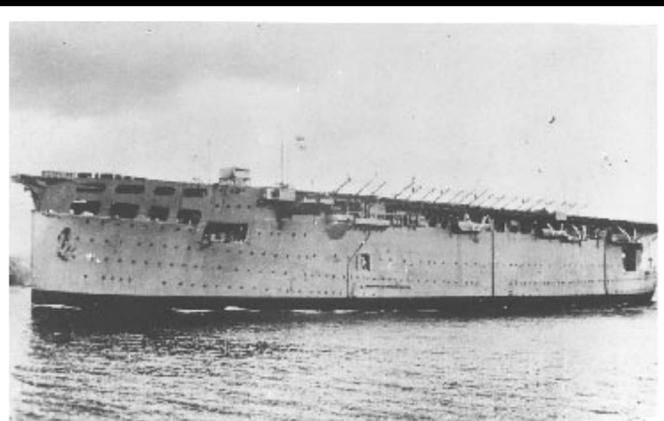


203 Squadron and Malta



THE SEAPLANE CARRIER HMS *Argus* stopped at Malta in September 1922 on her way to the Dardanelles, with Nightjars of 203 Squadron



A SUPERMARINE Southampton flying-boat (S1300) which, with two others, stopped at Malta in 1929 while on their way to join 203 Squadron at Basra in Iraq



ONE of the Nimrods of 203 Squadron taxiing at RAF Luqa



HAWKER SIDDELEY Nimrod MR1 XV249 with the distinctive seahorse badge of 203 Squadron on its dorsal fin



203 SQUADRON moved to Malta in 1969 with its Avro Shackletons



THIS Short Rangoon flying-boat (S1433), and another two, stopped at Marsaxlokk while on a delivery flight to Basra in 1931 to join 203 Squadron

by Carmel Attard

LAST FRIDAY about 280 retired Royal Air Force aircrew, their wives and partners arrived in Malta to take part in a reunion of 203 Squadron, RAF, which was based here from 1969 to 1977 with a short spell in Sigonella, Sicily, in 1972, during the Anglo-Maltese negotiations on the military base agreement.

The squadron was then flying Avro Shackleton Mk3s but these were eventually replaced by Hawker Siddeley Nimrod MR Mk1s. Both aircraft were used for maritime patrol.

Early connection

The squadron's connection with Malta however, goes back to well before 1969. Forty-seven years earlier, on September 23, 1922, the squadron, then equipped with Nieuport Nightjars, arrived at Malta on board the aircraft-carrier *HMS Argus* on its way to the Dardanelles. The squadron spent three months ashore at Kilia and returned to RAF Leuchars in the UK in December 1922, again on board *Argus*, stopping at Malta en route on December 23.

203 Squadron was again in Malta on March 7, 1929, when three Supermarine Southampton flying boats from the unit arrived at Marsaxlokk. The Southampton was used for general reconnaissance and could carry a crew of five. Its wings were made of wood and had an all-metal hull. The three machines that landed at Malta, carrying serials S1298, S1299 and S1300 were heading for their new base at Basra in Iraq. They had left their home base at Mount Batten on February 28, stopping at Hourtin (Bordeaux), Berre (Marseilles) and Naples.

All Southamptons had a crew of four. S1298 was under the command of Sqn Ldr R.M. Bayley; S1299 was flown by Wg Cdr Howe while S1300 was piloted by Flt Lt Daddo Langhor. The three Southamptons left Malta the next day stopping at Benghazi, Aboukir, Alexandria, Hinaidi (Iraq) and finally Basra. The flight took a total of 16 days, each flying-boat averaging 54 hours of flying time.

A similar delivery flight for 203 Squadron was made two years later, in February 1931. Three new Short Rangoon flying-boats were dispatched from Felixstowe, UK, to replace Southamptons of 203 Squadron at Basra. The three Rangoons were S1433/G-EZCQ, S1434/G-EZCR and S1435/G-EZCS. They arrived at Kalafrana in Malta on February 25, 1931 under the command of Gp Capt WL Welsh, DFC, AFC, who was to take command of 203 Squadron upon arrival at Basra. Before embarking on his new tour of duty, Gp Capt Welsh had served for four months at the Marine Aircraft Experimental Establishment at Felixstowe.

After leaving England, the three flying boats flew some 250 miles over land from Bordeaux to Marseilles. The original plan was that they would fly the 700-mile stretch from Marseilles to Malta without refuelling. However, as the *Daily Malta Chronicle* of February 26, 1931, reported: "exceptional strong weather prevailing constrained the flying boats to stop at Ostia where they remained until the morning of February 25".

The newspaper added: "The flight was undertaken to demonstrate the possibility of a fast flying-boat service for India air mail and although boats belonging to Imperial Airways have flown through this route, this is the first time a formation flight belonging to the Royal Air Force is flying over Mediterranean sections of the air mail route."

One of the Rangoons was flown by Gp Capt Welsh with navigation left in the hands of Flt Lt P.H. Mackworth. The pilots of the other two Rangoons were Flt Lt Hammersley and Flt Lt R.L. Ragg.

The Rangoon, like the Southampton, was used for general

reconnaissance in co-operation with the Royal Navy to protect British interests in the Persian Gulf where gun-running and smuggling activities were prevalent. It had an all-metal structure with a metal hull and fabric-covered wings.

On leaving Malta on March 1, 1931, the Rangoon flown by Gp Capt Welsh "bumped badly and strained its hull", according to a note entered in the Operational Record Book of RAF Kalafrana (AIR28/409). The ORB added: "The flying boat had to be brought ashore and spares and expert from Messrs Short Bros were sent to Malta." This mishap meant that three Rangoons' departure had to be delayed. Eventually they left Malta for Basra on April 16. On their way they stopped at Mirabelle, Crete, Alexandretta and Baghdad. Once in Iraq they alighted on the surface of the River Tigris.

When 203 Squadron, for the third time in six years, changed its aircraft again, Malta served as a staging post for the delivery of the unit's new type. In September 1935, 203 Squadron moved base, from Basra in Iraq to Aden, because of the Abyssinian crisis. The change of base brought with it a change in equipment. The squadron was assigned six Short S.19 Singapore flying-boats. The Singapore was flown on general reconnaissance duties and could take a crew of six. It had an all-metal structure, a metal hull and fabric-covered wings.

The first two Singapores assigned to 203 Squadron that stopped at Malta on their way to Aden were serialled K4582 and K4583. They landed at Marsaxlokk on September 16, 1935. A third Singapore, K4585, arrived at Marsaxlokk on September 24 and left two days later for Aden. The unit stayed at Aden till August 1936, when it returned to Basra.

The second batch of Singapore IIs assigned to 203 Squadron, made up of K4578, K4579 and K4580, landed at Malta on September 27, 1935. The next day the three Singapores were joined by a fourth, K4585. A further two Singapore flying-boats were deployed to 203 Squadron via Kalafrana, one on January 16, 1936 (K6907) and another on February 2, 1936 (K6908).

In defence of Malta

During World War Two, 203 Squadron at first moved to Aden from where its Bristol Blenheims flew reconnaissance and fighter patrols over the Red Sea until April 1941. Then it changed base and went to Egypt and Palestine. After taking part in the Syrian campaign, the squadron began reconnaissance missions over the eastern Mediterranean. The unit took on a new type, the Martin Maryland, in February 1942. Six months later the Baltimore was added and by November 1942 203 Squadron was fully equipped with Baltimores.

Ten members of the squadron died while serving on maritime reconnaissance against German and Italian convoys steaming in the Mediterranean heading for Tripoli.

On December 19, 1941, Flg Off A.T. Reed and his crew, Sgt C.T. Brown RAAF and Sgt A. McLevy, RAAF were flying in a Blenheim IVF fighter of 203 Squadron from Egypt on a maritime reconnaissance mission near Malta. The aircraft was shot down by a Bf110 of the *Luftwaffe*. All the crew died.

Four other crew members of 203 Squadron, namely Flg Officer J.B. Halbert RAAF and his crew - Flt Sgt N. Gordon, Flt Sgt H. Rogers, RAAF and Flg Off E.N. Somerville, RAAF - died on April 15, 1942. They were on a reconnaissance mission involving three Marylands of 203 Squadron which had left their base at Bu Amud in Egypt.

At 10 a.m. one of these Marylands (AH298), piloted by Flg Off Halbert, spotted an Axis convoy steaming southwards near the east coast of Sicily. Halbert began shadowing the convoy until his aircraft was running out of fuel, forcing him to head for Malta. But when Halbert was about four miles from Malta, his aircraft was shot down by a Bf110 or a Junkers 88. He and the other three crew members all died in the crash.

Another 203 Squadron crew member who died in the defence of Malta was Flt Lt W.R. Hole. He was flying a Blenheim (Z7849) in the Mediterranean on April 24, 1942, when he encountered two German Bf100s of III/ZG 26 and was shot down.

Two squadron members, Flt Sgt William Rattee, RCAF, and Sgt Frank Heywood, are buried at the Commonwealth War Graves Naval Cemetery in Kalkara. Both died on March 23, 1943.

The last operational sortie by 203 Squadron in the Mediterranean was flown on November 3, 1943. The squadron was by now converting to Vickers Wellington aircraft. It moved base to Santa Cruz in Bombay, India, that month. A year later, the Wellingtons were replaced by Consolidated Liberators and by December 1944 the squadron was fully operational with the new type.

The unit returned to the UK during May and June 1946, still flying the Baltimores. It settled at RAF Leuchars. Once in the UK, 203 Squadron was assigned Avro Lancaster IIIIs and it remained equipped with this type until March 1953.

From Leuchars, the squadron moved to other RAF bases in the UK, namely to St Eval, then to St Mawgan, again to St Eval and finally to Topcliffe, where it disbanded on September 1, 1956. The unit was at the time flying the Lockheed Neptunes.

In June 1955 Neptunes from 203 Squadron were deployed to Malta on a Fairisle detachment. During this detachment, one of the pilots, Flt Lt Houthousen, and his crew intercepted a Fleet Air Arm aircraft after a distress call. The aircraft ditched in the sea, and 203's Neptune kept flying over the scene until a rescue helicopter came to locate the ditched crew.

Moves base to Malta

203 Squadron was soon reactivated when on November 1, 1958, the then 240 Squadron was renumbered 203 Squadron at RAF Ballykelly. The squadron resumed its maritime reconnaissance, this time equipped with Avro Shackleton MR1s. The unit remained in the UK until the end of 1968. In December 1968 203 Squadron began preparations to move to Malta. The unit was then based at Ballykelly in Northern Ireland.

The *Times of Malta* of February 1, 1969, announced the arrival of 203 Squadron in a report entitled: "Shackletons arrive to watch Soviet Fleet movements". The newspaper added that the Shackletons were going to be part of a new NATO command. At the time the Cold War was at its peak and the stationing of Shackletons in Malta was part of a NATO effort to increase maritime reconnaissance in the Mediterranean.

Four Shackletons landed at Hal Far airfield, stopping en route at Gibraltar for refuelling. Before landing at Hal Far, the four aircraft with a particular sound of their respective four contra-rotating propellers, flew over the airfield in a box formation. Hal Far was only to serve as a temporary base until resurfacing works on RAF Luqa runways were completed by the end of March 1969.

A total of 42 officers, 42 non-commissioned officers and 79 ground crew changed arrived at Malta under the command of Wg Cdr R.G. Bowyer. The squadron's CO had already served in Malta with 37 Squadron between 1954 and 1956 and again with 38 Squadron from 1962 and 1964.

The four Shackletons were joined by another aircraft from 42 Squadron which was on detachment in Malta to fill the gap until arrival of 203 Squadron and by a sixth Shackleton which arrived some days later. The unit joined two other RAF squadrons also based in Malta, 13 and 39 Squadrons, both equipped with English Electric Canberras.

In August 1971 the Shackletons of 203 Squadron were going to be replaced by Hawker Siddeley Nimrod MR1s. However, these Nimrods were held at RAF Mawgan because of the political situation in Malta during negotiations on a new defence agreement with Britain. The situation deteriorated and on January 12, 1972 203 Squadron and its Shackletons moved to nearby NAF Sigonella, in Sicily. The Canberras of 13 Squadron were temporarily deployed at RAF Akrotiri in Cyprus.

A new defence agreement between Malta and the UK was eventually signed at the end of March 1972. Meanwhile 203 Squadron re-equipped itself with the new Nimrods. The squadron returned to Malta, and its Nimrod, XV250, touched down at RAF Luqa on April 24, 1972. The rest of the squadron followed within a week.

While in Malta, 203 Squadron won the Aird-Whyte Trophy and the Fincastle Trophy in 1973. Other important events for the Squadron included the participation of one of its Nimrods in the independence celebrations of the Seychelles in 1976. In April 1977 three Nimrods of 203 Squadron provided search-air-rescue cover for Queen Elizabeth II during her return journey from Australia as part of her Jubilee Tour.

203 Squadron disbanded in Malta on December 31, 1977. Its last commanding officer was Wg Cdr J.H. Carter, AFC. To mark the occasion, a parade was held at RAF Luqa and the reviewing officer was Air Vice Marshal R.D. Austen-Smith, AOC Air Headquarters in Cyprus. One of the squadron's Nimrods, piloted by Sqd Ldr M. Tanner, flew low over RAF Luqa after the parade. All Nimrods left Malta by mid-January 1978 and were absorbed into other RAF squadrons.

203 Squadron was reactivated in the 1990s and at present is based at RAF St Mawgan, Cornwall, UK flying three Westland Sea King HAR3s.