

# MALTA'S GREATER SIEGE &

ADRIAN WARBURTON 

DSO\* DFC\*\* DFC (USA)



*'The Most Valuable Pilot in the RAF'*

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PAUL McDONALD

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GREATER SIEGE  
&  
ADRIAN WARBURTON

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This book is dedicated to all of the men, women and children who gave their lives in Malta – or in its support – during its Greater Siege. Especially remembered are the 2,310 Commonwealth airmen who were lost, flying from bases in the Mediterranean theatre during the Second World War, and who have no known grave. They are commemorated on the Malta Memorial in Floriana.

*PROPOSITI INSULA TENAX TENACES VIROS COMMEMORAT*

An island resolute of purpose remembers resolute men.

Also remembered is Jack Vowles (28 June 1921–15 January 2015)

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DSO\* DFC\*\* DFC (USA)

‘The Most Valuable Pilot in the RAF’

Paul McDonald



Pen & Sword  
**AVIATION**

First published in Great Britain in 2015 by  
Pen & Sword Aviation  
an imprint of  
Pen & Sword Books Ltd  
47 Church Street  
Barnsley  
South Yorkshire  
S70 2AS

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ISBN 978 1 47386 008 7

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Typeset in Ehrhardt by  
Mac Style Ltd, Bridlington, East Yorkshire  
Printed and bound in the UK by CPI Group (UK) Ltd,  
Croydon, CRO 4YY

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## Plates

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### Acknowledgements

Via Frederick Galea: 10, 19–21, 26–37, 44

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Lynda Studdert-Kennedy: 22–5, 42–3, 46–7

Ordnance Survey: 53–4

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## Acknowledgements

The first to write about Adrian Warburton was the journalist Roy Nash, in the 1950s. Tony Spooner then went on to produce *Warburton's War* some thirty years later. But for Tony's efforts, Adrian Warburton would probably have been long forgotten. I fully acknowledge the value of Roy and Tony's work.

I am especially grateful to my good friends in Malta, Frederick and Valerie Galea. Frederick is a well-known Second World War historian and writer, and he very kindly gave me permission to quote from his books. He also made many photographs available. As Honorary Secretary of the National War Museum Association of Malta and a founder member of the Malta Aviation Museum, Frederick has done a great deal to ensure stories of Malta's war made it into print. His books and other collaborative projects, together with the work of his colleagues in Malta, make a valuable contribution to Maltese and British history. Both Frederick and Valerie are also important characters in their own right in this story.

Thanks are also due to Michael Longyear for permission to quote from his childhood reminiscences of growing up on an island at war. Peter Elliot, Head of Archives at the RAF Museum, has also been of great help in allowing me access to unpublished material, photographs and scrapbooks. Some documents quoted in this work are contained within official British Government records held at the National Archives in Kew. These are Crown Copyright and their use is in accordance with the Open Government Licence.

Three airmen of the period offered first-hand recollections: an Englishman, a Canadian and an American. I met Jack Vowles in 2013. He was 92-years-old and living in a nursing home in Gloucestershire. I spent hours with Jack. His memories of wartime Malta and of Adrian Warburton were vivid and I very much looked forward to our discussions, and to going through his notes and sketch-maps, painstakingly prepared despite failing eyesight. Jack and I became firm friends. He was one of a number who paid tribute to Adrian at Durnbach in 2003 and at the Berinsfield Memorial dedication in 2004. I am most grateful to Lynda Studdert-Kennedy, Jack's eldest daughter, and to Nigel her husband, for spending so much time with me going through Jack's photographs and allowing me to use them.

Lieutenant General (Ret'd) William Keir 'Bill' Carr, CMM, DFC, OStJ, CD, RCAF was also ninety-two when we came into contact. His memory of Adrian and his views on leadership, and Warburton himself, are hugely important even today and

I am grateful for his permission to quote from his written work. My son Matthew, in Los Angeles, put me in touch with Scott Blyth, son of Lieutenant Colonel (Ret'd) John Blyth USAF, the pilot of *Spitfire 944*, portrayed in the acclaimed American short film of the same name. Through Scott I learnt of John's friendship with Adrian during the weeks he spent at Mount Farm before his final flight.

Two Maltese ladies who knew Christina personally have also been most helpful. As a child Miriam Farrugia was befriended by Christina, whose summer house in Bugibba was next door. Thank you Miriam for your moving words about the vibrant and vivacious lady you remember so well. Ingrid Scerri very kindly allowed me access to the roof of her Floriana apartment to see for myself the views Christina described so well in 1940. Thank you Ingrid and also for your memories of the English lady who lived around the corner when you were growing up.

Thanks also to Keith Bastard for making his late father's logbook extracts and photographs available. I am also grateful to Peter Woods for allowing me to look at his late father's logbook, and the photographs and scrapbook so carefully maintained by his late mother.

To Eman Bonnici, archivist at *Santa Maria Addolorata* cemetery, a special thank you; our meeting was accidental, but proved invaluable. Thank you for responding to my many questions and for your contacts. Sincere thanks also to Major Joseph Borg of the Malta Police Force and to the journalist Fiona Vella.

Many who attended Adrian's funeral in 2003 have been extremely helpful: Tim Callaway, Editor of *Aviation Classics*, Heidi Burton, née Cox, was the RAF photographer, Glyn Strong from the Veterans' Agency, and Sue Raftree from the Joint Compassionate and Casualty Centre at Innsworth. Sue very kindly forwarded my requests for information to Adrian's nephew, Charles Gethen, and to Shelia Hunt, daughter of Betty Westcott, née Warburton. Thanks also to Martin Ratcliffe, Christina's nephew, for sharing his memories of his aunt. I am also grateful to Alan Bovingdon Cox, President of the Ridgeway Military and Aviation Research Group, for sharing photographs and information, and for the time he spent with me at what was RAF Mount Farm. Thanks also to Dr Chris Joy, archivist at Manchester High School for Girls, for making available extracts from school records and magazines.

I am especially grateful to Anne Dowie for her support and for engaging the help of so many of her relatives and friends: in Malta, Lora Dimech, Tess Gatt, and the Buhagiar families; in the UK, Ruth Johnston and the Rose family. Thank you all very much. Nothing was too much trouble for Anne trying to put me in touch with others; it was through her that I was able to gain contact with Christina's friend, Miriam. Also through Anne, I was able to get in touch once more with a former colleague from XIII Squadron: Brian Crook. Thank you Brian, and Francesca, for your support and for the many photographs you took for me while you were both on holiday in Malta.

To John Miles, meteorological forecaster at RAF Linton-on-Ouse for over twenty years, I offer my special thanks for liaising with Mark Beswick, the Archive Information Officer at the National Meteorological Archive. Having obtained the actual weather and forecasts, both British and German, for Taranto on the days on either side of the Fleet Air Arm's attack, and also for Europe on the day Adrian was killed, it was John who spent time going through the charts, figures and symbols so I could come up with an accurate picture of the weather on those days.

To three good friends, all experienced and able former RAF flying instructors still teaching like me at RAF Linton-on-Ouse, I offer grateful thanks. John Houlton and Steve Pepper shared my enthusiasm for this project from the start and were of great help with the first draft. Brian Russell later spent many, many hours going through the final draft in fine detail. I would also like to thank my cousin, Juliet Foster, for her editorial advice and help in finding the real 'Warby and Chris'.

I owe a special thank you to Ivan Berryman for his permission to use two of his excellent paintings – *Tribute to Wing Commander Adrian Warburton* and *Prelude to Taranto* – to illustrate this work ([www.ivanberrymandirect.com](http://www.ivanberrymandirect.com)). I am also grateful for the help and support I received from Laura Hirst, Pen and Sword's Aviation commissioning editor, Ken Patterson, my editor, and designer Jon Wilkinson and all at Pen and Sword.

Very special thanks go to my wife Jackie for her support while living through yet another obsession, and to our children Matthew and Hannah for their encouragement. Matthew combined a broad perspective with a meticulous eye for detail. He designed the original jacket and collated and enhanced many of the images. Ever the perfectionist, his work on the maps was painstaking and most effective.

I was pleased Jack Vowles was able to read an early draft of this work, but sadly he was unable to see it through to its conclusion. He died after a short illness on 15 January 2015. *Sahha* Jack, and thank you.

York  
August 2015

Author's Note: The spelling of place names in Malta can be problematic, with the letters 'k' and 'q' commonly used as alternatives. Ta' Qali and Takali, Qrendi and Krendi are often used, although neither captures the Maltese pronunciation. Some place names such as Hal Far and Ta' Qali are often presented as one word or two. Throughout this work Ta' Qali, Qrendi and Hal Far have been used.

## Foreword

**B**ill Carr was 20-years-old when he flew a Spitfire PR Mark XI to Malta in 1943 to join 683 Squadron. His new commanding officer was Wing Commander Adrian Warburton. Bill first came across his new boss at the squadron dispersal, stretched out on a table drinking tea with the airmen, who quite obviously worshipped their 25-year-old boss. Bill soon realised the extraordinary tales about a man they called Warby were true.

Bill served on eleven squadrons and commanded two of them, but his memory of the extraordinary squadron commander he met in Malta never faded. By 1973, Lieutenant General William Keir 'Bill' Carr was Canada's Deputy Chief of Defence Staff. Following retirement in 1978, he was often referred to as the father of the modern Canadian Air Force. Twice he wrote articles about leadership in which he portrayed Adrian Warburton as an exemplary leader:

'Leadership is simply the ability to inspire others to achieve goals. The leader may establish the goals, but often the achievements of others are not in his or her hands. Yet, in the exercise of leadership, the leader perhaps *manages* how they are achieved. This is an over-simplification of a complex process, and usually the view of leadership by those being led is based on many factors, not the least of which is peer pressure.

'Humans need "recognition" and it is little different in peace or war. A person needs to be seen by his contemporaries as well as his superiors and subordinates to be carrying their fair share of the load. A member must feel that their contribution is what is expected of them and is up to the level of those around them involved in similar pursuits. For the warriors specifically, they need their fellow fighters to see that they too are a worthy comrade-in-arms.

'In my thirty-nine years of military service in peace and war, I saw good leaders and bad ones. The good ones inspired me. The bad ones confused and dispirited me. Indeed, some disgusted me. I do not profess to have a profound understanding of leadership, but I do believe that certain factors identify what the elusive subject involves. And I am firmly of the view that leaders are developed, not trained. Managers are trained... . Only one squadron commander ... stands out as the ideal, because:



- 'He inspired people to fly to their limits (not *his*) and to achieve objectives with zeal even though they might be killed.
- 'He had courage and wisdom. His wisdom was demonstrated continuously by the manner in which he survived, and if you listened to him, caused others to survive by making them *think*.
- 'He was a superb pilot but he didn't flaunt it, and he didn't in all humility, think he was as good technically as many of the squadron members... .
- 'He demonstrated loyalty to his superiors and subordinates through being concerned about others, not himself.
- 'He was sensitive to people, their foibles and their differences.
- 'He demanded, expected, and got the best you could give – and then thanked you.
- 'He *did* have charisma, but he was not aware of it.
- 'He was an innovator but tried the new idea himself, whether he invented it or not, before accepting it. If it worked, he thanked the originator in front of his peers. If it did not, he thanked them privately and told them *why* it did not.
- 'He always put his service and his people before himself... .
- 'He was not *outwardly* ambitious, nor, do I think *inwardly* selfishly ambitious.
- 'He fought for and got the best for his guys, and he knew all of us individually by our first names. We respected him as an airman, a commander, and as a man.
- 'He would not suffer fools, and he did not condone carelessness.
- 'He saved many "weak sisters" lives... .
- 'He had the marks of greatness in his appearance, his approach, his "hell-raising", his stamina, his common sense, and his moral guts.'

*Bill Carr*

March 2015

Bill saw peace and war, and served at the very highest levels of command. He knew what attributes were needed in a squadron commander and he judged Adrian Warburton, whom he knew well, as exceptional. Adrian Warburton's attributes have stood the test of time. In March 2015, seventy-one years after Warburton's death, Bill's article about leadership, and a man they called Warby, was published once again in the *Canadian Military Journal*.

*Paul McDonald*

July 2015

## Prologue: A Selfless Act

14 October 1942

**H**ow many more times was he going to have to do this? He was stretching even his famed 'luck'. Couldn't they see he was sending them a message, asking them to follow him? Yet all they wanted to do was blast him out of the sky. He jinked left and right, changing his height to avoid the flak, yet trying to maintain a recognisable orbit. The tracer appeared to rise slowly at first, arcing gently upwards before accelerating rapidly, missing his cockpit by what seemed like inches. 'Flaming onions' René called them. Poor gallant René, those onions did for him and for young Jacques and George. Had it really been nearly two years ago? They were the first 69 Squadron crew to go in; so many had bought it since.

Here and now those 'flaming onions' were getting damnably close! The Eytie gunners seemed more accurate each time he came back. He realised there were many more machine-gun bullets heading his way he couldn't see. There were also shell bursts from heavier guns. Where would the next dirty white and grey smudge appear, he wondered? From a distance they looked like harmless white puffs, almost like a cluster of mini-cumulus clouds. Up close and personal he could feel their force trying to pitch and roll his aircraft violently before his right hand teased the elevators and ailerons to calm his steed. Given his constant jinks, he hoped his flight path was proving difficult for the gunners to predict. He didn't want to get any closer to those 'harmless' puffs.

He had no real choice; he needed to circle the warship two or three times to make them realise he was sending them a message – a life or death message. After the third orbit he flew a straight course in the fervent hope they would follow him. So far they hadn't. Why had those damned Eyties not cottoned on? They had of course, but it was a while before Adrian Warburton realised. He could hardly blame them for trying to shoot him down. After all, he was flying a Spitfire, a variant known as the PR IV, and he was circling a large Italian motor torpedo boat acting as escort to an armed Italian merchant ship. And Italy and Britain had been at war since June 1940.

Adrian rolled his aircraft's wings level once more. The well-harmonised controls responded crisply. They were beautifully balanced. No matter how often he flew the Spitfire he always got enormous pleasure from such a thoroughbred, a world-beater. He loved flying single-seat aircraft, although at one stage it looked as if his career as a pilot would be over before it began. He was a disaster in those days, and not just in

the air. Was it only two years ago? It seemed like a lifetime, so much had happened since. Thank goodness for dear old Tich from 'down-under'. He had sorted him out. Without him, Adrian's piloting days would have ended long ago. He loved the freedom being a recce pilot gave him, a role perfectly designed for him, the loner. A lonely warrior; he smiled at the thought. At least in a single-seat aircraft, he no longer had to worry about his crew. Yet he realised things would have to change now he was in command of 69 Squadron: he would have to change. He also knew he would have to move out of the flat in Valletta – her flat. How would she react he wondered, although he knew she would understand when he explained that his crews were to be accommodated together in Sliema.

He still yearned every day to be airborne and often took aircraft assigned to others at very short notice. Some, like Harry, thought Adrian totally selfish. Few knew the real reason why he acted as he did. Malta's recce pilots, a tiny clique, were all highly intelligent men. When they compared notes it wouldn't take them long to realise, as he had done, that when they stumbled on enemy ships there was sometimes more to it than luck; of being in the right place at the right time. And, having found the enemy, why were they sometimes required to transmit details in clear? It wasn't always the case, and it certainly hadn't been like that in 1941, but it was now happening more often. Adrian knew he must limit his pilots' chat about this as best he could, try and preserve a secret even he was not privy to; a number of their missions were intelligence-led, designed to disguise a very different intelligence source. He often wondered what it was. For the moment though, the others could continue to call him selfish, or 'Lucky Warby', when he took trips allocated to others. He could live with that.

He headed north-west again. 'Please, please follow me,' he thought. After a couple of miles, Adrian looked back; they still seemed to be ignoring him, still following in the wake of the cargo ship heading at full steam for Tripoli. Rommel would be pleased. But the Italians weren't ignoring him.

Adrian had no choice; he had to try again – it was ingrained in his nature not to give up. He also knew he was their only hope. They were definitely alive, but they had no hope of rescue without his help. They were too far from land to be spotted before nightfall. They would last a few days but would eventually succumb to the inevitable: thirst which would slowly, but surely, become intolerable, and then exposure. It would not be a pleasant death. That was his greatest fear, to come down into a sunless sea and die slowly. Even his prowess as a swimmer would count for little if rescue was not near at hand. That was why he simply had to keep trying. Trying until he was down to his very last reserves of fuel before heading back home to Malta and to his battered base of Luqa on an equally battered island.

Adrian moved his left hand gently forward on the red-engraved throttle with the ivory handle. The response was instantaneous and immensely satisfying as the Rolls-Royce Merlin 45 engine, with its de Havilland metal three-bladed constant-speed

propeller, wound up. It still made the hairs on the back of his neck stand up whenever he heard the unique sound of a Merlin engine. He hauled his aircraft into a high wing-over through 180 degrees and then back he went to the Italians. Maybe this time they would get the message, realise what he was trying to do. Yet, as he approached once again, it seemed they had not, as both ships' guns opened up on him once more. He was beginning to get a little irritated with this. Oh, come on you lot, do sharpen up! What do you think I'm doing? Offering some target practice in the middle of the Med?

He found himself thanking Supermarine for fitting leading edge fuel tanks – from wing roots toward the wing tips – to the recce Spitfire. He needed the extra fuel now, the extra endurance.

The day had begun like many others. The mission was routine. A routine war mission, was there such a thing? Three Beaufighters from 227 Squadron at Luqa were tasked against an Axis 2,000-ton merchant ship being escorted by a single Italian warship. They were somewhere off the coast of Tripolitania, one of three provinces in Mussolini's Italian Libya, his so-called new Roman Empire. Even old Benito might be having second thoughts about his empire these days, having lost so many ships crossing the *Mare Nostrum*, 'Our Sea', as he described it. The cargo ship was carrying supplies destined for Rommel's Afrika Korps. The ship must be sunk. That was Malta's primary role: attack, strike at Rommel's tenuous supply lines so the British 8th Army, now under Montgomery, could succeed in Egypt. 'When would Monty's attack begin?' everyone asked. 'Who would strike first?' Even a single Axis supply ship could make a difference. So they had to sink it.

It was a strange game. The RAF and the RN were doing their utmost to strangle Rommel's lifeline while Field Marshal Kesselring – 'Smiling Albert' – and the might of the Luftwaffe and the Regia Aeronautica were doing their utmost to do the same to Malta. If Allied convoys were stopped, Malta could not survive. Without Malta, the Allied campaign in North Africa was doomed. Sink their ships! That was Hugh Lloyd's directive from the moment he took over and now his successor Park had taken up the same cry. Warburton liked Lloyd, Hugh Pughe everyone called him, but not to his face; he was an individualist just like Adrian and gave Adrian a lot of slack; the New Zealander, Keith Park, was more of a team man.

The Beaufighter was a great attack and recce aircraft and a good fighter too, as Adrian knew from personal experience, but he loved his PR Spitfire, its solitude and its majesty. He could outrun any aircraft the Axis could throw against him, providing he saw them coming of course! That's why many of his colleagues wore scarves and silk cravats; it was not an affectation, but essential, given how you needed to keep your head moving, constantly scanning the sky for trouble, for the 'Hun in the Sun' as the posters put it. See the enemy was the requirement, and know where to look. In that lay the true art of the fighter pilot. It was not a gentlemanly duel of eagles, but a sneaky game using every conceivable tactic, all of your skill and guile, to strike

fast and from on high, unnoticed by your enemy for just as long as it takes to blast him from the sky before he can react. Then get the hell out of it, as fast as you can.

They all hoped death, when it came, would be sudden, but often it was not. Sometimes it was slow and painful; you might see it coming yet be powerless to do anything about it. Adrian hoped when his end came, as he knew it would, he would not fall into the wide blue yonder, far from shore and out of sight of friends. As a recce pilot operating on his own, he suspected he would most likely die alone and unnoticed, far from friendly eyes. Chris would mourn his passing but he couldn't let himself dwell on the thought. It wasn't going to happen on this flight. Yet he knew it would, one day.

The Beaufighter was so much better than its predecessor, the Blenheim, whose crews were slaughtered. But they carried on undaunted; theirs was a conscious courage. The three 227 Squadron crews were experienced and able, confident in their aircraft and each other. The pilot of the lead aircraft was a squadron leader; a very capable operator decorated for bravery only a few days earlier. All would be well. All Adrian needed to do was record a successful strike with his cameras and they could all head home for tea and medals.

It hadn't quite worked out that way. The Italian crews saw them coming in the clear blue sky and their well-trained gunners were ready. As the Beaufighters performed their graceful, insanely low, coordinated attack the anti-aircraft fire was intense and deadly accurate. Whether the lead Beaufighter, with the tail letter 'Q' for Queen, was hit was unclear. Having attacked the merchant vessel with cannon fire, its bombs hung up. It may have hit a mast as it lifted above the ship's superstructure. What was very clear was what happened next. It exploded in the air only yards past the ship, and toppled into the sea in a great ball of flame, vividly red, horribly black, and terminal. The crew would have known for a second or two they were about to die. Their friends saw it all. Maybe the shocking loss of their leader put them off. The second aircraft – 'Y' for Yorker – straddled the ship's deck with cannon fire, but its bombs overshot. It departed to the north-west trailing smoke. 'H' for Hotel also attacked with cannon fire and Adrian observed hits on the ship's deck amidships. No bombs were dropped. Hotel made a second run but the bombs undershot. It could do little except exit stage right at speed and make its escape. Maybe theirs would be another day. The mission was an abject failure. There was little left for Adrian to record on his cameras except a merchant ship turning for Tripoli with its valuable cargo intact, destined for the Afrika Korps.

Adrian turned away, saddened by the deaths of friends. He gradually overtook poor Yorker trailing smoke, thickening smoke as the mortally wounded Beaufighter got lower and lower with every mile. They had no hope, they weren't going to make it back home, or to any other airfield for that matter. Nor would they make landfall. By now they were also too low to bale out. Ditching was their only option, a hazardous



manoeuvre at best. The Beaufighter pilot did very well getting his dying aircraft down onto the water in one piece. As Adrian flew overhead he saw the crew of two, apparently unharmed, clambering into their small dinghy before their faithful Yorker slipped beneath the waves. Within seconds she was gone and they were on their own bobbing about in a tiny two-man dinghy, with a lone PR Spitfire circling helplessly above and little hope of rescue. Now what? They were much too far away from Malta and there was no possibility of any friendly ship passing nearby. Apart from the Axis ships just out of sight over the horizon, there was nothing on the wide expanse of the Mediterranean to offer any hope of salvation. The Beaufighter crew's deaths would be long and lingering. Unless... .

Surely life in an Italian prisoner-of-war camp was preferable to death at sea. Could he somehow get the Italians, so recently fighting for their own lives, to follow him and save the lives of their former assailants? How were the Italians likely to react to an attacker returning? Perhaps they would assume he had come back to guide others in for the kill? They gave Adrian their answer in no uncertain terms. He had circled the motor torpedo boat three times before setting course for the dinghy and then he flew round the dinghy three times, slightly higher and in sight of the Italians, before returning to the torpedo boat to do the whole thing again. So far his efforts were to no avail, except the Italian gunners seemed to be getting more proficient. His fuel was now becoming critical. Thank goodness for his aircraft's extra endurance, but even so this had to be his last throw of the dice. The Beaufighter crew deserved whatever chance he could give them.

Three times more he circled, ducking and weaving before setting course for the Beaufighter crew. After a mile or so he looked back. Hurrah! The Italians were at last following him! He flew low over the dinghy for the final time, wagging his wings and saw them waving. They knew he had found help. He just hoped they would not be too disappointed when they recognised the shape of their rescuer. The Italians would treat them well: they were honourable captors. Adrian pulled up into a wide orbit as the Italians got closer. He hung around for a little longer until he saw the Beaufighter crew hauled safely aboard the Italian vessel. At least the Eyeties had stopped shooting at him! There was a reason for that as Adrian was about to discover and it wasn't because they were busy rescuing the downed crew.

Now at last Adrian could set course for home. He had spent twenty minutes messing about since the failed strike. Or could he? Suddenly, out of nowhere, or so it seemed, six Italian Macchi fighters swooped towards him. Adrian had misjudged the game. He had not given the Italian captain enough credit. He had played a wily game, knowing all along what Adrian was doing, simply trying to keep Adrian loitering until he summoned the cream of the Regia Aeronautica from the Italian airbase at Homs on the coast east of Tripoli.

The Italian fighters approached fast from the south. They would have done better to have swung wide around him out of sight, to get between him and Malta.

Maybe their numbers made them overconfident, but with six they were definitely a threat. The Macchi was the best fighter the Italians had, but it was no match in combat against a Spitfire: a normal Spitfire. Alas he wasn't flying a normal Spitfire. The price his PR Spitfire paid for its extra speed, very high ceiling and extended endurance, was to have no guns, no armament of any kind. Not even any armour-plating. It relied wholly on speed and agility, and a good pair of hands. He would need all of these qualities in full measure, and especially the latter, if he was to make good his escape. Four of the enemy fighters got onto his tail, but they struggled to close the range to fire their guns and his powerful Merlin engine soon accelerated him out of trouble. Once clear he began a cruise climb, throttling back gently as he didn't have a great deal of fuel. He kept a wary eye on his six o'clock.

Adrian then lit a cigarette. It was his way of unwinding and he often smoked in the cockpit even though it was against the rules. He always made sure the oxygen was switched off first though! The lads who serviced his aircraft didn't seem to mind when they found his cigarette butts stuffed under his parachute. He reassured them he made sure they were 'out' before putting them down there. That usually made them laugh; he had always got on well with his ground crew. He well remembered the look on Jack's face when he met Adrian's Maryland and found Adrian sitting on his parachute balanced on a tin helmet. It was for, 'protection down there!' Adrian said. That was over a year ago. The airmen were a brilliant bunch. Not for them a posting to Egypt for a rest. When they arrived in Malta they were there for the duration and for much of their time it was hell on earth. Adrian missed Air Marshal Tedder's visit to the island in May when he had described the ground personnel as the spirit of Malta. Tedder was a good judge.

He finished his cigarette, carefully stubbed it out and pushed it easily beneath his parachute. He rarely did up the straps of his parachute anyway; there never seemed to be much point on a low-level mission. But perhaps he should ask for an ashtray to be fitted. He smiled at the thought.

He was going to be late. Chris would be worried. It was her watch on duty at Lascaris: D Watch. She had been captain of D Watch for ten long months. Like everyone else in 'the hole', she would be well aware he was overdue and two of the three Beaufighters had bought it. He knew she often worried about him. There was not a lot he could do about that. He often said to her he was safer in the air while everyone 'copped it' on the ground. He didn't know how the Maltese population had coped for so long on starvation rations under incessant bombing, but they had. They were a remarkable people.

He often worried about Chris; she was desperately thin when he got back from Egypt in August. Soon he was within range of Malta and in answer to his call he heard the deep, resonant and reassuring voice of Bill Farnes, the senior controller. He would soon be home; Chris would now relax as she moved his marker across the plot. Home for tea and medals. Would there be any tea, he wondered?

## Chapter One

### A Quest

I was at my desk in the NATO HQ at Ramstein in Germany one quiet April morning in 2003, when I received a call to say the remains of a wartime Royal Air Force (RAF) pilot had been found in the wreckage of his aircraft in Bavaria. The discovery brought to an end a fifty-nine year old mystery. The pilot was Wing Commander Adrian Warburton. I had never heard of him.

A military funeral was arranged with an interment at Durnbach, south of Munich. Warburton was evidently held in high regard as Air Marshal Sir Roderick ‘Rocky’ Goodall, my UK superior at Ramstein, represented the RAF’s Chief of the Air Staff (CAS). The service on 14 May 2003 was taken by Squadron Leader the Reverend Alan Coates, Ramstein’s RAF chaplain, and members of the Queen’s Colour Squadron of the RAF Regiment were pallbearers. US military personnel formed an Honour Guard. I made a note to find out more about Warburton but, at the time, I never did.

A year later, when driving to Salzburg, I passed a sign to Durnbach. It rang a bell and I felt compelled to stop. Like similar cemeteries the world over, Durnbach is well looked after by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. It was quiet, tranquil and quite beautiful, despite the poignancy and air of sadness. The majority of the 2,934 graves are of British and Commonwealth airmen. The ages of those who lay there gave me pause. I soon found the grave I sought:

WING COMMANDER  
A WARBURTON  
DSO & BAR DFC & 2 BARS  
ROYAL AIR FORCE  
12TH APRIL 1944 AGE 26  
FOND MEMORIES OF  
OUR SHORT TIME TOGETHER

Warburton’s age was sadly not unusual – he was in good company. Neither was his rank at such a young age, given the circumstance of wartime service. His decorations, though, make him truly outstanding. What story could he tell, I wondered? Once again, at the time, I did nothing to find out about the man named on the headstone, the man behind the medals.

Five years later I read *Warburton’s War* by Tony Spooner. I was struck by Warburton and our mutual associations with Malta and photo reconnaissance

from Luqa, albeit over thirty years apart. I felt slightly unnerved, as I could relate to Adrian's struggle to become an operational pilot too. Like him, I taught ship recognition to colleagues which helped us each establish a reputation within our respective squadrons. After that the similarities between us faded rapidly. Adrian's experience was almost entirely of a service at war; my experience was one of a service largely at peace. I also felt slightly embarrassed. Despite my photo-reconnaissance background and being well read about RAF history, to my regret I had never heard of Adrian Warburton until that chance telephone call in 2003.

He was involved with an English dancer called Christina who became an aircraft plotter. She appeared to fill an important role in his life. I began to wonder about her too. What story could she tell? The link between a recce pilot in Malta and a plotter reminded me of a post-war film called *Malta Story*. My interest was further aroused when I read three short stories under the title *Carve Malta on my heart and other wartime stories*. Published by the Maltese writer and researcher on the air battle, Frederick Galea, the opening story is about Christina. It left me with many questions. Increasingly I reflected on my own association with the island.

I first saw Malta through the small windows of an RAF VC10. The tiny walled fields and the rocky, waterless landscape made an immediate impression. The sun's brightness and the heat hit us like a wave as we exited the aircraft. It was Wednesday, 27 August 1975, and a blisteringly hot day, such a change from the mild summer weather we had left behind at RAF Brize Norton. There was a lot to take in. Luqa was Malta's international airport and nothing like the RAF airfields with which I was familiar. Everything was light brown; even the uniforms of the airmen were stone in colour, matching the many walls. The countryside was sun-baked, dry and dusty, with no signs of crops or greenery except for clumps of prickly pear. Many of the villages dotted around had high-domed churches.

Luqa opened in 1940. It was difficult to imagine it as one of the most heavily bombed airfields anywhere in the Second World War. The control tower, not the wartime original, was south-east of Runway 24/06, Luqa's single useable runway at the time. Behind the tower was a low flat-roofed building with a second storey in the middle. This was the HQ of my new squadron: XIII Squadron. I was a 26-year-old married flying officer, a pilot, and about to embark on my second tour. The dispersals contained the unmistakeable shape of my new aircraft, reconnaissance Canberras. Each was fitted with an array of cameras developed in the Second World War when the RAF gained a deserved reputation for photo-recce and photographic interpretation, a reputation it has never lost.

To the north of my new HQ, and across a long-disused runway, was the main airport terminal. The village to its left gave the airfield the name Luqa, one of a number of surviving Arabic names. Left of the village, the ground sloped toward

Grand Harbour and further left, near Runway 24's threshold, was the original air traffic control building. The whole area was dominated by a high hill to the north-west. On its summit, Rabat adjoined the battlements of the ancient so-called silent city of Mdina.

Our first home, in Birkirkara, was a great vantage point to watch the regular and loud firework displays as nearby villages celebrated their *fešta*, the feast of their patron saint. There was always a special one in August, although it was some time before I grasped its significance.

Over the next three years, I spent many hours over Sicily and southern Italy taking photographs of ports and harbours like Augusta and Palermo, Taranto and Naples, all of them photographed many times in the past, but in rather testing circumstances. Italian airfields like Trapani and Sigonella were practice targets and again, like my predecessors, I always received a very warm welcome there, only in a very different sense. The Regia Aeronautica's successors were very hospitable, a spirited and professional lot, not unlike their own predecessors, who often earned the professional respect of those posed by their politicians as Italy's enemy. Years later, I served on a Tornado squadron commanded by an Italian *tenente colonelo* and my navigator was a *leutnant* in the Luftwaffe. I developed the utmost respect for both air forces. When returning to Luqa from Italy, I often coasted out from Sicily at Gela before heading for Gozo. A left turn brought me to Grand Harbour with Luqa soon in my sights. It took no time at all.

Our son was born in the Royal Navy (RN) Hospital at Mtarfa. Mtarfa is due north of Mdina and the valley between leads to a dried-up lake on which the RAF airfield Ta' Qali was built. Long disused in 1975, it was home to small, flourishing craft industries operating from wartime Nissen huts. Nearby are the small, pretty towns of Attard and Balzan and only a short distance north is Mosta with its famed, some say miraculous, church, visible from much of the island. On 9 April 1942, a bomb crashed through the dome in the middle of a service, rolling past the congregation without exploding, hence the church's reputation.

Our Maltese babysitter was evacuated in 1940 from the Three Cities to Birkirkara following heavy bombing. When she told us her story it seemed odd, given how close Birkirkara was to the main residential areas. Bombing was often localised around the docks and the airfields but, on such a small island, nowhere was immune. The Three Cities – Vittoriosa, Senglea and Cospicua – are close-knit communities that grew around two fishing villages: Birgu, now Vittoriosa, and L-Isla, now Senglea. They prospered around the dockyards, which ultimately led to their destruction under some of the most intensive bombing the world has ever known. Since then they have become a rare and unexpected find: history, thriving communities and welcoming warmth, all hidden in the open and only visited by the more inquisitive of Malta's tourists.



Balzan was the location of our second home. It overlooked San Anton Palace, the official residence of Malta's president and the former residence of Malta's wartime governors. It was in nearby Attard, at St Catherine's Nursing Home, that our daughter was born in our final summer on the island.

At the end of September 1978 there was an air display at Luqa to mark the end of RAF operations from Malta. I was proud to take part, flying in the second element of a nine-ship Canberra formation. As I came in to land I flew over the Officers' Mess and smiled when I saw once more the message left after HMS *Ark Royal's* farewell visit to Malta: Fleet Air Arm crews had painted FLY NAVY in large white letters on the flat roof. My squadron flew out en masse on 4 October 1978, relocating to RAF Wyton in Huntingdonshire, my final flight before posting. No. XIII Squadron was the very last RAF squadron to be based in Malta. Its withdrawal ended a tradition of RAF photo reconnaissance which began in 1940 with a few American aircraft, built for the French, but delivered to Britain and brought to the island by an Australian. They created a legend.

On 31 March 1979, the last RAF personnel left the island, ending Britain's 179-year association with Malta. There is so much that links the two nations and bears testament to the sacrifice of many in two world wars; testament that will last regardless of politics and politicians who come and go. Some personal links can never be broken and we now had two rather important ones that would draw us back to the island twelve years later, each wishing to visit where they were born.

In the summer of 1990, we landed on the 11,500 foot long main runway which was under construction the last time I'd seen it. It was built partially on top of what was the main wartime runway, orientated north-west to south-east, which had been disused in my day. The terminal appeared unchanged and my old squadron's dispersals and buildings were still visible, though there was no activity nearby. The former administrative site was now an industrial estate but, across the road from the main gate, the old Officers' Mess seemed much as it was, with the 'bull-ring', the scene of many a Summer Ball, still visible. The Mess was now occupied by a Maltese Government department. Did the Maltese officials know of the light-hearted legacy left by the Fleet Air Arm?

Our former homes in Birkirkara and Balzan were now hotels, but San Anton Gardens was unchanged, its walls cutting out the noise and bustle of the nearby streets. Mdina, with its narrow atmospheric streets, is a magical place, described as a hauntingly beautiful city dreaming quietly behind impenetrable walls. Whoever offered that image must only have visited as dusk approaches, or in the evening when the tourists had gone. As we left Malta, just like in 1978, we gave little thought to the possibility of returning. We were drawn back twenty-two years later.

In 2010, while researching my memoirs, I contacted Frederick Galea to check one or two facts about Malta. He was most helpful. This reawakened my interest in Adrian Warburton and Christina Ratcliffe. In 2012, my wife and I visited the island once more and inevitably I began to delve deeper into their Malta story. I found it intriguing. What happened on Adrian's final mission? How important was Christina to the man who became known as 'Six-Medal Warburton'?

Christina was living in Floriana when we lived in Malta in the 1970s. We were frequent visitors to the NAAFI and the Medical Centre in the former St Francis Barracks, which was overlooked by the house in which Christina lived in 1937 and to which she returned in 1940. She was living there when the Italians declared war in June 1940 and described what she saw from her balcony in the aftermath of the bombing raids on the first day of Malta's war. Later, Christina moved to an apartment in Floriana, which we often drove past going to and from Valletta, or driving down to Malta's quayside. How I wished I had known about Adrian and Christina when I was based on the island. Yet even if I had, it was most unlikely I'd have been able to learn more. By then she was a very private lady. Yet on my short visit in 2012, almost everywhere I turned there were links with Christina and Adrian. I again felt unnerved, disconcerted. Did she want their story told?

A talented writer, Christina wrote quite extensively, yet said little about her relationship with Adrian and nothing about her feelings towards him until shortly before she died. Why was that? As I started reading more, I realised Frederick Galea knew far more about Malta's air war than I realised. After a chance meeting with Frederick at the entrance to the Malta Aviation Museum at Ta' Qali, I began to delve deeper. I'm not sure I would have pursued the story but for that brief encounter. When I returned from Malta, I was hooked. From then onwards Frederick and I began to exchange notes and photographs, and we became good friends. Later, I was privileged to meet and spend many hours with the late Jack Vowles, a former airman who had been hooked since he met and served with Adrian in Malta in 1941.

What was it about Malta? Was there something there which 'hooked' Adrian and Christina, sparked something between them? Was it the island's history that captured their imagination and allowed them to shine? Or was it simply the circumstances of life on an isolated island at war and under siege, the excitement of the times that brought these two people together, a shy loner who didn't fit in and an outgoing, vivacious dancer? And what was it about their story that drew me in, sending me back to Malta on a quest to find out the truth about the man Marshal of the Royal Air Force, Lord Tedder, described as, 'the most valuable pilot in the RAF'?

## Chapter Two

### A Place in History

I began by looking at just what makes Malta unique. What is so enchanting about the place and what events conspired to give it such spellbinding qualities? The answer is not a simple one. Some I knew from our time there, but, as I began to unravel a Maltese tragedy, there was much more to discover, more that makes Malta what, perhaps even who it is.

The island has its own language and alphabet, and its people have roots in every country from Portugal to Palestine. The main island stretches fourteen miles north-west to south-east and is seven miles wide at its broadest point. Its ninety-five square miles put it at a similar size to the Isle of Wight, yet its population, triple that of its English cousin at 450,000, makes Malta one of the more densely populated countries in the world. Gozo, to the north-west, measures less than eight miles west to east, by three miles north to south. Some 30,000 people live on those twenty-six square miles. Between the two main islands is tiny Comino whose one square mile supports a handful of farmers.

Retreating glaciers left outcrops of pale yellow limestone in a rolling landscape. The stone is easy to quarry and to cut. There are few trees and, for most of the year, little greenery to soften the sun-bleached landscape. There is almost a total lack of rain throughout the long summer, which adds to the pale-yellow aura, contrasting sharply with the bright azure summer sky and the deeper blue sea of the Mediterranean. In autumn and spring, Malta is visited by the *Sirocco*: a dry, hot and dusty wind originating in the Sahara. It can last half a day or several days, reaching hurricane force. It is little wonder the land often has a dry and bleached-out quality. Thin soil led to extensive terracing, still a striking feature of the terrain, which, combined with the absence of any permanent rivers, makes farming doubly difficult. Life for the early inhabitants can never have been easy.

Human settlement dates back to at least 5200 BC. Little is known about the earliest inhabitants, except they built great temples around 3600 BC and were moving fifty-ton megaliths and creating buildings aligned to the winter solstice sunrise a thousand years before the first pyramid in Egypt. Near the village of Mgarr, the temples are the oldest free-standing stone structures in the world. The temple period came to an end between 1800 BC and 2500 BC; no one is sure why. What directly followed is uncertain but, in what became a pattern marking good times and bad, the islands were invaded and occupied in around 800 BC.

Sixty nautical miles south of Sicily and one hundred and eighty north of Libya, the islands are physically European, lying on Europe's continental shelf, but they also have North African overtones. This situation determined Malta's destiny, while its relative isolation shaped the inhabitants. As travel and trade developed, the part-way position of the islands attracted commercial and military strategists alike. Invasion, or attempted invasion and occupation, became a feature of Malta's history – another aspect of the islands that gives them commonality with Britain. It most certainly contributed to the development of the character and psyche of both nations.

The first recorded occupation was by the Phoenicians, a maritime people from the eastern Mediterranean. They seized Malta, having recognised the importance of the natural harbours on either side of a peninsula known as Mount Sciber-Ras, the 'light on the point'. Much that came with the Phoenicians survives today as part of Malta's character. Their Semitic language, based on Hebrew, was the beginning of Maltese and the only Semitic tongue to use the Latin alphabet. Indeed, Malta's name may have come from the Phoenician word for harbour. Also still part of Maltese culture, they brought their rowing boats and sailing galleys. Even now the colourful Maltese fishing boats, the *luzzu*, *dghajsa* and *kajjik*, with watchful eyes painted on their bows, are little changed from Phoenician vessels. The Phoenicians held on to Malta until defeated by the Romans in 218BC.

When the Romans arrived they came in friendship, treating Malta in a very different manner to other occupied nations. Malta and Gozo were made free towns, or *municipiums*, with liberty to control their own affairs, mint their own coins and send an ambassador to Rome. Paul the Apostle, a Roman citizen, was shipwrecked on Malta in February 60 AD. He was on his way with other prisoners to Rome to be tried for his life. The site of his shipwreck is said to be the tiny, uninhabited St Paul's Island, at the northern entrance to St Paul's Bay. In Acts 28:2 Paul wrote, 'And the barbarous people showed us no little kindness; for they kindled a fire, and received us every one, because of the present rain, and the cold.' The word barbarous simply meant the islanders did not speak Latin or Greek. Paul stayed in Malta for three months as the guest of the Roman Governor, Publius, and they became firm friends.

The villa of Publius was in the former Phoenician settlement of Malet, by now a large Roman town, Melita. It spread over an area three times the size of the later medieval citadel. Legend suggests Rabat Cathedral now stands on the site of the villa. Publius allowed Paul to preach, giving rise to some of the first Christian converts in the village of Naxxar. Pronounced 'nassar', it means, 'made into a Christian'. Publius was baptised and went on to become the first Bishop of Malta. Paul went on to Rome and martyrdom. Malta prospered under Roman rule and became the first country in Europe outside Italy to convert to Christianity, beginning the country's long history of religious devotion. This played an important part in the development of the Maltese character and the island's history.

The Byzantines were next, ruling Malta until their defeat by the Arabs in 870 AD. The new Arab rulers treated the islanders largely with respect. At a time when there was bloody conflict between the Crescent and the Cross – the infamous Crusades – the Arabs seemed to tolerate Christianity in Malta. It nevertheless declined as the Saracen rulers taxed Christians but not Moslems. The Saracens did bring irrigation to Malta, a sun-baked rock for six months a year. Their influence on the language is also clear. Many Arab place names still exist, such as Hamrun, Mdina (*imdeena*), Mtarfa (*imtarfa*), Luqa (pronounced loo-ah), and Qormi ('ormy). They also made Mdina, the Arabic word for 'walled city', the capital, reducing its size, building strong walls and a deep moat. They left the Roman villa of Publius outside its walls in the suburbs; a suburb is known as *rabat* in Arabic.

The Normans arrived in 1090 and theirs was a brief but pleasant era. Legend has it Roger Guiscard, Count Roger I of Sicily, ripped a piece from his red, personal standard and gave it to the Maltese, who added the white section to make the fragment up to a suitable size for a flag. The motif on the left-hand side of the current flag didn't appear until 852 years later. Ousting the Arabs, Count Roger was welcomed and Christianity was formally restored, along with the cathedral in Mdina. The Maltese enjoyed relative independence while Count Roger, ruling from Sicily, repaired decaying churches and rescued a desolate country. Although his rule lasted only eleven years, a mass for his soul was still being offered in Mdina on 4 November, some 800 years later.

In 1194, Malta's fortunes changed again and control passed to the German dynasty of Hohenstaufen. Then Charles of Anjou seized Sicily, only to be defeated by King Pedro I of Aragon in a naval battle at Grand Harbour in 1282. From then on, the Maltese found themselves exploited from Aragon – modern Spain – and harassed by marauding Turks and Barbary corsairs. Mdina, known by then as *Citta Notabile*, or the Noble City, became the favoured residence of the Maltese aristocracy and the seat of their governing council, the *Universita*. Although the Aragonese crown pledged never to give Malta to any other power, the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V of Spain broke the agreement. In 1530 he gave Malta to the Knights of the Order of St John of Jerusalem, who, for the past eight years, had wandered the Mediterranean after expulsion from Rhodes by the Ottoman Empire. Charles V hoped the knights, also known as the Hospitallers, might help contain Turkish ambition.

The arrival of the Knights of St John, under Grand Master Philippe de L'Isle Adam, marked a significant point in Malta's history. It was not long before the Turks, under Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent, recognised Malta's location made it a crucial strategic gateway between east and west. With Malta's much-coveted natural harbour such a draw to any strategist, the scene was set for the Great Siege of 1565, a test of courage and endurance few could ever imagine.

The knights were unimpressed with the barren, waterless and poorly defended islands. They settled in Birgu (now Vittoriosa) and set about fortifying the harbour, the key to their existence and strategy. Originating from various European countries, the majority from France and Spain, others from Italy, Germany and England, they formed divisions, called *langues*, based on a common language. Each *langue* had its own small palace or *auberge*. De L'Isle Adam was like the king of a small nation in status and, as did those he sought to emulate, failed to consult the 15,000 or so local inhabitants, also excluding the local aristocracy.

By 1565, a new Grand Master, Jean Parisot de la Valette, had turned Malta into a fortified naval base. Fort St Angelo, on the tip of Birgu, was rebuilt and strengthened, augmenting Fort St Michael on the tip of Isla (Senglea, built by la Valette's predecessor Claude de Sengle). A third fort, Fort St Elmo, was built at the end of the uninhabited Sciberras peninsula. The knights knew what was coming and these three forts were vital, as was the ancient capital. They, perhaps wisely, and to prevent panic, did not forewarn the Maltese, who must still have suspected as they toiled to strengthen the forts.

Suleiman the Magnificent had spent thirty years building and strengthening his vast fleet. The potential of Malta and its harbour to become part of his growing empire and expansionist ambitions was a major temptation. That it was in the hands of the Order of St John of Jerusalem, a relic of the Crusaders and their holy war against Allah, made Malta all the more irresistible.

Admiral Piali Pasha commanded the Ottoman fleet of close to 200 vessels. It took a month to travel from Constantinople, arriving on 19 May 1565. Rough seas prevented the fleet from reaching the preferred anchorage of Marsaxlokk in the south-east. Instead, they proceeded to Gnejna and Ghajn Tuffieha Bays in the north. They returned to Marsaxlokk the following day, landing in force, and set up their main camp in present-day Marsa. Within twenty-four hours the southern half of the island was occupied. The Maltese population took refuge behind the walls of Birgu, Senglea and Mdina. Many of them, taken by surprise, had not gathered their grain harvest or secured their animals. This seems to confirm that the knights did not inform many locals of the imminent invasion. Had they done so, however, would focus have been on harvest rather than on constructing fortifications?

In the first two days, the Turks suffered many casualties from harassing cavalry attacks. The Turks also tortured and executed two captured knights who gave false information. Estimates of the size of the Turkish army, under General Mustapha Pasha, vary widely, from 22,000 to over 40,000. The defenders were outnumbered by between three and five to one.

La Valette's strategy was simple: defend the three mutually-supporting forts controlling access to Grand Harbour whilst retaining a stronghold inland at Mdina to the west, and importantly, to the rear of the Turks.



Suleiman's strategy was not so straightforward. The Ottoman war council favoured naval priorities and directed General Mustapha to safeguard the fleet. The battle on land was not to compromise that. The sultan did not intend to see his armada squandered against a barren island at the very edge of his empire, despite its useful location. His war council wanted Marsamxett Harbour accessible to the whole fleet; therefore Fort St Elmo must be captured. General Mustapha offered a sound alternative of occupying most of Malta, picking off the blockaded strong points one by one. The admiral, twenty years younger than the general, had greater influence within the council because of his relationship with the sultan's favourite son. His view prevailed. The strategy certainly fulfilled the sultan's overall wish to protect the fleet, but it was seriously flawed. The shared power and uneasy 'jointery' offered great advantage to La Valette.

With the Turks focusing on St Elmo, the defenders had time to strengthen St Michael and St Angelo. La Valette knew only too well the loss of St Elmo, along with its defenders, was inevitable. He did not expect quarter, nor would he offer it. The Turks built a dyke across the ridge of Mount Sciberras from which to mount their assault on St Elmo and the siege began in earnest on 27 May 1565.

Fort St Elmo held out for a month, its final days terrible for the maimed and half-starved defenders. The Turks' concentration on the fort cost them at least 6,000 men. None of the 600 defenders survived. When Mustapha Pasha mourned his dead he could only wonder, 'if the daughter meant so much loss to us in dead and wounded, what is the mother going to cost us?' The mother was Fort St Angelo.

Soon after the fall of Fort St Elmo, General Mustapha employed gruesome intimidation tactics, ordering several captured knights beheaded. The heads were nailed to stakes looking out toward Birgu's defenders and the bodies fixed to crucifixes, then floated across the harbour. In response, La Valette decapitated all Turkish prisoners and used their heads as cannonballs fired back at the Turks. Such was medieval warfare.

General Mustapha urged Mdina and Senglea to surrender, promising to respect privileges, give freedom from the knights and grant trading rights with the Turks. The Maltese answer was a resounding 'No'.

With Fort St Elmo captured, Marsamxett Harbour was now open to the Turkish fleet. They could enter Grand Harbour, but were still unable to row past Fort St Angelo. Instead, they dragged their vessels overland from the head of Marsamxett Harbour to the head of Grand Harbour. The knights countered, driving wooden stakes into what is now Frenchman's Creek. Turkish swimmers were sent to destroy them, but were defeated by their Maltese counterparts. Despite further fierce assaults, things were going badly for the Turks. They suffered an epidemic of dysentery when the local population poisoned wells and cisterns, throwing dead animals into the water. Throughout this, the knights lived, ate, slept and died in their heavy suits of armour, coping on strict and unpalatable rations.

General Mustapha, aware things were going badly, ordered a five-day barrage, breaching the walls of Fort St Angelo. The Turks surged in. Of the Maltese, everyone joined the fight. Women and children hurled stones and poured burning oil onto their assailants. Now the commander of Mdina launched a counter-attack with cavalry, surprising the Turks, creating havoc and destruction. Even though victory for the Turks was at hand, General Mustapha ordered a retreat, fearing the appearance of cavalry heralded much talked about reinforcements from Europe.

When he realised his error, Mustapha renewed the siege, turning to tunnels and mines. These also failed. A huge siege engine achieved some success until the defenders tunnelled beneath their own walls, captured the tower and turned it against the Turks. Turkish morale plummeted, drained by a long hot summer and increasing casualties. The defenders too were exhausted.

Within the Ottoman war council, General Mustapha pressed for the army to stay until spring. The weak Turkish strategy now became decisive. As the Mediterranean sailing season ended traditionally with the storms of late September, Admiral Piali insisted the fleet depart at the first sign of winter.

On 7 September, reinforcements for the defenders arrived from Sicily. General Mustapha was again fooled, believing them a much larger force and withdrew. The relief landed at Mellieha Bay, occupying the high ground at Naxxar. Realising the ruse, Mustapha ordered his men to disembark at St Paul's Bay. Many of the tired and dispirited Turkish soldiers were slaughtered.

On 8 September 1565, Malta's defenders woke to find they had won the four-month siege in that long hot summer. In the Great Siege of Malta, they had endured bombardment by 130,000 cannon balls, one of the bloodiest and most fiercely contested sieges in history. Estimates of Turkish casualties vary as widely as those of the original number: it is likely they lost over 20,000 men. At least 7,000 defenders died, perhaps as many as 9,000. At the end of hostilities it was said only 600 islanders were capable of bearing arms. Malta had lost one third of her people, both Birgu and Senglea levelled. But the Turks never came back.

That date, 8 September – *Il Bambina*, or the Feast of the Birth of the Virgin Mary – is a day especially celebrated in the Maltese calendar and still commemorated as the Victory Day public holiday.

Such was the gratitude of Europe for the heroic defence that money poured in to the island. Jean de la Valette was thereby able to construct the fortified city of Valletta on Mount Sciberras, denying the position to any future enemies. The city, called *Humillima Civitas Vallettae*, the 'most humble city of Valletta', was built in less than two and a half years. La Valette died of a heart attack in 1568, aged seventy-three, and did not live to see its completion. His legacy, and the city he left behind though, are magnificent. Valletta was the first planned city in Europe, a regular grid of streets, underground sewers and massive fortifications packed into an area of about 1,000 metres by 600 metres.

The Knights of St John, the oldest Order of Chivalry in existence and the third oldest religious order in Christendom, became so famous they are known throughout the world as The Knights of Malta. Although the accolades are well deserved, it must be acknowledged the Knights may have achieved less without the grimly resolute efforts and sacrifice of the Maltese. It was largely Maltese women and children who repaired the walls, brought food and ammunition to the soldiers, and tended the wounded. Inevitably, the effect of the siege on the people was near catastrophic and it took decades to recover from the loss of such a vast proportion of so small a population.

Many of the Grand Masters who followed left their mark, or their names, on different parts of Malta. The period following 1565 saw building, not only of massive new fortifications and watchtowers, but also of churches, palaces and *auberge*. Birgu was renamed Vittoriosa, or Victorious, after the siege. Jean de la Cassiere oversaw the construction of the magnificent St John's Church, which became a co-Cathedral, and Alof de Wignacourt provided funding for a new aqueduct from Mdina to Valetta. The decadent Antoine de Paule built San Anton Palace and used it for hedonistic parties, hardly in keeping with the knights' image, but a lifestyle that was becoming ever popular. The infamously dour Jean de Lascaris Castellar gave rise to the Maltese phrase meaning 'face of Lascaris' to describe someone with a sour facial expression. He also gave his name to a bastion.

Generally, the knights had little to do with the local population, which faced extreme famine and severe outbreaks of plague, with precious little reward from the knights. The exception was Antoine Manoel de Vilhena, who did most to improve the lives of the Maltese and achieved great popularity. He built Manoel Theatre in Valletta and Fort Manoel in Marsamxett Harbour. He also built Floriana and a terrace bears his name.

In the mid-eighteenth century, Manuel Pinto de Fonseca embellished many of the restrained Renaissance buildings. He also epitomised the change that came over the Order which had moved far beyond its vows of chastity, obedience and poverty. Members concerned themselves less with militarism and monasticism and more with drinking and duelling, with some commerce and piracy. To many of the Maltese, the knights were simply affluent foreigners living off the labours of a downtrodden peasantry.

Over 200 years, the power and influence of the order declined greatly. By the late eighteenth century, around three quarters of their income came from the knights of the French *langue*. After the French Revolution and confiscation of the Order's properties and estates in France, it found itself in dire financial straits. The new French leader, Napoleon Bonaparte, had designs on Malta, stating the fortress could be seized easily, and the starving Maltese were friendly toward the French and much estranged from the knights. Bonaparte thought with Malta, Sardinia and Corfu

in his hands, the French could make themselves masters of the Mediterranean. A British sailor by the name of Nelson thought differently.

The end for the knights came in 1798, when Bonaparte's fleet stopped in Malta on its way to Egypt. They sought permission to take on water, a pretext. With Grand Master Ferdinand von Hompesch dithering, the French landed. On 11 June the Grand Master capitulated without a shot fired and control of the islands was handed to the French Republic. Napoleon himself landed at Customs House steps and stayed at the Parisio Palace on what became Merchants Street.

To begin with, Malta welcomed the French as liberators, but these new masters proved no better than the old. Napoleon imposed taxes on an already poor people to pay for the French garrison and seized treasure before heading for Egypt on 19 June 1798, and to defeat at Nelson's hands in the Battle of the Nile. The seized treasures met the fate of the French ship-of-the-line *Orient*, catching fire and sinking.

Back in Malta, the French closed convents and seized church treasures. When they tried to auction those from the Church of Our Lady of Mount Carmel in Mdina, the Maltese rebelled, lynched the Mdina garrison and drove the remainder of the French back into the stronghold of Valletta. Once more the capital was under siege, but this time the locals were on the outside. They asked Britain for assistance and Nelson imposed a blockade lasting two years and two days. On 4 September 1800, the French garrison surrendered and French rule came to an end. So began an association between Malta and Britain which lasted 179 years.

The Maltese people wanted to be part of the growing British Empire and why not? With their experience of invasion and occupation, what other great power at the beginning of the nineteenth century could protect their homeland from further subjugation? There could also be significant economic benefits for the islanders. As Napoleon went into exile on another small island, the 1814 Treaty of Paris declared: 'The island of Malta and its dependencies shall belong in full right and sovereignty to his Britannic Majesty'. British rule began.

Britain was, of course, a colonial power at the very height of its strength and followed the colonial trend. An Anglican Cathedral was built on the site of the German *auberge* in Valletta. The *Auberge de Provence* became the Union Club, for 'officers only'. Maybe some Maltese were disappointed at their new rulers' more strategic than altruistic attitude, but Britain had much to gain by possessing Grand Harbour and its docking facilities. The Suez Canal opened in 1869, adding further confirmation of the vital importance of Malta in maintaining Britain's territorial interests. Malta grew wealthy as an important refuelling and staging post for British steamships. The docks of Senglea and Vittoriosa grew and ships of many nations helped build Malta's economy. Malta's only railway was built running between Valletta and Rabat. Although it never flourished, it left a legacy in the form of a tunnel cut through Valletta's ramparts.

But soon economic depression hit Malta. As the island lacked a sound economy and had a rapidly rising population, inevitably there were tensions between the Maltese and the British. Nonetheless, the Maltese workforce put its grievances to one side as it worked for victory in the First World War. Malta served as a military hospital and became known as the Nurse of the Mediterranean, providing 25,000 beds for the disastrous Gallipoli campaign against Turkey.

Colonial rule though was not without tensions. Not long after the First World War, prices and taxes rose and the economy slumped. Riots broke out and four Maltese citizens were shot dead when British soldiers panicked. The government responded by giving the Maltese a greater say in the running of their country and, in 1921, they had a taste of self-government, maybe their first since Roman times. A thirty-two strong Legislative Assembly looked after everything but defence, foreign policy and immigration. This collapsed after six years because of local issues and arguments over the official language. Italian, the language of polite conversation and the judiciary, was spoken by only 15 per cent of the population, yet the upper classes would have it spoken as the official language in many institutions. Part of the language issue was that street names, especially in Valletta and Floriana, were in Italian. Mussolini had already made the ridiculous claim Maltese was merely a dialect of Italian and said the Maltese Islands rightly belonged within his 'New Roman Empire'. By 1936, Malta was a British colony once more, but with a new constitution banning Italian as an official language. Any thoughts about self-government for Malta went on hold as tension increased throughout Europe with the rise and ever-growing threat of fascism.

Thus Malta survived many great upheavals, outlived many a master and grew strong. Its people understood courage and sacrifice, knowing these traits would carry them through. Galvanised by turbulent times throughout the centuries, Malta braced itself for yet another war. The Second World War put every citizen on the front line and tested every ounce of their spirit. The fortifications created by the knights endured; the ancient forts important to the islands' survival yet again. Malta's strategic importance was also the key to success for either the Axis or the Allies in North Africa.

So, with such a turbulent but determined history surrounding them and such a glorious nation spirit, one can hardly be surprised two equally spirited young individuals would fall for one another as 'the light on the point' shone around them. And so begins the story of a man she called 'Warby' and a girl he called 'Chris'.

### *Chapter Three*

## **Stepping Stones & Flying Lessons**

**M**ary Christina Ratcliffe was born on 1 July 1914, in Dukinfield, a small industrial town on the eastern outskirts of Manchester. She had two brothers. Her father, Henry Marsland Ratcliffe, originated from Glossop in Derbyshire and her mother, Jeanie King Ratcliffe, née Downs, was Scottish.

Historically part of Cheshire, Dukinfield was a product of the Industrial Revolution. The cotton trade in particular shaped the town, which at the beginning of the nineteenth century had two cotton mills. By the century's end there were fourteen, but the industries that sustained Dukinfield were soon dying as the twentieth century progressed and the cotton industry declined. This was the landscape in which Christina, known as Mary as a child, grew up. She wanted something different. With her outgoing nature and sense of adventure she wasn't content with the routine and the prospect of what she saw as a dreary existence in an industrial town in the shadow of the Pennines in no way appealed.

She grew into a tall, slim, attractive girl, with brown eyes and blonde hair. Intelligent and confident, her independent nature was apparent from an early age. Like many other girls, Christina began ballet lessons at the age of eight and it was her dancing shoes that shaped her future. Few could have imagined just where her determination and search for excitement would take her, least of all her ballet mistress, who told Christina's mother her little girl, 'will never get anywhere with her dancing. She's far too wooden.'<sup>1</sup> For any child, such criticism was stinging, but coming at the end of a matinee given by pupils at her dancing academy, it was particularly hurtful. However, Christina was not put off by the devastating comment. Indeed, it served to strengthen her yearning to pursue her dream.

She attended the private Ashton High School. At thirteen she moved on to Manchester High School for Girls, a leading independent fee-paying school, travelling each day by train. The Ratcliffes were well placed in depression-hit Britain. Her father was a cotton manufacturer and the family's standing is confirmed by Christina's reference to his cotton factory as 'our mill'. At school, she took additional lessons in gymnastics and was a member of the dramatic society. She proved particularly adept at French and was awarded her School Certificate in 1931 in five subjects.

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1. *Carve Malta on my heart and other wartime stories*, by Frederick Galea, page 6.

After leaving school having just turned seventeen, Christina worked in her father's mill, but it did not hold her for long: she longed to go on stage and to travel, despite her parents' hopes she would become a nurse. At some stage she appeared on the same billing as George Formby at the old Manchester Hippodrome. Then, having won the grand total of £40 in a crossword competition, she set off for the bright lights of London. Her prize could hardly have financed her for long, so she must have had support from her parents. In 1933, Christina was 19-years-old and she soon found work and danced in the film *Charing Cross Road*, starring John Mills. She then joined an English dancing troupe, *Miss Frances Mackenzie's Young Ladies* and the lavish show, complete with nudes, was produced in Paris. It was called *Jusqu aux Etoiles* and toured France, Italy, Switzerland and North Africa.

Fascism was on the rise at the time and there was growing concern about Hitler and Mussolini's territorial ambitions. In an effort to create a 'New Roman Empire', as his supporters called it, Mussolini ordered the invasion of Abyssinia in 1935. His far superior forces were soon victorious. Although many European nations were colonial powers, their expansionist programmes had ended decades earlier. With the international mood being against colonialist expansion, Italy's actions were roundly condemned, particularly by Britain. Unfortunately, these events coincided with the appearance of *Jusqu aux Etoiles* in Genoa. Italian theatre-goers, well known for displaying their emotions, reacted badly, when, in the troupe's final number, the backdrop was revealed to include the Union Jack. *Miss Frances Mackenzie's Young Ladies* were booed off the stage.

Christina then joined the *Rodney Hudson Girls* for a six-month contract at the Tivoli Theatre in Barcelona. The overland, overnight, train journey was uneventful until they were stopped, twelve miles short of Barcelona. The date was 17 July 1936, the first day of the Spanish Civil War. By the time news reached the passengers, Barcelona had been bombed in the opening round of what became a vicious, terrifying conflict. The train's passengers remained stranded for three days, sustained by local villagers. Eventually they made their way to Barcelona, having waited with fearful anticipation through the sound of bombing, shellfire and gunfire. Their eyes were opened to the reality of war when they came across evidence of executed rebels. There were dead animals and shattered houses with street barricades manned by machine-gun armed defenders.

The war between the Republican Government, and the Nationalists, a rebel group led by the fascist, General Franco, lasted for close on three years. With Britain and France anxious to appease Hitler, there was no prospect of an anti-fascist alliance with the elected Spanish Government. There were atrocities on both sides with tens of thousands of civilians killed for their political or religious views. Estimates vary widely, but probably not less than 200,000 died. Franco emerged victorious, but there was no reconciliation, with thousands of Republicans sent into exile. Nor



did the executions end. For Italy and Germany's military, the Spanish Civil War was a perfect proving ground for their tanks and aircraft. Italy provided 50,000 volunteers, as well as aircraft, tanks, artillery and munitions; some 16,000 Germans were also involved in support of Franco.

Thankfully for Christina and the other stranded British nationals, after one terrifying night in Barcelona the RN came to their rescue. They were taken on board HMS *London*, the only rescue ship to berth inside Barcelona Harbour. The crew organised the ship as a reception centre accommodating 900 people in the first three days of the war; they were then sent in smaller groups to destroyers which took them to Marseilles. Christina's group spent two days on *London* before the destroyer, HMS *Gallant*, took them to Marseilles and safety.

Within a week, Christina was considering another engagement in India, but opted instead for one in Stockholm. Coming so soon after such a traumatic experience, Christina's resilience and enthusiasm for travel indicates something of the steel within her character and her thirst for further adventure. She had only just turned twenty-two years of age. The work in Sweden came to an end after only a month, and she returned to London, appearing as a guinea-a-day extra in *Dark Journey* starring Vivien Leigh. Next, she worked as an extra in *The Mill on the Floss* with Geraldine Fitzgerald.

Christina's next film opportunity was as a dancer in the Hollywood-style musical crime film *Premiere*, made in Vienna at the end of 1936. Christina eventually saw the finished product in the Regent Cinema in Valletta. The work was more than balanced by a very active social life, dining in style in their hotel, the Heitzinger Hof, and waltzing to the music of Strauss. A highlight was listening to Richard Tauber sing in the opera *Tiefland* at the Vienna Opera House. While Christina was in Vienna there was widespread evidence of Austrian Nazi Party activity within the capital, which led to *Wehrmacht* troops entering the country soon afterwards. Nazi Germany then annexed Austria in the *Anschluss*. There were a few voices of protest, but little else to what amounted to Hitler's first major move toward the creation of a Greater German Reich. Czechoslovakia was next, then Poland.

Adrian Warburton was born in Middlesbrough on 10 March 1918, the only son of Commander Geoffrey Warburton, a highly respected RN submariner, and Muriel Warburton, née Davidson. Awarded the Distinguished Service Order (DSO) for gallantry in a world war which still had eight months to run, Geoffrey was not done with courageous acts or awards. For his next, though, he would have to wait for the war that followed the war to end all wars. Gallantry and military service were something of a Warburton tradition: an uncle of Adrian's earned the DSO in the trenches, a cousin was the first officer awarded the Victoria Cross in the Second World War and a great uncle was equerry to King Edward VII.



Geoffrey remained in the RN after the Armistice and saw much service overseas. A strong-willed and dominant individual, he arranged for Adrian to be christened in a submarine. With the ceremony taking place in Grand Harbour Valletta, a link was perhaps established that would in time draw Adrian back. He may have grown up slightly in awe of his highly-disciplined, traditional father whom he saw infrequently. Winning his father's approval may also have been difficult when he was young, but over time they became close. Adrian's mother Muriel was an attractive lady, the daughter of a distinguished colonial police officer. With both parents often thousands of miles away, Adrian's relationship with them in those early years was distant, although his mother worshipped him.

In the 1920s, 'class' meant a great deal in British society. The Warburtons were upper-middle class and Adrian enjoyed the privileges of a good, if disjointed, upbringing and a comfortable lifestyle. In what was common practice for children of military officers, Adrian became a boarder at a preparatory school in Bournemouth. He and his sister, Alison, five years his senior, spent their holidays with their grandmother in her large house not far from the school, his grandfather having died when Adrian was four years old. The family was affluent and the house had numerous members of staff. To family members outside the immediate circle, Adrian was a normal friendly boy, but his character was influenced by the atmosphere at home. He became something of a loner and ran away from his first school at least once. According to his mother, Adrian didn't make many friends and never minded being by himself.

Defence cuts saw Geoffrey Warburton placed on the retired list in July 1927 at his own request and in the rank of commander. Finances must have taken a tumble and any boarding school allowance ended. Geoffrey became a cinema manager in Shepherd's Bush and the family moved to Enfield. The transition into commerce from an overseas military lifestyle to a suburban one would have come as a shock, particularly to Adrian's mother, whom he later referred to as 'the Lady Margaret'. Such a change of circumstance must have hit both parents hard, but Geoffrey was well capable of adapting, although he would have needed to be firmly focused, perhaps even single-minded, in carving out a new career and providing for a young family. Adrian did not get on well with his father at the time, maybe sensing some family tension as his mother struggled with the family's change of standing, smothering Adrian with the affection he may not have got from his father.

At the age of fourteen and a good average scholar, Adrian was sent to the private, fee-paying, public school of St Edward's in Oxford; the headmaster was a cousin of Adrian's mother. Adrian arrived in January 1932 at about the same time as another quiet boy who later became a household name: Guy Gibson. Curiously, Douglas Bader attended the same school some years earlier. At St Edward's, Adrian was seen as a loner who didn't fit in. He was often in trouble with authority, avoided team

games and exercise, but was keen on swimming, and for his age, was by far the best swimmer in the school. Despite a reluctance to take part in other physical exercise, Adrian became a strong, fit young man. He left in early 1935, aged seventeen, somewhat earlier than normal. This was the end of his full-time education. He was certainly up to the mark academically and was particularly good at mathematics, so the reason for leaving may have been financial. No evidence exists he was asked to leave early.

Adrian's interest in aviation began early, the seed almost certainly being sown on one of his mother's regular visits when Adrian was at prep school. His first experience of flying was in what Muriel described as a 'ten-bob flip'. Asked by the pilot whether they 'wanted the works', Adrian was thrilled by the loops and rolls that followed; his mother was less amused.

This early experience made a major and lasting impression on a youngster who grew up on a diet of tales about heroes of ancient Greece. With a heroic father and a long line of such men in his family, Adrian probably dreamt of being a hero too. With few friends, he grew up enjoying his own company, although he was fun-loving with a great sense of adventure. He was also extremely fond of animals and often stayed up all night tending a sick dog or cat. He loved climbing trees, showing no fear at all. He became good at shooting, but it is doubtful whether that and his prowess in the pool would have been sufficient to satisfy his demanding father. Later, at St Edward's, Adrian's interest in aviation developed further and he joined an aeroplane group, shunning all other school societies.

From an early age, he showed an evident rebellious streak. For example, when he was two he visited Australia with his parents. The fashion in those days was for young boys up to the age of five to wear their hair long and Adrian's mother took great delight in her son's long, blonde, curly hair. One day, Adrian slipped away from his governess, went to the ship's barber and had all of his lovely locks cut off. This independence of spirit marked him out in future years, and it surfaced again and again. In a hair-raising, rather than hair-shedding, demonstration at age fifteen, Adrian built a canoe, strapped it to his back, and cycled off. The following day he was rescued off the Essex coast.

In Malta in adult life, one of Adrian's colleagues suggested he was boastful and eager to portray his actions in a positive light. This is at odds with his parents' and others' experience of Adrian; his father later said Adrian did not talk about his wartime achievements, even though they corresponded and met regularly. His mother only learnt about Adrian's awards from others, not from Adrian. There may have been more than a little jealousy beneath accusations of boastfulness.

By the age of seventeen, Adrian was bright and articulate, extremely strong and fit, and good-looking, with blonde hair and blue eyes. He was very much an individual, a non-conformist who liked to do things his way rather than as a member

of a team or group. He was charming company, despite inheriting a slight sneer from his father which he often used at school. This would do nothing to endear him to future colleagues and, together with his privileged upbringing, it is easy to see why some might not warm to him. Adrian needed to soften aspects of his character to limit provoking those feelings of jealousy.

So, what was next for Adrian? How would his talents be put to best use? A career in the RAF certainly appealed but was firmly vetoed by his father, causing a significant clash between the two. Instead, Geoffrey arranged for Adrian to become an articled clerk, a daily commuter on the tube into Central London, to work with a traditional and well-established firm of accountants in Cheapside. It was a wholly unsuitable choice.

It is interesting to speculate about Adrian's likely future if his father had supported his ambition to join the RAF in 1935. Adrian would certainly have been commissioned: he was well-educated, fit, naturally confident, and imbued with those qualities engendered by public school education which were then considered necessary for service as an officer. His long-established service connections would also have worked in his favour. But he would have demonstrated no more piloting aptitude then than he did four years later. The RAF would also have been under less pressure to ensure Adrian qualified as a pilot. He could easily have found himself as an observer, as he had definite navigational skills. If that had been the case, 'Warby' might never have emerged.

Not surprisingly, Adrian and accountancy didn't hit it off, although he stuck with it for some time, maybe even as long as three years. It was never going to last and he made little positive impression on the firm's business partners. In a sign of things to come, he made a very positive impression on the mother of one his work colleagues who thought he was charming. Many ladies of all ages were charmed by this blue-eyed, blonde-haired Adonis, but he seemed unsure how to respond; he was thought to be inexperienced with girls.

In due course, Adrian's articles were terminated by mutual consent. Like many others who experienced the First World War, Geoffrey Warburton saw another war coming and encouraged Adrian to prepare for it. Adrian volunteered for the local Territorial Army unit and, on 1 November 1937, he became a part-time soldier as a private with 22nd London Armoured Car Company, part of the Royal Tank Corps. A year later, he was accepted by the RAF for pilot training.

The beginning of 1937 saw Christina out of work in London, living at the Theatre Girls' Club in Soho. There were no film jobs available and many shows and pantomimes were only at the beginning of long runs. Every morning she joined a dozen other girls staying at the Theatre Club trooping round agents' offices, all to no avail. With the winter weather worsening, and, despite the pleasant company,