

**S-e-c-r-e-t**

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To: Director Operations, Air Ministry

From: Wing Flying, Operation Oppidan

Date: 10<sup>th</sup> May 1942

Subject: Report on Operation Oppidan

1. In accordance with instructions, I reported to the R.A.F. embarkation Officer at Glasgow on 29<sup>th</sup> April, 1942 and commenced preparing to embark forty-seven (47) Spitfires and forty-nine (49) pilots on the U.S.S. Wasp for ferrying to Malta.

2. I checked the aircraft and called a roll of the pilots. Only a few of the pilots had arrived so I concentrated on the aircraft. I contacted Squadron Leader Wall, the senior technical officer present. He assured me amongst other matters that all the jettison tanks had been tested and were serviceable. As the result of a suggestion from Lieutenant Commander Shen, U.S.N., I insisted on a further test being carried out. This showed the tank to be unserviceable. I therefore ordered tests to be carried out on all tanks, and twenty-three (23) were found unserviceable. As many as possible of these tanks were replaced or repaired before being loaded [aboard] the U.S.S. Wasp. There remained however, five (5) which had to be repaired aboard and this occasioned adverse criticism from American Naval Officers, particularly as the same trouble had been experienced on operation "Newman" (see report on operation "Newman" by F/Lt – H. H. Sims dated 27 April, 1942.)

3. All pilots had reported by the evening of 30<sup>th</sup> April, 1942 and a kit inspection was held the next morning. It was discovered that a number of them had not brought kit laid down. Deficiencies in kit were made good at Abbotsinch. Fifty-two (52) pilots had reported and of these the forty-nine (49) most experienced were selected. It was discovered that some who had been detailed as section leaders had less experience than some of those who were not so detailed. Consequently new section and flight leaders had to be chosen. Here it should be mentioned that one of the pilots had never flown a Spitfire and that there was a lack of experienced leaders. It is suggested that in any future operation at least two experienced flight commanders should be sent back from Malta to lead the new pilots after they have flown off the carrier. This would considerably improve the morale of the pilots. As it was, the flight leaders as a whole had no confidence in themselves and consequently the pilots lacked confidence.

4. During the voyage, briefing was carried out and all preparations for the flight were made. Pilots received lectures on the technique of deck take offs and deck landings. They watched the Ship's Fighters take off and land and had formal discussions with the Ship's pilots. It was particularly impressed on pilots that once they were committed to the take off on no account should brakes be used to keep the aircraft straight. Pilots were be[ing] carefully briefed regarding the details of the flight to Malta and a comprehensive flight plan was worked out.

5. Weather reports were received from Malta during the day previous to the take off and on the morning of the takeoff these generally showed satisfactory weather but in certain cases it was not possible to understand the messages. It is suggested that in any future operations improvised codes should not be used but that recognized cypher should be used.

6. On the morning of the take off, the conditions at the ship were good although the wind was lighter than ideal. The first twenty-two (22) aircraft took off satisfactorily, but the twenty-third (23) failed to reach flying speed before reaching the end of the deck and crashed into the sea and the pilot, Sgt. Sherrington was killed. The cause of this accident has not been conclusively proved but it is believed that the pilot left his air screw in coarse pitch as his engine did not seem to giving sufficient revolutions. A Court-Of-Inquiry has been held aboard the U.S.S. Wasp and the proceedings are being forwarded separately.

7. The Jettison tank of one aircraft failed to suck petrol and the pilot, P/O Smith, having jettisoned his tank landed aboard the carrier. This was an extremely fine performance [on] his part as he had never operated from a carrier before. He carried out the drill exactly as he had been ordered and obeyed all signals both over the R/T and from the deck landing officer with commendable coolness. It is believed this is the first time a Spitfire has ever landed aboard a carrier.

8. The points noticeable in this operation are detailed below:

1. Trouble was experienced with the jettison tanks.
2. Pilots did not arrive at Abbotsinch with the kit laid down.
3. There were not enough experienced flight leaders amongst the pilots.
4. The method of sending weather reports from Malta was not satisfactory.

Wing Commander (signature illegible)  
I/c [?] Flying      Operation Oppidan