

The Gozo Airfield – Eisenhower’s Recollections

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Introduction

In 1961, sixteen years after the end of World War II, in a speech delivered in Washington, D.C., US President Dwight D. Eisenhower vividly recorded Gozo and the construction of the Xewkija airfield during the war.

The Xewkija airfield was constructed in support of the Anglo-American invasion of Sicily. A similar airfield, and for the same purpose, was constructed on the island of Pantelleria after it was taken by the Americans.

Speaking at the Statler Hilton Hotel in Washington, D.C., on the occasion of the Annual Hoover Medal award dinner, sponsored by four leading US engineering societies, President Eisenhower recalled that since Malta had run out of space, Gozo was the only place where the Americans could build an additional airfield close to the new theatre of war that was soon to be opened up by the invasion of Sicily.

Indeed, as we read in Charles Bezzina’s brief but detailed account, the most comprehensive treatment so far of this event, the construction of the airfield was completed on the 20 June 1943 and “Operation Husky,” as the invasion of Sicily was code-named, started on the night of 9 July (Bezzina, 2004).

Eisenhower’s Speech

The extract from Eisenhower’s speech, delivered on 10 January 1961 and reproduced below, shows how the building of the Gozo airfield left a lasting impression on him:

“There are one or two incidents that General Marshall¹ did not mention. I am not going to go too deeply into statistics, but there is a story – a true one – that I thought always was interesting. The American engineers equipped with the kind of mechanisms such as he mentioned, went over to Malta; and there was a British air officer, General Park, a very competent and gallant man, who knew



Aerial photograph of the Gozo Airfield as of June 20, 1943. Photo: C. Bezzina

¹ In this extract, it is not clear whether Eisenhower is referring to Brig. Gen. Samuel L. A. Marshall or Gen. George C. Marshall, but the other references are clear namely to Gen. Alfred M. Gruenther and Air Vice Marshal Sir Keith Rodney Park.



American soldiers guarding the Gozo Airfield - July 1943. Photo: From Bezzina, C.

that the Americans needed a new fighter field close by. The only spot that was possible to use was an island and I think it was named Gozo, but if I am wrong General Gruenther will tell me after we leave this meeting. But anyway it was nothing but a mountain. And the British having long ago given up with their hand tools on building this field, said to the engineer colonel visiting for the evening, “How long would it take you to get this field ready?” And the British thought, at least, that anything under a year, if you could do it at all, would be all right. And this man took a look and said, “Oh, 12 to 14 days.” And the British officer was so astonished, and really so insulted in a sense, he said, “When can you start? Well,” he said, “let’s see what headquarters will give me.” And he cabled back to Africa – he was over in Sicily – and it happened that all this equipment was in a harbor in Philippeville and ready to go, so it went right over. From the time the equipment reached there, 13 days later, our first fighter flew on and off the field. And General Park made a special flight to me and said, “I take

back everything about American bragging; it’s all true” (Woolley & Peters, 2009).

A Lasting Impression

In his speech, Eisenhower did not mention only Gozo. He referred to a number of other feats performed by American engineers in support of the war effort. Eisenhower had obviously not been to Gozo, which he described as “nothing but a mountain”. This shows that he must have been briefed of the island’s physical topography and terrain and that it was hilly. The unnamed American officer who Eisenhower refers to as an “engineer colonel” was of course Major Baron Le Colt (Bezzina, 2004:16). He could not have cabled back to Africa (Eisenhower’s Headquarters) from Sicily as Eisenhower claimed, for Sicily was still in enemy hands. This does not diminish from Eisenhower’s account, recounted some eighteen years after the completion of the airfield. It is obvious that although he was relying on memory the Gozo airfield had left a lasting impression on him. Again, this in itself is quite remarkable for a man who had led the Allied War effort in the west,



Lt. Col. Fred M. Dean's Spitfire Vb at the Gozo Airfield - June 1943. Photo: Bezzina, C.

whose military career encompassed such a vast area and so many events of the war and who had led America as its president between 1953 and 1961. Somewhere in Eisenhower's memory, his "hard disc", tiny Gozo lingered on notwithstanding the brain's tendency to select, sift, retain and discard information without a specific command from us.

As we find in Bezzina's account, the Xewkija airfield, consisting of two runways, remained in use up to the 6 August 1943. By then, all the military units stationed there had been relocated to Sicily and the fields on which the runways had been built, were slowly returned to their original owners with compensation.² Only the Gourgion tower was never rebuilt. Mention also needs to be made in this context of the Gozitans' role in this wartime endeavour. They provided the bulk of the manual labour which was also crucial together with the heavy equipment brought over by the Americans, for the speedy construction of the runways. In this they had to overcome their mortal fears that the airfield could also transform their relatively peaceful island into a military target. Fortunately, this did not happen.

Little is known on how daily events actually unfolded in the Xewkija airfield during the hectic

days of the invasion of Sicily and its short life span. Further research could perhaps unearth reports and anecdotes which could throw more light on life in this short-lived military base such is the one involving first Lieutenant Edward Fardella, a Spitfire pilot, 308 Squadron, USAAF, who collided with the wreck of a Spitfire on one of the Gozo runways, in July 1943, killing Leading Aircraftsman Ernie Nuttall and Leading Aircraftsman Jim Taylor of 3231 RAF Servicing Commando Unit.

References

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² American records show that between the 13-14 July 1943, the 307th and 308th Fighter Squadrons, 31st Fighter Group, had already transferred with Spitfires from Gozo to Ponte Olivo, Sicily. This was made possible by the rapidity with which enemy airfields were being captured in Sicily. See, *COMBAT CHRONOLOGY US ARMY AIR FORCES MEDITERRANEAN - 1943, PART 2* at <http://www.milhist.net/usaaf/mto43b.html> (accessed 30.08.2009)