

Five explanations as to who named Malta's Gloster Gladiators Faith, Hope and Charity in 1940-1941

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Abstract

One of the most remarkable stories of the Second World War concerns the role played by a small number of obsolete biplanes that took to the skies over Malta in June 1940 and engaged wave after wave of modern Italian fighters and bombers. Malta's outdated Gloster Gladiators, flown by volunteer pilots with little or no fighter experience, came to be known as Faith, Hope and Charity. But who gave them these names and when were they widely known? Each of a number of commentators suggests one and only one possible explanation as to the origin of the names. The purpose of the present article is for the first time to assemble and discuss five explanations that have appeared in the literature as to how and when Malta's legendary Gladiators were christened.

The origin of the Faith, Hope and Charity names is obscure.
Malta Aviation Museum, 20 May 2009

*One of the
Gloster
Gladiators
that
defended
Malta in the
summer of
1940
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IWM)*



When Mussolini declared war on France and Great Britain on June 10, 1940, he immediately set his sights on Malta, the main base of the British Mediterranean Fleet. It was within convenient striking distance from his air bases in Sicily, of great strategic value, and thought to have no fighter aircraft to defend herself. Mussolini is said to have boasted that Malta would be conquered within a matter of days and that he would be in Valletta in two weeks.¹

Shortly before 7 a.m. on June 11, the first Italian bombing raid of Malta began. Eight raids would be carried out that day, by waves of Savoia Marchetti 79s bombers escorted by Macchi 200 fighter planes.

When war first broke out in 1939, there was widespread agreement that Malta was indefensible.² Opponents of that view soon gained enough ground for the War Cabinet in London to earmark four fighter squadrons for the defense of Malta but in the Spring of 1940, no fighter aircraft had as yet been stationed on the island because they were now more desperately needed elsewhere and above all in the protection of Britain herself.³ On May 28, 1940, the Cabinet came dangerously close to offering Malta as a concession to Italy for staying out of the war, but Churchill and the socialist members of the Cabinet prevailed over the conservatives, in a 3 to 2 vote.⁴

In March 1940, Malta's Commanding Air Officer, Air Commodore Foster Maynard, learned that eighteen Gloster Sea Gladiators belonging to the Navy were being stored in packing crates at the Air Repair Section at Kalafrana. They had been left behind by the aircraft carrier *H.M.S. Glorious* when she rejoined the Home Fleet to take part in operations in the Norwegian campaign. Eight of the crated Gladiators that were being held in reserve for her 802 Naval Air Squadron were now dispatched to the *Glorious*. And the remaining ten were soon in principle to be transferred to the *H.M.S. Eagle*. Maynard wanted a small number of these biplanes, since although they were obsolete, they could at least provide a rudimentary fighter defense. He asked the Mediterranean Fleet's Commander-in-Chief, Admiral Andrew Cunningham, whether the RAF might take over some of the Navy planes. Cunningham complied and obtained agreement from the Chief of Naval Staff, Rear-Admiral Willis, that the RAF could have four of the crated Gladiators. These planes – with serial numbers N5519, N5520, N5524 and N5531 – were unpacked, assembled and delivered to the Hal Far airport as the basis for a new Fighter Flight unit, established on April 23. Maynard now needed pilots who would train to fly the Gladiators, and eight volunteers – including Maynard's personal assistant, George Burges, began their basic training, though none of them had fighter experience. But a few days later, Maynard was informed that the ten Gladiators would now have to be transferred after all to the *Eagle*, and on April 29, the Malta Fighter Flight was dissolved and the four Gladiators taken apart and packed in their crates. Then reversing itself again, the Navy decided it only needed three of the planes after all and on May 4, the Malta Fighter Flight was reinstated and the four Gladiators reassembled and test flown. By the end of May, two more Gladiators were unpacked and assembled (N5523 and N5529) and one more was kept for spare parts.⁵

Countless articles, books and websites have rightfully celebrated the exploits of a handful of obsolete Gloster Gladiators. These are the planes whose volunteer pilots defended Malta against the modern bombers and fighters of the Italian air force that raided the island for the first time on June 11, 1940. Though as already described, six Gladiators had been removed from packing crates and assembled at Kalafrana in April and May that year to constitute a fighter defense for the island, only three of the outmoded biplanes could be serviceable and airborne at any one time due to a shortage of engine parts and pilots. And whether the Gladiators that were engaged in dogfights with enemy planes over Valletta or Sliema were always the same three aircraft or three of a possible five or six, is of no consequence whatsoever. Nor is there anything mythical about the role they played in the conflict. During the first weeks of the bombing raids, for the Maltese watching the skies from rooftops and cheering on their defenders, there were three antiquated biplanes fearlessly engaging the bombers and fighter planes of the Regia Aeronautica. And those three defenders came to be known as Faith, Hope and Charity.

Most discussions of these events simply state that the planes were named, dubbed or christened Faith, Hope and Charity, with no indication as to who did the naming. But some commentators have either explained the origins of the names or have in passing expressed assumptions about those origins. Each of those commentators suggests one and only one possible

¹ R.L. Oliver, *Malta at Bay. An Eye-Witness Account* (London, 1942), 11.

² I. Cameron, *Red Duster, White Ensign* [expanded edition] (London and New York, 1960), 15.

³ N. Polmar, *Aircraft Carriers: A History of Carrier Aviation and Its Influence on World Events, vol.1, 1909-1945* (Washington, 2006), 109.

⁴ T. Spooner, *Faith, Hope and Malta GC. Ground and Air Heroes of the George Cross Island* (Manchester, 2008) [original publ. 1992], 19.

⁵ J. Holland, *Fortress Malta: An Island Under Siege 1940-1943* (London, 2009), 28; C. Shores and B. Cull, *Malta: The Hurricane Years 1940-1941* (London, 1987), 5-7.

explanation. The purpose of the present article is for the first time to provide an overview of five explanations that have appeared in the literature as to how the names Faith, Hope and Charity were given to Malta's legendary Gladiators.

1. Gladiator pilot John Waters

The single most detailed explanation for the christening of the Gladiators credits the pilot John Waters with the idea of giving them their names during the month after the bombing raids had begun⁶:

One quiet evening in early, when there hadn't been a raid for several hours, the pilots were sitting on the grass at Hal Far, watching the three Gladiators being refueled.

"You know," Jock Martin said reflectively, "we ought to give them a name."

Someone suggested Pip, Squeak, and Wilfred; but this wasn't received with much enthusiasm. It was John Waters – quiet, good-looking, and technically the most brilliant pilot of the seven – who made the inspired suggestion.

"How about Faith, Hope and Charity?" he said.

The names caught on. They spread beyond Hal Far, beyond Valletta and the Three Cities, beyond the shore of Malta itself. Soon, every time the Gladiators took to the air, people would stop, point skyward, and cry:

"Look! There they go. *Faith, Hope and Charity!*"

To most Britishers on the Island the names brought no more than a wry, appreciative smile; but to the Maltese they brought something more. For the people of Malta are intensely religious, and it meant a great deal to them that the men and machines which were defending them so valiantly had been christened with the words of St. Paul. Now more than ever before, the three Gladiators came to epitomize the island's spirit of defiance; they became symbols of a cause which began to take on something like the sanctity of a crusade.

Two other commentators subscribe to the same explanation.⁷

However, attributing the naming of the planes to Gladiator pilots in July 1940, is inconsistent with the view expressed by the pilots' own Group Captain, George Burges⁸:

When asked about the famous names given to the Gladiators, George Burges is quite adamant that – in his day – and he was to remain on the Island for another year – the three planes were never called 'Faith, Hope and Charity.'

And Burges's view was shared by Malta's Commanding Air Officer, Air Commodore Foster Maynard, whose idea it had been to use the crated Gladiators in the first place, and who stated that "he first heard these names in connection with his Gladiators when he returned to the United Kingdom in 1941".⁹ Furthermore, the earliest mention of the three names in the principal local newspaper, *The Times of Malta*, is on October 25, 1941 (3), in the transcription of a radio broadcast given the previous evening by Wing-Commander Grant-Ferris, M.P. and entitled "Malta's Air Defense". The opening sentence reads: "It does not seem so very long ago, and indeed it is little more than a year, since the days when the Fighter Defense of Malta depended upon the magnificent efforts of those three old Gladiators "Faith" "Hope" and "Charity" – when they took to the air and gave chase to swarms of Mussolini's Air Force."

In the light of these statements by Burges and Maynard, and considering the fact that no source is given for the reported conversation involving Martin, Waters and other Gladiator pilots, there are ample reasons for questioning the explanation offered by Cameron.

⁶ Cameron, 42.

⁷ K. Poolman, *Faith, Hope & Charity. The Defence of Malta* (Bristol, 2004), 60-61; J. Wismayer, 'Malta's Involvement in World War II', *The Times of Malta*, 26 August, 2007, 28.

⁸ Spooner, 19.

⁹ F.K. Mason, *The Gloster Gladiator* (London, 1964), 82.

2. RAF Corporal Harry Kirk

Citing an article by Roy Nash entitled “The Unknown Air Ace” in *The Daily Star*, but without indicating a specific date in March 1958, Holland offers this as “the only explanation [he] was able to find for the naming of the Gladiators”:¹⁰

On the first day [11 June 1940], an Italian plane pursued by one of the Gladiators was seen to dive, with smoke trailing behind it. It did, in fact, make it back to Sicily, but for those on the ground watching the dogfights above, this was the first victory to their gallant defenders, and the three planes they saw swooping and turning in the skies over Grand Harbour. Harry Kirk, an RAF pilot based at their headquarters in Scots Street, saw the Gladiators flying in tight formation and thought they looked rather like the three silver hearts on a brooch of his mother’s. Each heart had a name – Faith, Hope and Charity. ‘Look, there go Faith, Hope and Charity,’ he told a fellow airman. The names stuck; soon everyone at HQ was calling them that.

Having tried unsuccessfully to obtain a copy of Nash’s article without an exact date of publication, I have no way of assessing the reliability of this claim.

3. A Maltese newspaper

An anonymous author wrote about the three names in a footnote to a description of the Gladiators:¹¹

These names were not actually applied to the aircraft at the time; it was months later when a Maltese newspaper reported the air duels that the monikers stuck.

This claim would be more convincing if the name of the newspaper were provided as well as the title of the article in question, the name of its author and the date of its publication. In the absence of those details, there is no reason to treat the claim as anything but second or third hand hearsay. The same applies to another commentator’s statement that contemporaries of John Waters attributed the Gladiators’ names “to journalists at a later date”.¹² Here again, a glaring lack of precision does not inspire confidence in the claim.

4. The people of Malta

A number of commentators attribute the naming of the three planes to “the Maltese,” “the people of Malta” or “the locals.” This makes the naming of the planes a collective act expressive of the profoundly religious nature of the Maltese people. And although one may be skeptical of any view attributing invention to a collectivity rather than an individual, this approach is especially interesting when it plays on a contrast between British and Maltese cultures. That is the case in this passage which begins with sets of names for the planes that were inspired by British cartoon characters and that were soon forgotten:¹³

[The planes] were known for a time as ‘Pip’, ‘Squeak’ and ‘Wilfred’, and as ‘Freeman’, ‘Hardy’ and ‘Willis’, like the cartoon characters or the ‘shoebox’ assemblies they at first might have seemed to be. But as they survived and prospered against odds, the Maltese called them almost naturally ‘Faith’, ‘Hope’ and ‘Charity’. Which fitted them so well and signified the feelings of those who watched their tremendous efforts and hair-raising exploits.

This contrast between British and Maltese cultures is even more striking in a fictional work called *The Legend of Faith, Hope and Charity*:¹⁴

“Do you know what the people of Malta call your planes?” Lucija asked.

Robson was puzzled by the question. “They are Gloster Sea Gladiators mark ones. There’s N-5-5-2-0, N-5-5-1-9. N-“

“No! What do you think we call your planes?” Lucija interrupted.

Still confused, Robson shrugged his shoulders and offered no answer.

¹⁰ Holland, 40, 402.

¹¹ Anon, ‘Gloster Gladiator – World War II Aircraft; The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy: Earth Edition’, http://h2g2.com/approved_entry/A10223885 (2006).

¹² Shores and Cull, 370.

¹³ Hogan, 1978, 27.

¹⁴ Royce, 2014,

“They are more to us than three planes, and definitely more than some silly numbers. We call them Faith, Hope and Charity. I know you have heard of Faith, Hope and Charity before?”

“They are the Christian virtues according to St Paul,” Robson answered instantly, recalling many of the sermons he had attended with his mother.

“Marvik told me about your friendship with a Bishop, so I knew you would understand. The first morning of the war, I was horrified to see all those bombers attacking Valletta. But I also saw three small planes fly to meet them. The whole island saw it. And every time the bombers come, the same planes always fly to meet them. Your planes are symbols of our spirit. How can this island fall to the enemy when there are men willing to face such odds,” Lucija explained, her voice was choked, and her eyes full of tears.

[...]

In the car, on the journey back to Hal Far, Robson voiced the names “Faith, Hope and Charity” aloud. He liked the resonance and he smiled as he contemplated their meaning.

There are other commentators as well who share the view that the Gladiators were christened Faith, Hope and Charity by the Maltese people.¹⁵ And one commentator attributes the naming of the planes to “the Maltese personnel”.¹⁶

5. An Information Officer

In another work of fiction, an intriguing possibility is evoked in this way:¹⁷

‘So, tell me, what do you know about Malta?’

‘I know about Faith, Hope and Charity.’

Everyone knew about Faith, Hope and Charity. The newspapers back home had made sure of that, enshrining the names of the three Gloster Gladiators in the popular imagination. The story had courage-in-the-face-of-adversity written all over it, just what the home readership had required back in the summer of 1940. While Hitler skipped across northern Europe as though it were his private playground, on a small island in the Mediterranean three obsolescent bi-planes were bravely pitting themselves against the full might of Italy’s Regia Aeronautica, wrenched around the heavens by pilots highly qualified to fly them.

And so the myth was born. With a little assistance.

‘Actually, there were six of them.’

‘Six?’

‘Gloster Gladiators. And a bunch more held back for spares.’

Pemberton frowned. ‘I don’t understand.’

‘Three makes for a better story, and there were never more than three in the air at any one time, the others being unserviceable.’

The names had been coined and then quietly disseminated by Max’s predecessor, their biblical source designed to chime with the fervent Catholicism of the Maltese.

‘It’s part of what we do at the Information Office.’

‘You mean propaganda?’

‘That’s not a word we like to use.’

‘I was told you were independent.’

‘We are ostensibly.’

That censorship was a fact of life in Malta during the war should not be forgotten. R. Leslie Oliver writes in his foreword to his book:¹⁸

My thanks go to Mr. R. Wingrave Tench, the Deputy Chief Censor of Malta, who has been most helpful and constructive in his criticisms and censored my book more promptly than I could have hoped.

And a great deal of the Gladiators’ importance had to do with morale as its most decorated pilot pointed out with admirable candor:¹⁹

¹⁵ Oliver, 12; Preston I. Grover and William McGaffin, ‘Malta’, *Life Magazine* (4 May 1942), 44; D. Wragg, *Malta. The Last Great Siege 1940-1943* (Barnsley, 2004), 117.

¹⁶ G.A. Kelly, ‘The Days of ‘Faith’ ‘Hope’ and ‘Charity’’, *The Times of Malta*, 26 August 1960, 7.

¹⁷ Mark Mills, *The Information Officer* (Hammersmith, 2009), 15-17.

¹⁸ R.L. Oliver, *Malta at Bay. An Eye Witness Account* (London, 1942), 3.

¹⁹ Holland, 40.

People got the impression that our aircraft were shooting down enemy planes left, right and centre,' says George Burges. 'They did not, but morale was kept high'.

Given the realities of censorship and the need to give high priority to the morale of the local population, the creative license taken by novelist Mills with respect to the naming of the three Gladiators may not have been entirely off the mark.

On the other hand, it could be argued that at least during the period when Gladiators were the only fighters Malta had as a defense against the Italian air force – from June 11 to June 21/22, 1940, when first two and then six more Hurricanes arrived²⁰ – the last thing the censors would want known by the local population and by the enemy was that the island could muster no more than three obsolete aircraft at any one time in her defense. Once Hurricanes and eventually Spitfires were there to defend the island, no harm could be done by revealing the true extent of Malta's initial defenses when the bombing raids began. This may explain why in the daily accounts of the Gladiators' exploits in the local newspapers, the planes are invariably described as "British fighters," or "our fighters," or "our fighter aircraft" without a word about their being outdated or outnumbered or flown by volunteers with little or no experience as fighter pilots. In other words, the contemporary accounts describe what might be understood as a somewhat level playing field, with "our fighters" pitted against "their fighters," not our tiny number of Gloster Gladiators valiantly trying to hold back a modern air force. It is only when accounts of those exploits are made months or years later that the David-versus-Goliath aspect of the conflict in June 1940 is fully revealed.

Here are three representative samples, all excerpts from articles that appeared during the first week of bombings in *The Times of Malta*, illustrating how radically the contemporary accounts differ from the retrospective ones, not in their emphasis on the effectiveness of Malta's planes but in the omission of their outdatedness and maximum number:

Following yesterday's report of the first day's eight air raids over Malta, it is now confirmed that two enemy machines were destroyed by anti-aircraft fire. Both fell into the sea. A third was damaged by our fighters which chased the enemy.

"Two Enemy Planes Brought Down: Our Fighters Chase the Enemy,"
The Times of Malta, June 13, 1940, 6.

But the raid: The leading formation of the enemy air raiders consisted of bombers and these machines were immediately attacked by our fighter-craft.

Several bombs were dropped in the neighborhood of Kalafrana. There was no damage or casualties.

The second formation of enemy bombers was also attacked by our fighters and quickly dispersed.

The third formation of enemy aeroplanes were fighters, possibly "Macchi 200's", but these were also dispersed in an engagement with our own fighters.

The fact that enemy bombers were yesterday accompanied by fighter-craft is obvious evidence of the healthy respect and even fear which Italian pilots regard our fighters.

"Two Sunday Raids," *The Times of Malta*, June 17, 1940, 2.

A total of fifty five bombs were dropped on Malta yesterday in three air raids by the enemy, all of short duration, thanks to our fighters and anti-aircraft. The first air raid was the earliest we have had so far—at 6.15 a.m. It ended at about 7 a.m., the raiders having been driven away by our fighters.

"Italy's Attack on Malta," *The Times of Malta*, June 18, 1940, 1

It is quite conceivable that an information officer encouraged withholding the fact that Malta's fighters were Gloster Gladiators. And in the unlikely event that in June 1940, the names Faith, Hope and Charity were in use, it might have been a strategic decision not to mention them, since they give away the number of Malta's airborne defenders.

These then are five explanations mentioned in the literature, attributing the idea for naming the three Gladiators Faith, Hope and Charity to:

- Gladiator Pilot John Waters
- RAF corporal Harry Keith
- A Maltese newspaper

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 41.

- The people of Malta
- An information officer

While the present article has by no means settled any issues, it has at least charted the range of explanations that have been evoked to explain a particularly meaningful aspect of the Gladiators' role in Malta in the summer of 1940.

