



Issue 32 - Dec-Jan 2016

# Contrails

## Newsletter of the Christchurch Aviation Society

CAvSoc

### Finding the Malta Spitfire

For our November talk Kevin Patience gave us the story behind the forward fuselage and engine of a Supermarine Spitfire shot down during the height of the Malta siege in 1942 and which now resides in the Malta War Museum in Valletta. Kevin was posted to Malta in 1967 where he soon joined the sub aqua club at Luqa. During the next year various wrecks were dived on until one day he heard a story of a Spitfire in Marsalforn Bay, Gozo. With an old Rolls-Royce limousine loaded with cylinders and equipment Kevin and two friends arrived at Marsalforn and spent the day combing the seabed thirty feet below. This was repeated several times but the story was confirmed by a local cafe owner so they did not give up and returned to Gozo in mid 1968. This time, living in a rented flat enabled a systematic search and after four days with no luck an odd shadow on the seabed revealed a propeller and Spitfire wreck covered in weed.



Excavating the aircraft showed it was broken in two with the tail section from behind the cockpit armour plate missing. The windscreen had gone and the cockpit was almost empty with just the stub of the control column and rudder pedals and seat with the remains of the harness. The under carriage selector and emergency air bottle were in place and when the lever was moved the air burst out in a large mushroom cloud from a broken pipe on the engine compressor. Lying buried under the sand was the brass case of the P8 compass still in working condition. A bullet hole found in the glycol cooling header tank in front of the engine could have been the cause of the aircraft crash. The Spitfire was obviously a Mark V fitted with a Vokes tropical filter. Kevin contacted his brother who spent some time researching the records in the Ministry of Defence Air Historical Branch but what was needed was a serial number or a date that would narrow the search.

When a wing panel was opened to reveal an undercarriage main wheel, the disturbance caused the hub to disintegrate suddenly into a fog of tiny particles. Opening the gun panel

revealed the figure 108, which, after more searches enabled the aircraft to be identified.

The aircraft was a Spitfire Mk Vc, BR108, built at Castle Bromwich with a Rolls-Royce Merlin 46 engine and first flown on 3 March 1942. Loaded onto the aircraft carrier USS Wasp on 7 May, it flew off to arrive in Malta two days later. In the hands of various pilots it accounted for a Bf 109 and two Junkers Ju87 Stukas but was damaged on 12 May when taxied into a steam roller. It was repaired and scrambled twice on 6th June. On the morning of the 8th July, 108 scrambled from Taqali flown by Flt Lt Lester Sanders accompanied by seven others to intercept a raid approaching Gozo from Sicily. Following some action which



Spitfire Vb - 1942 colour picture

saw an Me109 and Ju88 damaged, a lone Ju88 was seen and attacked by Sanders who observed strikes on its fuselage, however, as he closed in, the German rear gunner achieved a direct hit on the Spitfire's armoured windscreen, forcing him to break away. Sanders was then in turn attacked by two Bf109s and a few seconds later white smoke poured from the engine. Sanders was too low to bale out and decided to ditch the plane in the sea and landed in the bay. He struggle out of the cockpit and two fishermen took Sanders ashore to a heroes welcome. Sadly he was killed later when he was a test pilot at Castle Bromwich on 2 3rd October 1942

### Vulcan XH558 is grounded

At the end of the 2015 XH558 had far exceeded the 250 flying hours promised and consequently her structure and systems were more than ten percent beyond the flying hours of any other Vulcan. Therefore, although XH558 was as safe as any aircraft flying, knowing where to look for any future possible failure would become increasingly difficult. Collectively the three technical authorities (BAE Systems, Marshall Aerospace and Rolls-Royce) decided to cease their support which, under CAA regs, meant XH558 could no longer fly. Additionally much of the expertise and knowledge required had been obtained by contracting retired specialists.



### Next Meeting - at Druiitt Hall commencing 8pm

Wednesday 2nd March 2016 - The Future of Flight Data Recorders by Paul Hart of Curtiss Wright.