

Book Review

Torpedo Leader

By Wg Cdr Patrick Gibbs DSO, DFC

Reviewed by Wg Cdr Clive Blount

T*orpedo Leader* is a first person account of flying the Beaufort in the anti-shipping torpedo bomber role in 1941-2. Gibbs wrote this book whilst WWII was still in process and its immediacy and freshness - without the benefit of any 'post match analysis' - is stunning.

Gibbs was a regular officer who spent the early stages of WWII as a Flight Commander on a Coastal Command Beaufort squadron. He spent most of winter of 1940/41 in hospital following a flying training accident, which probably saved him from the fate of so many of his colleagues, leaving the squadron in Autumn 1941 as one of very few pilots to survive a tour of Torpedo Bomber operations. Attacks in those early days were conducted in small formations, with low level searches of the enemy coastline carried out in an attempt to locate shipping for attack. To hit a moving ship with a torpedo is no easy task, particularly as the Beaufort was not fitted with any form of weapon sight; so these attacks were largely ineffective despite the high losses sustained by the Beaufort crews. It was this futility that urged Gibbs to develop tactics and techniques to conduct squadron, and multi-squadron attacks later in his career. After a period as a staff officer in the Cairo HQ, Gibbs then talked his way back to operational

flying, first in the Western Desert and then on to Malta. It is the desperate battle for Malta's survival that forms the backdrop of the bulk of the book. The role of the air defence forces, not least the legendary Gladiators 'Faith' Hope' and 'Charity', and the story of the courageous convoy of Operation PEDESTAL in the protection and re-supply of Malta, is well known. Gibbs describes a much less familiar area of operation that, nonetheless, was vital in supporting the campaign in North Africa and drastically reducing the re-supply of Rommel's *Afrika Korps*.

Not only technically fascinating, with detailed discussions of tactics and techniques and an exciting first hand account of many anti-shipping attacks, this book is intensely personal and draws the reader in to Gibbs' fears, crises of confidence and determination to hit hard at the enemy. The leadership dilemmas of commanding a squadron in a high intensity battle are described and one can follow Gibbs personal torment in vivid detail. Gibbs is searingly honest about his fears and motivations; this adds a human dimension and grabs the reader's empathy like few similar memoirs. We are also introduced to the many supporting roles required to enable the Beaufort's success. The initial lack of intelligence on enemy shipping, and the poor use of that intelligence which was available,

is highlighted by Gibbs, as is the logistics support required for his campaigns. Gibbs describes his shock realisation of the effort it took to get sufficient Torpedoes to Malta - usually carried in the bomb bay of Wellingtons which themselves suffered not inconsiderable losses - a factor he had not considered as he developed his mass attack tactics. From an air operations perspective Gibbs describes in detail the evolution of co-ordinated attacks by large numbers of Beauforts and subsequently the addition of other ac to provide fighter escort and dive-bombing attacks to much increase the effectiveness of the anti-shipping effort.

Whilst an exciting book for the lay reader, I would say that *Torpedo Leader* is a fascinating and thought-provoking read for the professional airman. I found myself alongside Gibbs tackling his many problems and found the experience most rewarding. I would say that it will have great resonance among those conducting today's operations. The anti-shipping battle in the Mediterranean was a largely unsung role in a largely unsung campaign, although without these operations the allied successes in North Africa would have been considerably less likely. The Torpedo Bombers' successes were largely anonymous - no one knew whose Torpedo hit the target and did the damage - and there was no tally of kills, or of bombing missions to measure success - few crews flew more than six operational flights from Malta. It was a grittily determined effort to hit the enemy hard that drove the crews forward. Gibbs' book goes along way to redress the balance of recognition in this key campaign

and is a fitting tribute to the Torpedo Bomber crews.

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