



Hawker Hurricane Z 3055 restored to its former glory. PHOTOS: MALTA AVIATION MUSEUM David Polidano working on the main spars of the wings.

# The aircraft that returned from

## The story of Hawker Hurricane Mark IIA Z 3055

JEFFREY SAMMUT

July 4, 1941, 3.45am – The roar of the Merlin engine broke the silence of the Safi airstrip. Blue flames spewed out of the engine's exhaust, giving out an eerie light that danced around the cockpit.

The newly-constructed airstrip was not looked well upon by RAF pilots. It was just a narrow runway hewn out of rock and its borders were littered with anti-invasion devices, which consisted of explosive charges on top of poles embedded in the ground.

To make matters worse, the weather was horrible and visibility bad. Therefore, 23-year-old Sgt Thomas Hackston of 126 Squadron carefully taxied out and aligned Hawker Hurricane Z 3055 on the runway. He opened the throttle and his aircraft trundled down the airstrip, gained speed, finally became airborne and vanished into the murky night, on what was supposed to be a routine air test. He was never seen again.

Fifty-two years later, in 1993, Karmenu Grixti and John Spiteri, while scuba diving, spotted aircraft wreckage on the bottom of the sea, just off the Hamrija Coastal Tower, close to Wied iż-Żurriq. The wreckage consisted of a nearly complete aircraft, with the engine, fuselage and wings almost intact. There was also something resembling a crane jib.

The two divers spoke of their find to David Schembri, a professional diver at the time, and currently mayor of Qrendi. A

fisherman friend of the divers, Karmenu Caruana, confirmed what Grixti and Spiteri had said, as he knew the site well, having dropped his nets close to the wreckage many times. The sunken remains attracted all kinds of marine life, including large fish. Yet Caruana was always careful not to drop his nets too close to the wreck, as these would get snagged and cut by the sharp metal. He agreed to mark the site for Schembri with a buoy.

**“Hackston somehow managed to bring his aircraft down smoothly, but... he was never spotted, and the sea became his untimely grave”**

Schembri was taken to the site by one of his closest friends, Joe Sciberras, a Blue Grotto boat owner. With the aircraft buoyed, Schembri dived to investigate the site. At a depth of around 40 metres, the hazy shape of an aircraft could be made out. One wing had a part missing and the jib of the crane was, in fact, the broken fuselage, having been twisted out of shape by the weight and accumulation of snagged nets.

During his underwater survey, Schembri recovered two loose instruments from the open cockpit, later identified as the light and

undercarriage indicators. Their markings were in English, so the diver, with his limited aviation knowledge, presumed the wreckage to be that of a Spitfire. “Had the wordings been in German, I probably would have opted for a Stuka,” Schembri remarked.

Schembri decided to film the wreck on videotape. The videotape, together with some of the instruments recovered, were passed on to Ray Polidano and Mike Eastman of the Malta Aviation Museum, who were at that time busy rebuilding a Supermarine Spitfire. The Spitfire still lacked its wings, so Schembri thought the underwater wreck could be a possible source for them and other spare parts. However, on examining the underwater video footage, the men of the Aviation Museum established that the aircraft was a Hawker Hurricane.

Over the next two years, several dislodged items, such as the windscreen, battery and radio were recovered. However, Schembri's dream was to raise the whole wreck from the depths. After many discussions, it was decided that the aircraft was to be recovered in two stages due to its fragile condition. On July 16, 1995, a 1.5-ton lifting bag was attached to the fuselage and tail, slowly filled with air, and gradually, part of the Hawker Hurricane reached the surface, to be towed to Wied iż-Żurriq.

But it was there that their troubles started. The winch pulling the wreckage onto the shore stalled. Yet, seeing that a crowd had turned out to witness these

unusual happenings, Schembri and the rest of the team asked for help. Four ropes were tied to the aircraft, and with 10 to 15 men tugging enthusiastically on each one, and after much hard work and sweat, the remains finally saw the light of day.

While on the slipway, the large amounts of nets entangled in the fuselage were removed, making the relic much easier to handle. Nevertheless, it still took eight men to lift the remains onto Polidano's Land Rover, to be taken to Ta' Qali for eventual restoration.

With the initial task over, the next step was to recover the aircraft engine, centre section, cockpit and wings. At this stage, Schembri was joined by fellow diving colleague and restoration enthusiast Charles Tanti, who provided addition underwater assistance and advice on the salvage.

With the 1.5-ton lifting bag attached to the centre section, the aircraft was partially raised off the seabed and moved to a different position a few metres away, allowing the divers to scour the sand and pick up any parts that had fallen off throughout the years. However, the remains still had to be lifted and taken ashore.

Providence, in the form of Caesar Ship Repair Enterprises Ltd, intervened. Its director, Anthony Cassar, offered the use of the sea vessel *Sea Wolf*, an A-frame moored barge. Its crew were experienced in marine salvage and proved to be a vital asset during the operation. The forecast for September 19, 1995, predicted favourable weather, and the operation was scheduled for that day.



Sgt Thomas Hackston, who disappeared on July 4, 1941, aged 23. PHOTO: DAVID SCHEMBRI

However, the weathermen got it all wrong and the team faced strong winds, high waves and rain. Despite this, the remains of the Hurricane were recovered and brought aboard the *Sea Wolf* within an hour.

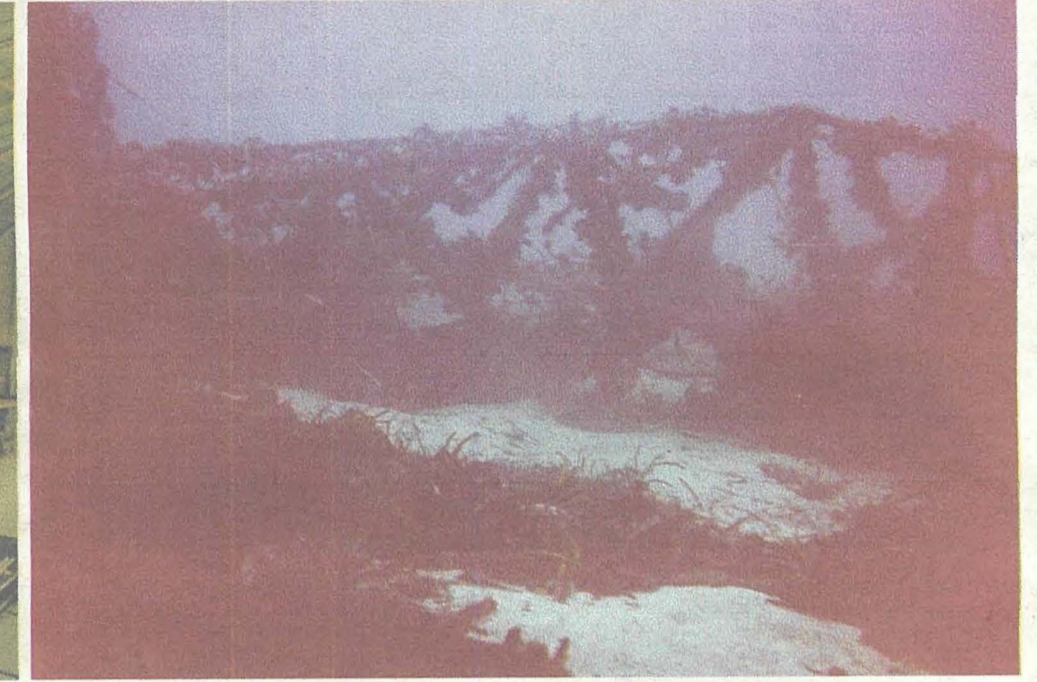
With the salvage successful, the aircraft parts were taken to Marsaxlokk and eventually to Ta' Qali to join their counterparts for restoration. From a brass plate and two aluminium panels with painted serial numbers, it was established that the Hurricane was Z 3055.

At the Malta Aviation Museum, a lot of hard work still remained to be done. Having spent the best part of 50 years at the bottom of the sea, the aircraft needed extensive restoration. For example, the engine was in such a bad state that little could be used from it. Most of the parts had to be manufactured, purchased or exchanged.

Learning of the difficulties, Paul Cardona donated a complete



The fuselage of the Hawker Hurricane prior to being covered by fabric.



What resembled a crane jib on the seabed turned out to be part of the fuselage.

# the depths

Merlin 224 engine to the Aviation Museum, and with the parts already on hand, a serviceable engine could be rebuilt. Building and connecting the engine to instrumentation took time, and it was only on December 13, 2001, that Merlin engine came back to life with its characteristic roar.

The Hawker Hurricane contains a lot of wooden frames, and these had to be manufactured by Lorry Borg, a local wood turner, from original plans and blueprints acquired from the UK. Then the fuselage was covered in fabric, painted with dope, and the colour scheme and markings applied.

The wings, too, proved to be a problem. Corrosion had eaten away most of the main spars and thus only a few ribs could be reused. The rest had to be rebuilt from scratch or found elsewhere. The company Hawker Restorations proved to be a priceless source for the many missing bits and pieces.

What about 23-year-old Thomas Hackston, the pilot from Edinburgh who had flown Z 3055? Why did he end up in the sea? It seems that during his final flight, the aircraft suffered engine failure, or the engine caught fire. This was deduced during restoration, when one of the cylinder banks showed signs of overheating.

A dead engine left Hackston no other alternative but to ditch in the sea. The Hawker Hurricane, with its large under-fuselage radiator air scoop, had a tendency to flip over the moment it touched water, trapping the pilot inside the cockpit. But according to Polidano, Hackston somehow managed to bring his aircraft down smoothly, as the landing lights

were found to be still attached to the wreckage.

Hackston must have gotten out of the sinking aircraft, in the process removing the cockpit hood and the emergency exit panel, which were never found. He was equipped with a life jacket and a small dinghy but due to the bad weather and the fact that he never used the radio to call for help, he was never spotted and the sea became his untimely grave.

The lovingly restored Hawker Hurricane Mark IIA is now on display at the Malta Aviation Museum, Ta' Qali. The thousands of man-hours spent to recover and restore this masterpiece of an aircraft, together with the large amount of money spent by the volunteers of the museum, show the dedication of the museum's staff in keeping Malta's aviation history alive. Here one must mention David Polidano, Andrew Cilia, Linda Denney, Mario Zammit and James Watson, who selflessly spent countless hours at the museum reconstructing and bringing back to life this fighter aircraft.

More information about the recovery and restoration of Hawker Hurricane Z 3055 can be found on the Malta Aviation Museum Foundation Fly Past magazines nos 1, 2 and 5.

## Acknowledgements

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The rest of the aircraft safely aboard *Sea Wolf*.



The first parts that were brought to shore being cleared of fishing nets.