

The King of Lampedusa

.... from a talk by Tom Carney to RCAF 441 Wing - March 10, 2015

War is a tragic business. But from time to time amusing incidents arise that provide temporary relief from the tragedies. One of these incidents is the story of Sydney Cohen, the uncrowned King of Lampedusa, a tiny island in the Mediterranean.

Before recounting Syd's story, though, I should set the stage - the context in which he earned such an exalted title. About 2 years ago, at the Wing's Awards Dinner, Bob Middlemiss gave an excellent talk about his role in the defence of Malta. He focused on the defence of the island, but also pointed out Malta's strategic importance, and how it impacted the seesaw campaign in North Africa, between the British 8th Army, led by Bernard Montgomery, versus Germany's Afrika Korps, commanded by Rommel. By late 1941, the north side of the Mediterranean was entirely controlled by the Axis powers and sympathizers.

If you look at **the first map**, you'll see that, starting in the west, Franco now controlled Spain. Moving east Vichy France was controlled by Germany; Italy had Mussolini for a leader; cross the Adriatic to the Balkans you find Yugoslavia occupied by Germany, Albania by Italy; Greece, Crete, the Dodecanese and Cyclades Islands occupied by Germany. Only Turkey was neutral, but was being pressured by Germany to join the Axis. On the south side, i.e. the African side, Britain's 8th Army was like squished ground beef in a sandwich. Vichy France, Spain, and Italy controlled Morocco, Algeria, and Libya west of the 8th Army. Vichy controlled Lebanon, and Syria, east of the 8th Army.

So why, you might ask, bother with the Med? Surely the pressing need was the direct defence of Britain? Actually the Mediterranean region was of much greater importance than most people today realise. Just one example from many reasons - Napoleon once said, "An army marches on its stomach". In World War 2, Mechanized Forces, moved on oil. Referring to Britain's main source of oil was Iraq. In 1941/42 the Luftwaffe kept a squadron of He 111 bombers in Syria, threatening Iraq.

Britain's Middle East Forces got oil supplies through the Suez Canal, plus a pipeline from Kirkuk in Iraq to Haifa, then in Palestine. But the UK needs had to come the long route through the Persian Gulf, Arabian Sea, Indian Ocean where Vichy France serviced German U-boats in North Madagascar, round Cape Town, and then face the U-boat menace in the Atlantic.

If you look at **the next map**, you'll see that the the approx 10 week route. Compare with Germany's supply from Ploesti in Romania.

Major changes for the better happened in the fall of 1942. Montgomery's 8th Army defeated the Afrika Korps at Alemein and advanced to Tripoli, destroying Rommel's army Operation Torch in which the British 1st Army, a Free French Army, plus the first American troops to see action in Europe/Africa, ousted the remaining Axis forces and the Vichy French from Morocco and Algeria. All of this was accomplished by April 1943. North Africa was rid of Axis forces. It was time to rid the European side of the Mediterranean of the Nazi/Fascist scourge.

The first step was to be the invasion of Sicily and Italy, and this is the starting point of the story of my good friend, Sergeant Pilot Sydney Cohen, Royal Air Force. Born in London's East End, he became the unofficial King of the Island of Lampedusa; the first Allied airman to accept the surrender of Axis held territory in Europe together with its Italian garrison of 4,600 men.

If you look at a map of central Mediterranean you will see that the closest entry points in Europe from Africa are 2 tiny islands, Lampedusa and Pantelleria, each only about 8 sq. miles, and about 100 miles or so west of Malta. Syd, who shortly after his victory became a good friend of mine, when we both served at Berka airfield near Benghazi, was based in Malta, flying Fairey Swordfish biplanes at the time of his historic flight. June 10 1943 while patrolling the sea between Malta and Lampedusa his flight and navigation instruments went completely haywire. His only sensible option was to land on Lampedusa. He knew it was occupied by an Italian garrison and expected that he and his 2 crew members would become POWs. Much to his surprise, on landing, he was greeted by hordes of Italian troops, waving white flags, sheets, or anything white they could get hold of. They wanted to surrender to him. Just like an alien today, stepping out of his UFO would demand, "Take me to you Leader", Syd demanded to be taken to their Commanding Officer, and was taken to him. He, in turn, surrendered the island to Syd. In Syd's words as I remember them, "I didn't know what to do. So I accepted. I radioed the situation back to Malta then asked the Italian commander, "What now?" He was very hospitable. We went to the mess and opened a few bottles of vino." News of the surrender spread like wildfire, first to his base in Malta, where his colleagues gave him the title, "King of Lampedusa", a title which spread, along with his story throughout the Desert Air Force with which I was flying. It was a month later, in July 1943 that I first met Syd. By now he was flying Air Sea Rescue Walruses, was with the ASR flight at Benghazi which served my Wellington Squadron.

If you Google *King of Lampedusa* you will find close to 20 versions of Syd's story, each slightly different, but all with the same theme. The official USAAF site for instance, emphasises the need to capture Lampedusa and Pantelleria, before invading Sicily. It states Lampedusa's surrender was on June 13, 1943, when British troops formalized the surrender, rather than June 10th when Syd actually accepted the surrender. The web site does however add a comment; "that island officials had already surrendered Lampedusa and its 4,600 troops to an RAF sergeant pilot who'd landed on the airfield with engine trouble on June 10." Incidentally, Allied forces landed on Pantelleria, on June 11th and the military governor surrendered the island and its 12,000 troops to the 1st British Infantry Division. "The only Allied casualty among the invading troops was a British infantryman who was nipped by a local donkey." This, in my opinion still leaves Syd as the

first. While my Air Force buddy deserves the credit, in all fairness to other units, I should mention that a RN destroyer HMS Penelope shelled Lampedusa up to June 10th; Wellington bombers (including Wimpys from 3 RCAF squadrons, 420, 424, and 425 transferred temporarily from 6 Group in the UK) plus some American B-25's carried out 450 sorties up until Syd's landing. Still, I believe all honour is due to the KING - He was the First.

The story of Syd's adventure continued to spread, and when word reached the Jewish community in London, a Jewish playwright, S.J. Harendorg, wrote a musical version for the Yiddish theatre in Whitechapel. The musical comedy, called, "The King of Lampedusa" was based on Sydney Cohen's true story. It ran at the Grand Palais for six months from December 1943 to June 1944, with over 200 performances making it the longest running Yiddish play in London. Its success reached the ears of William Joyce, known as Lord Haw-Haw. The British traitor in his nightly broadcast from Berlin said, "The Yids at the Grand Palais should not be laughing for much longer at the ridiculous play "The King of Lampedusa" because they are earmarked for a visit from the Luftwaffe". What a terrific plug for the show! They played for six months despite black-outs and occasional bombing raids. But in June 1944 the V1 Doodle-Bugs, the German flying bombs came crashing down on the East End of London and they had to take the play off and close the theatre."

Syd's story lives on. A book was published in 2003, in Yiddish and in English about "The King of Lampedusa". One report says that Syd saw a small version of it in Haifa. I doubt that. Our paths frequently crossed, including several times in and around Haifa. Sadly, he was killed in a plane crash just before returning to the UK. When a King dies, it is proclaimed, "The King is Dead. Long Live The King!" This coming May, we will observe the 70th Anniversary of VE Day and the Surrender of all Axis forces in Europe. Please take a moment at that time to think of my good friend, Sydney Cohen. Long Live the memory of The King of Lampedusa; the young Sergeant Pilot who accepted the first Axis Surrender to the Western Allies in Europe, 8 square miles and 4,600 troops, a surrender which was cemented by drinking lots of the Italians' own vino with their garrison's Commanding Officer.

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