

A flying Springbok of wartime British skies: A.G. ‘Sailor’ Malan

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This article, an expanded version of a 2008 public lecture, explores the life and times of Adolph Gysbert ‘Sailor’ Malan, a South African who rose to prominence as a combatant in the 1940 Battle of Britain and who, after his post-war return to the Union, became a notable personality in liberal reform politics. A classic Anglo-Afrikaner empire loyalist or ‘King’s Afrikaner’, Malan became ‘Sailor’ through his interwar merchant marine service, joining the Royal Air Force in the later 1930s. An exceptional fighter pilot, his wartime role as an RAF ace in defending Britain turned him into a national hero, a migrating loyal Springbok who had sprung selflessly to the defence of Great Britain. Subsequently, as an ex-serviceman, Malan drew on his wartime sensibilities and beliefs to return to political battle in his home country, in opposition to post-1948 Afrikaner nationalism and its apartheid policies. The mini-biography of Sailor Malan analyses several key life-story elements, including his seafaring apprenticeship, British wartime identity and combat experience, and troubled relationship with post-1945 South Africa as a gradualist liberal.

In his recent survey of the British Empire during World War Two, Ashley Jackson notes that ‘many South Africans served in the RAF’.¹ By far the most prominent of those starred in versions of a story, possibly apocryphal, about the Battle of Britain. Related by the late Conservative MPs Alan Clark and Julian Critchley, it concerned a tour of several snooty southern English girls’ schools, like Cheltenham and Sherborne, by three fighter pilots shortly after the end of the war. To illustrate Britain’s victory as the achievement of its united empire, the decorated airmen were a Briton, a New Zealander and a South African. At one point during their school assembly talks, an ace pilot began to describe a thrilling combat ‘show’ over the English Channel:

‘really, there was simply no time even to feel scared. I had two of those fuckers coming up on my tail, one fucker was coming up at me from the left, and then I spotted two more fuckers a few hundred feet above me, just waiting for their chance...’. At this moment, an increasingly agitated headmistress stood up and interrupted the guest speaker. ‘Girls,

1 A. Jackson, *The British Empire and the Second World War* (London: Hambledon Continuum, 2006): 241.

as some of you may not know this, Group Captain Malan is referring to a common type of German aeroplane, called the Focker'. To which a bemused Sailor Malan retorted: 'Madam, I don't know anything about that. All I can tell you and your girls is that those bloody fuckers were flying Messerschmitts.'²

I first heard of Sailor Malan when I was growing up as a schoolboy in Cape Town in the 1960s. Then, when an older generation of people in the community in which I lived were not grumbling about apartheid, they often referred to the times through which we were living either as after Jan Smuts or after the war. Of the two, it was the war which was more imaginatively rewarding. Before girls became a terminal attraction in late puberty, it provided more sober diversions to set an adolescent pulse racing. Consumed by images of Britain's waging of war, for several years I subscribed to weekly British boys' comics like *Hotspur*, *Hurricane*, *Lion* and *Valiant*. There, Battler Britton and Rockfist Rogan, 1940s combat heroes with biceps bigger than Bombay, made sure that any hour would be Britain's finest. In my bedroom, I glued together Airfix models of Hawker Hurricanes and Messerschmitt 109s, Supermarine Spitfires and Focke-Wulf 190s. Blankets were spread out as Essex, Kent and Sussex, while a splashy iron tub in the backyard was the English Channel. And, deep through the quietness of those dark Wynberg nights, a painted plastic and cotton thread version of the Battle of Britain dangled from the ceiling. In contrast to the precarious state of South Africa's electricity grid in the twenty-first century, those were the years in which one needed a blanket over one's head to experience a blackout.

Then, with advancing adolescence, that game was up. Inevitably, grounded De Havilland Mosquitoes and Junkers 87s were traded for singles by the Beatles and Sandie Shaw. Aerial dogfights, operational ceilings, the deficiencies of the .303 Browning gun and victory rolls, once all of animating interest, disappeared from view. When it came to smouldering, now it was teenage looks rather than downed Dornier and Heinkel bombers.

For all that, though, there were still things out in 1960s South Africa that were enthralling, poignant or otherwise evocative of that epic Anglo-German battle of the summer of 1940. One fixture was the heart-stopping sight of a cannibalised Spitfire on display in a Cape Town wrecker's yard in lower Salt River, *Barnett's Crash, Smash and Flash* if personal memory still serves. Quite unexpectedly, a salvaged thread from a Cape Town Spitfire put in a surprising show in 2008. Elodie Hainard, a Swiss history student at the University of Cape Town, was driving a locally-restored 1950s Austin; built in an era before seatbelts, its driver was having to make do by strapping into a Spitfire cockpit harness. Appropriately enough, the owner of this bit of combative British heritage is also a French-speaking national archer, flat-eyed accurate in front of a target.

2 A. Clark, *Diaries* (London: Phoenix, 1994): 224-25; J. Critchley, *A Bag of Boiled Sweets* (London: Faber and Faber, 1994):25.



Figure 1: Elodie Hainard: Swiss Spitfire Miss, 2009 (author)

Another more distant prospect from the wartime past was provided by family memories of the protest activities of liberal white ex-servicemen who had been appalled by their country's apartheid turn in 1948. Some veterans had even taken to the streets to protest against hardening racial discrimination. The most prominent personality among them was a South African Battle of Britain ace, Sailor Malan. Naturally, I already knew of him as a dashing man of action, like Squadron Leader Robert Stanford Tuck or Wing Commander Douglas Bader.³ Now, intriguingly, he appeared to be more, not merely a war hero, but an individual of decency and conscience who had stuck out his neck in the cause of common rights and freedoms.

A third encounter was the city's bustling Grand Parade. In later high school years I had had a Saturday job selling books for Cranfords booksellers of Long Street, which had a stall on the Parade that flogged thrillers so cheap and nasty that they would have made James Hadley Chase squirm. Ordinarily, that employer would have been remembered entirely for his tight-fistedness. But he lives in memory also for his engrossing, first-hand stories of the Springbok Legion and of Torch Commando rallies flickering on the Parade. And there,

3 As presented in his earlier biographies: O. Walker, *Sailor Malan: A Biography* (London: Cassell, 1953); N.L.R. Franks, *Sky Tiger: The Story of Group Captain 'Sailor' Malan, DSO* (London: Kimber, 1980).

once again, these featured the plucky figure of Malan, back from Biggin Hill Royal Air Force station.

A fourth and final earlier encounter with this most audacious of Springbok warriors was in the cinema or, as it was back then, the bioscope. Guy Hamilton's spectacular 1969 epic, *Battle of Britain*, featured a square-jawed, no-nonsense fighter pilot called Squadron Leader Skipper. Confident, courageous, and contemptuously impatient of flying fools, he was played by the late American actor Robert Shaw. Making the best use of his set jaw, wavy blond hair and flat, blue-eyed stare, Shaw for once acted out of his socks, embodying a real-life Battle of Britain personality in a forceful cameo role. The seafaring connotation of his 'skipper' character in a white turtle-neck sweater was not incidental. For Squadron Leader Skipper's bearing and conviction represented implicitly the identity of the commander of 74 Squadron in August 1940, Sailor Malan, a leader hard on himself and hard on his pilots.

Hamilton's *Battle of Britain*, like all war films, to say nothing of very many war histories, had its fair share of cardboard mythologies. But in its fictive recreation of real historical character, like Robert Shaw's Sailor Malan, or Trevor Howard's Air Vice-Marshal Sir Keith Park, it was a well-embroidered contribution to a teasing dialogue between the living and the dead. And it is surely that effort to get some credible measure of the past in close-up in the present which constitutes the really imaginative context of history. This is especially so when it comes to the tricky business of constructing a balance sheet of a life of some historical significance. How, then, does one not only do justice to A.G. 'Sailor' Malan, but also take his measure as an enduring figure in the Anglo-South African world of the twentieth century?

Some large part of the answer, perhaps, is provided simply by the universally layered nature of biography, as David Cannadine has stressed so elegantly in the case of Cecil Rhodes.⁴ Like Rhodes or Smuts, those much fatter local egos of the British imperial age, Sailor Malan was made up of various lives, or generated different versions of his life. Each of these was individually very striking. Collectively, they all added up to a remarkably vivid South African life, both domestic and exported.

One was the archetypal Afrikaner youth from rural Wellington in the Western Cape, easy astride horses and beady-eyed accurate with shotguns. Like several other of the RAF's most lethal pilots, such as Roland Beaumont, Paul Richey, or the New Zealander Alan Deere, an earlier youthful apprenticeship in hunting and fishing pursuits meant that a dry air of effortless superiority in aiming was never likely to be clouded by shooting himself in the foot. Indeed, Malan attributed much of his bull's-eye effectiveness to having slept out with shotguns. Unlike most other green flyers of the later 1930s, by then he had little need of clay pigeon shooting practice at Tangmere. His air firing practice often consisted of careering around the perimeter hedges of airfields in an open-topped

4 D. Cannadine, *History in Our Time* (London: Penguin, 2000): 208-15.

car, downing small game with a double-barrel gun. At this Malan was, according to an experienced fellow pilot, 'very hot'.⁵ With few rivals in clinical shooting skills, he was a keen hunter of buck and rabbit on the ground well before he became a cold hunter of men in the air, an assailant of ice-grey, calculating feline intelligence, sculpted seemingly from the purest testosterone.

A further Adolph Gysbert Malan was, by contrast, sensitive, wounded and put upon, surviving beneath a crust of stoic endurance. At the age of fourteen he was bundled off to maritime college on board the training ship *General Botha*, an establishment with a masculine drill regime that made Sparta look a place for milksops. For its white sea cadets, it provided character-building Christian seamanship of a most muscular kind, with institutionalised bullying and ferocious, almost sadistic, discipline. The punishment merely for smoking was a heavy flogging in public, for which victims were checked medically for fitness, the feared 'heart and bum check', before being stripped and tied down spread-eagled to receive their lashes.⁶ Malan himself witnessed the flogging of a senior cadet or Old Salt, whom he later described as 'a huge chap ... It was quite a shock to see him break down. Later on, I understood why.'⁷

In this strenuous making of a merchant marine 'Sailor', the innocent cadet from a Wellington farm in some ways ran true to an eighteenth-century fictional type in the writing of Herman Melville, incidentally also of Dutch-Anglo descent. Here, the literary analogy is to the handsome and resigned sailor, Billy Budd, a 'natural' country wanderer. In Melville's haunting depiction, his bitter experience of the relentless chains of ship discipline in the British Navy of the 1790s is that 'of a young horse fresh from the pasture, suddenly inhaling a vile whiff from some chemical factory'.⁸

Malan's understanding of the mental limits of what could be borne was a consequence of his having been subsequently whipped himself. According to his early biographer of the 1950s, he was 'never more emotionally stirred than when he recalled the ceremony of being tied down and thrashed'.⁹ That lacerating episode of pain and humiliation may well have helped to mould a later manner when resisting another brutal invasion: impassive, laconic, a flesh and blood fuselage with an armour-plating of steady self-control. Not for nothing did Malan invariably spurn efforts in later years to get him to join in the notorious horseplay of RAF squadron initiation rites.

Thirdly, there was a family Malan, or Sailor Malan as destiny's child of a particular Afrikaner-Anglo landed family pedigree. With an ample place for their French Huguenot ancestral bloodline, the decent civilities of the Wellington Malans encompassed instinctive loyalty to the British Crown. In such affinities, the upbringing of A.G. Malan was a world away from that of Cape Malans of an Afrikaner nationalist stripe. The most prominent political fruit of their Riebeeck

5 *The Times*, 29 May 1940; I. ('Taffy') Jones, *Tiger Squadron The Story of 74 Squadron RAF in Two World Wars* (London: W.H. Allen, 1954): 192..

6 F.C. Hartley, 'Carry on Mr Chapman', *Botha Watches: 50th Anniversary Edition Magazine of the South African Merchant Navy Academy, General Botha*, 1971: 47.

7 Quoted in P. Bishop, *Fighter Boys: Saving Britain, 1940* (London: HarperPerennial, 2004):109.

8 H. Melville, *Billy Budd* (New York:Pantheon, 1966): 45.

9 Walker: 41.



Figure 2: A.G. Malan, Debonair Air Warrior, 1940s (RAF Archives, London)

Kasteel branch in the Swartland locality of the Western Cape was, of course, D.F. Malan, South Africa's first National Party prime minister, who once gloriously described the 'enemy' as 'the non-white' and 'the Briton'.¹⁰ Unlike Daniel Francois, Adolph Gysbert was loyal to Crown and the Mother Country, a Malan perfectly happy to break bread with Britons, settling down in England in 1935 as an ex-merchant navy officer and applying for a short-service airforce commission the following year. By then he had had his fill of the sea. And the 1930s were exhilaratingly air-minded for dreamy younger men, even back in his own country.¹¹

By then, Malan had also identified his own kind of enemy. It was European. In the 1930s, voyages with the Union Castle steamship line had been carrying him regularly to Hamburg and Kiel. There, brusque bar encounters with German sailors and disquieting exchanges with harbour officials had convinced him that war was brewing. In that eventuality, for a thoroughly anglicised Sailor Malan there was no question of where loyal duty lay. Whether it was being voiced in Britain or by Afrikaner opinion in the Union, he had no truck with 'sordid, treacherous' talk of appeasement, of trying to placate Hitler to prevent a ruinous war.¹² That pre-war pugnacity would also come to enjoy a broader loyalist family resonance, as a collective warring identity. In these terms, the existence and

10 *Die Volksblad*, 20 Junie 1947.

11 P. Fritzsche, *A Nation of Fliers: German Aviation and the Popular Imagination* (London: Harvard University Press, 1992), 1-6; A. Grundlingh, "'The King's Afrikaners': Enlistment and Ethnic Identity in the Union of South Africa's Defence Forces in the Second World War, 1939-45', *Journal of African History*, 40, 3 (1999): 355-57.

12 G. Wellum (ex-RAF fighter pilot), personal recollection, communicated to author, February 2007.

accomplishments of ‘Bull’ Malan, brother of the more famous Sailor, ought not to be overlooked. This other sturdy Malan airman participated in the very first amphibious invasion of the Second World War, the South African invasion of Madagascar in 1942.¹³

Lastly, there was a fourth Sailor Malan figure, the celebrated wartime South African pilot who taxied first into parliamentary and then extra-parliamentary politics after returning to his native country shortly after the end of the war. Following a short stint of humdrum instruction duties at the RAF Staff College, his relish for the challenge of the air was spent. As with some other crack wartime pilots, he found the end of front-line flying a deflating experience.¹⁴ Once back in South Africa, Malan fell in with the MP for Kimberley, a fairly wealthy and influential man. He did well working for the Anglo American mining heir, serving as an effective constituency political agent who easily held Harry Oppenheimer’s ear and earned his admiration for energetic and skilful service. In due course, it brought Sailor Malan a hefty dividend. His generous capitalist benefactor rewarded him with an enormous pastoral farm in the northern Cape, on which sheep supplanted Spitfires as prime living assets.

Socially, ‘Sailor’ evidently delighted in being at the centre of things in the diamond town, both a charming and handsome farmer figure and family man, and a fair and liberal-minded personality who commanded the respect and affection of local society around him in the moneyed lair of the Kimberley Club. There can be little doubt that, in a way, the hunting, gaming and other ceremonials of good living in white Africa would have done something to bring back the taste of an earlier exhilarating stage of his eventful life. Then, it had been a European Britain in the earlier 1940s, when Malan’s Biggin Hill fighter sector was renowned for throwing boisterous parties and hunt balls and putting on cabaret. That round included what *The Tatler and Bystander* of June 1943 called ‘the most wizard wartime party ever’, the lavish ‘Thousand’ party held at London’s Grosvenor House Hotel. In gossip-column guise as ‘War Ace throws a Party’, its genial host, Group Captain Malan, was shown ‘in his accustomed manner’, namely, ‘glass in hand’, and with ‘an alluring woman guest’ dangling on his arm.¹⁵

Inevitably, though, the dazzle of life in the thick of an English Kimberley society would all have been something of an anti-climax after the titanic extremities of the Battle of Britain. There, Malan’s conspicuous service had helped to ensure the survival of the democratic European civilisation to which he felt so fiercely attached, an outcome which represented ‘one of the key moral moments of the war’, as Richard Overy has put it.¹⁶ It left its liberalising mark on Malan, as on a fair number of other white soldiering comrades of the Union’s 1939–45 war effort.

If the exact content of that progressive 1940s sentiment remained somewhat diffuse, in general terms it conveyed belief in the creation of a more fair and more

13 J.A. Clayton, ‘The South African Air Force in the Madagascar Campaign, 1942’, *SA Military History Journal*, 9, 2 (1992): 6.

14 Bishop: 404.

15 *The Tatler and Bystander*, 16 June 1943: 28.

16 R. Overy, *The Battle* (London: Penguin, 2000): 120.



Figure 3: Mess Wall Marauder: Official Portrait, Group Captain A.G. Malan, 1940s (RAF Archives)

inclusive society, developing on the basis of some liberal softening of the segregationist racial order.¹⁷ To congeal within the ranks of murmuring and uneasy returned war veterans, it required a trigger. That was an apartheid National Party and it was soon pulled by its 1948 electoral victory. Naturally, Malan was aghast. His country, he wrote to a former British pilot with whom he had once flown, was now in danger of ‘losing its ticket’ to remaining in ‘the company of the civilised nations of our world’, the ‘humane’ world of ‘decent values’ that had prevailed in 1945.¹⁸

The lines were drawn. Banding together with other like-minded ex-servicemen and a rearguard of female supporters in the mass Torch Commando, in the 1950s Malan wielded his moral credentials in a doomed extra-parliamentary defence of inherited constitutionalism and the old constitutional concession of Coloured franchise rights against the manipulations of an apartheid state bent on extinguishing such entitlement.¹⁹ At the forefront of a street campaign for civil rights conducted under guttering lights when it was dark enough for parliament to notice protesters assembled outside, the glowing commandos produced their moment of liberal illumination. But, unlike Malan’s days of blackout night-flying, it did not end in the relief of emergence from darkness into light.

17 For recent interpretation, see S. Dubow and A. Jeeves, eds., *South Africa's 1940s: Worlds of Possibilities* (Cape Town, 2005); Jeeves, ‘South Africa in the 1940s: Post-War Reconstruction and the Onset of Apartheid’, *South African Historical Journal*, 50 (2004): 1-11.

18 Royal Air Force Archives (RAFA), Hendon, London, Scrapbooks, AC72/1/7/7/4, S. Malan to C. Orde, 7 January 1949.

19 See N. Roos, *Ordinary Springboks: White Servicemen and Social Justice in South Africa, 1939-1961* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005)- 129-59.

Locally, it was, in its way, another stand by the few, if viewed suggestively against Winston Churchill's famous speech of August 1940. Then, incidentally, like other pilots on Fighter Command stations, Sailor Malan had turned the remark about 'so much owed by so many to so few' into a standing joke about his bloated mess bills. Now, the fate of the few was to be decisive defeat. Less clear is how the many viewed an unrealised debt.

That aside, however much the Torch Commando's campaigning may have languished, it did not stop the high mandarins of white liberalism, like Alan Paton, Margaret Ballinger and Donald Molteno, from persisting in regarding Sailor Malan as a powerful potential political ally. In June 1953, Leslie Rubin put pressure on Malan to join the Liberal Party. Keeping his distance warily, he at first used the heavy work demands of sheep farming as an excuse for not having the time to serve the party. When pressed for a commitment and 'to forget your sheep for a little while', he came clean, however.²⁰ Malan's reluctance was due to his gradualist conviction that the Liberals were going about things in the wrong way in making a fuss about franchise rights. 'The difficulty of selling it to the Europeans' was by no means the least of his reservations. What the country needed was planned evolution. In his view, as he told Rubin, 'more emphasis should be placed on economics and less on political rights. It is true that you are today dealing with the more educated Non-Europeans but your concern should be with the masses, to whom a full stomach and a secure life are more acceptable.'²¹ While 'quite prepared to accept eventual Non-European control' when that became inevitable, Malan's emphasis was on addressing 'poverty and starvation', with the 'primary emphasis' falling on 'material advancement', the centre of which should be 'very largely the economic advancement and housing of the African'.²²

In due course, Malan's political rumblings during this fluctuating decade subsided. He lived on beyond it but, cruelly, not for very long. At twenty-nine, he had been relatively old when he became a fighter pilot, 'an outstanding pilot' who was 'older than all of his colleagues and a married man', as Alan Deere recorded of his first meeting with him at Hornchurch airfield in Essex in 1938.²³ After the outbreak of war, understandably, the RAF discouraged its pilots from marrying. Even before then, Malan's senior experience was already valued in technical matters. By 1938, he had already acquired a reputation for his technical understanding of aircraft performance, and his advisory opinion was being sought after by Flying Boards concerned to iron out quirks in fighter design and behaviour.

After all this, the mature pilot died relatively young, succumbing to Parkinson's disease in 1963 when only in his early fifties. To be claimed by Parkinson's was a particularly grim irony for an individual much of whose life had been synonymous with absolute steadiness, unwavering accuracy and

20 Alan Paton Centre Archives (APCA), University of Kwazulu-Natal, Leslie Rubin Collection, PC10/1/1/1, L. Rubin to S. Malan, 21 June 1953.

21 APCA, PC10/2/2/1, S. Malan to L. Rubin, 10 November 1953; R. Vigne, *Liberals against Apartheid* (London: Macmillan, 1997): 68.

22 APCA, Liberal Party Collection, PC2/3/3/1, S. Malan to L. Rubin, 21 January 1955.

23 A.C. Deere, *Nine Lives: The Classic Autobiography of a Battle of Britain Pilot* (London: Hodder Paperbacks, 1959): 31.

assured control. *The Times* carried a major full-page obituary of this Battle of Britain South African. This was ‘a Boer’ who had been remembered with esteem and who had remained in the British gaze through the 1950s, partly through press coverage of his political stand and partly through BBC broadcast interviews which featured him as a reliable Dominion voice on home affairs, including such episodes as the Festival of Britain and the impact of the Crown.²⁴

The nationalist rulers of his country, by then a republic, barely registered the significance of his passing. It also said not a little of the character of the South African Air Force that it, too, turned a blind eye. Against that background, if there is, ultimately, a tragic sense to Sailor Malan’s life, some measure of it must lie surely in a sad contradiction. Against authoritarianism and extremism overseas, his cause had prevailed. At home, he failed, swatted aside by illiberal forces under the leading wing of a quite different kind of Malan.

So much, then, for seeing Sailor Malan as parts or versions of an exceptional life. In all of this, what is it that really defines his place in history? Or, to put it another way, what is the hub around which everything else turns? The obvious answer remains that raging battle which he waged almost seventy years ago. There, at one level, Malan’s step into war and to distinguished service in it can be summarised easily enough. Having joined the RAF around the mid-1930s, on completion of flying training he was posted to 74 Squadron, then still equipped with arthritically slow Hawker and Gloster biplanes, improved models of older design with which the RAF had been re-equipping in the early 1930s.²⁵

Early in 1939, Malan’s unit switched to Vickers Supermarine Spitfires, a fast, agile and technologically advanced monoplane fighter to which he took with gusto. After promotion to the rank of flight lieutenant, he rapidly became a flight commander. In May 1940, 74 ‘Tiger’ Squadron was in the middle of fighting over Dunkirk, inflicting losses on the enemy for which Malan was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross. In the lull between the Dunkirk evacuation and the Battle of Britain, he flew perilous night sorties, attacking Heinkel bombers. Feared by all pilots, the natural perils of night flying in pitch darkness were made worse by the design of the Spitfire. The plane had a Pinocchio-length nose which blotted out most forward vision from the cockpit. Even so consummately skilled an airman as Malan could have his bearings muddled by sensory deprivation. Once, operating over Essex, in a narrow squeak he almost flew straight into a house. This was not the only time that found him having ‘to pull up suddenly’.²⁶

In August 1940 Malan moved up to Squadron Leader and took command of 74 Squadron. His tally of enemy aircraft continued to rise, and by March 1941 it had reached fifteen enemy aircraft destroyed, six jointly destroyed, two presumed destroyed and seven damaged. Earlier, before the end of the Battle of Britain, he had already established a formidable reputation as a tactician of aerial combat. The more widely-spread flying formations practised by his squadron came eventually to be adopted as standard tactics by most Fighter Command units during

24 *The Times*, 18 September, 1963; British Library, London, BBC Sound Archive (BBCSA), HS/Malan/1/1/3, 1950-53.

25 D. Edgerton, *Warfare State: Britain, 1920-1970* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006): 43.

26 RAFA, Fighter Command Reports, FCCR/653/40, WC/1, Composite Report, A.G. Malan, 15 June 1940.



Figure 4: RAF No.74 (Tiger) Squadron badge



Figure 5: Battle of Britain Fighter Aces: Pose and Poise (RAF Archives)

From Top Left: Sqd/Ldr. A. G. Malan, D.S.O., D.F.C.; Sqd/Ldr. A. A. McKellar, D.F.C.; Sqd/Ldr. Max Aitken, D.F.C.; F/Lt. H. S. L. Dundas, D.F.C.; Sqd/Ldr. W. P. F. Treacy; F/O W. Urbanowicz; F/Lt. J. Cunningham; W/Cdr. John Peel, D.S.O., D.F.C.; F/Lt. B. E. Finucane, D.F.C.

1941. And his staccato style *Ten Rules of Air Fighting* was easily digested. With its classic injunctions never to ‘fly straight and level for more than 30 seconds in the combat area’, and to ‘fire short bursts of one to two seconds only’, this cat-sat-on-the-mat leaflet on survival in air combat was pressed on pilots throughout Fighter Command, quickly achieving ‘widespread fame’, with copies pinned to all ‘noticeboards in crew rooms and flight offices’.²⁷

Malan’s long ‘hour’ as a fighter ace saw him appointed commander of the Biggin Hill fighter wing in the first quarter of 1941. His final *score* – to use the cosy sporting vocabulary of deadly aerial combat – was twenty-seven aircraft destroyed, seven jointly destroyed, three presumed destroyed, and sixteen damaged. For Air Chief Marshal Sir Hugh Dowding, a terse and discriminating figure not given to gushing compliments, he was ‘one of the great assets of the Command – a fighter pilot who was not solely concerned with his own score, but as one whose first thoughts were for the efficiency of his squadron and the personal safety of his junior pilots’.²⁸ He was echoing well the views of those more junior who had been viewing Malan as ‘concerned’ and ‘considerate’ since the later 1930s.²⁹

27 J. Falconer, *Life as a Battle of Britain Pilot* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing 2007): 55.

28 *The Times*, 22 April 1941.

29 Deere: 31.



Figure 6: Fighter Boy: A.G. Malan before Flight, 1940 (RAF Archives)

In describing Malan as a major asset, Dowding knew what he was on about. Fighter Boys like Sailor Malan and other colonial supermen like Al Deere ‘were extraordinarily good for morale’, emerging ‘from the anonymity of their squadrons’ to find themselves ‘on the way to becoming national figures’,³⁰ faithful outer men of Empire who joined Britons in swarming into the core of national consciousness. With the crucial nature of their defensive role having been underlined forcefully by Churchill, the eminence of Fighter Command was widely recognised, especially its value for instilling in the population a sense of self-belief and staying power. Predictably, Malan was prominent among those who were lifted out of the restrained collectivity of their squadron identities and fashioned into famous individual figures, cocky and adored fighting personalities who were snapped sipping sherry with King George VI or waltzing around London ballrooms with actresses.³¹ It was the devil-may-care conceit of a modern imperial identity, and that of a metropolitan ‘insider’.

Before long, Biggin Hill became a centre of ‘aces’ for press and radio correspondents, with Malan turned into a major celebrity, as doggerel verse invited

30 Bishop: 228.

31 *The Tatler and Bystander*, 7 January 1941, 19; *Daily Mail*, 12 June 1943.

Daily Mail readers to cheer ‘Sailor Malan and his Merry Band Down to Biggin Hill’, Britain’s finest ‘Lads in the Air – They’re out for the Kill – Up they go from Biggin Hill’.³² A patriotic Afrikaner South African who had come over to risk all was assuredly something over which to drool. And, predictably, he was nudged towards newspaper photographers and radio microphones. In such publicity treatment, propaganda continued to present fighter pilots in the light-hearted, laid-back, phlegmatic public image that they had come to create for themselves. The BBC, for instance, put pressure repeatedly on Malan and other aces to make broadcasts in the form of racy radio ‘talks’, conjuring up the thrilling victories of the summer of 1940 in which Britain had not only withstood punishment but had struck back at its enemy, with ‘speed and power’ making it ‘rather warm for the Hun’.³³ Airmen were paid a small fee for this service, from which a tight-fisted Air Ministry always insisted on taking its cut. Their accounts of dogfights were scripted mostly by hack writers from the Ministry of Information who adopted a peculiar style, one part breathless Hollywood serial cliffhanger, the other British *Magnet* comics, all Billy Bunter and Greyfriars School.

Yet, there was a paradox to the heavy promotion of famous flying aces through the later years of the war. As their fame for saving Britain rose ever higher, in relative terms their actual military importance was declining steadily. By the end of 1940, the mythological ‘few’ were soon becoming rather more, if not quite yet the many. The acute pilot shortage had been eased, and aircraft supply was more secure.³⁴ Heavy German daylight raids had virtually stopped. Having ensured its own survival and done its job against the Luftwaffe, Fighter Command assumed essentially a secondary role. That entailed being pegged back to a little night fighting and escort flying in support of the British bomber offensive. In many respects, in the balance of the air Britain had gained a lasting edge.

Nonetheless, in print and radio treatment, Malan and other heroic flyers were keeping up the stock of an earlier, unique British battle in which loss would have been a national catastrophe. The first major battle in history to be fought entirely by aircraft, it did something to restore the notion of individual skill and bravery to war. Defending the skies in a Spitfire or Hurricane over Kent or the Channel, a young combatant could feel that he controlled his fate, or at least that he was able to influence it through alertness and quick judgement.³⁵ Watched from the ground by the awe-struck Southern English it was, of course, made into a famous myth of indebtedness in ‘the field of human conflict’ by their growling Prime Minister. In some other respects, the 1940 contest also amounted to one of the supreme ironies of modern industrial conflict. After the unremitting carnage of 1914–18, renewing the mythical romance of war in the imagination required an element like Sailor Malan in a lethally powerful machine. Although unglamorous in its industrial manner, his battle restored airborne glamour to a combat narrative of individual men as clean executioners.

32 *Daily Mail*, 17 January 1942.

33 BBCSA, WR/Malan/6/4/4, 12 June 1944.

34 Overy: 112–13.

35 S. Hynes, *A Soldier's Tale: Bearing Witness to Modern War* (London: Penguin, 1998): 93; see also, M. Paris, *Warrior Nation: Images of War in British Popular Culture, 1850-2000* (London: Reaktion Books, 2000): 206–207.

In that vein, it was also war as a backs-against-the-wall defence of the home against criminal interlopers, fought one against one, as in the *Iliad* or in the gladiatorial pits of Rome. Archetypal RAF voices interpreted that highly-charged environment and air of combat romance, in which solo jousting seemed to be putting in a knightly appearance in the machine age. In an accent often sounding more like public school barking than public school speaking, the British bulldog pilot would describe how he had chased down his quarry, a Jerry ‘rotter’, exclaiming, ‘I’ll teach you some manners, you Hun’, or ‘Well, Jerry, that’s what you get for being damn impudent’. In one of his own vintage pieces, Malan, too, nailed ‘a real ruffian of a blighter’, giving him ‘a thorough thumping’.³⁶ Thus described, incinerating adversaries in their cockpits when fuel ignited or sending them crashing into the ground or the sea at high speed became stern paternal punishment, the disciplinary equivalent of administering six of the best.

Writers such as the cultural historian Samuel Hynes attribute the blandness or understatement of fighter pilot expression to the ingrained reticence of an upper-class Englishness.³⁷ Sailor Malan himself, undoubtedly, did much to make that measured tone his own; as he declared of his ‘first show’, it turned into ‘a fair old scrap’. Having ended in his shooting down his first Heinkel bomber, ‘the release from tension was terrific, the thrill highly agreeable’.³⁸ ‘It was’, recalled a young pilot officer who had once flown under Malan’s wing command, ‘a great surprise to be told one day that Hitler (his RAF nickname), was actually a South African Boer. He always wore a little South Africa insignia on his shoulder, but I thought that it was just that he had lived there once. Really, I suppose we just assumed he came from some decent English-German family, what with a ropey name like that. Well, what I mean is, otherwise, Hitler was just like any normal chap I would’ve expected to see at Harrow.’³⁹

There may well be something to the idea that a strict kind of shire county Englishness, whether bred in the bone or swallowed by a chameleon colonial from South Africa’s Boland, could account for cool detachment from a draining drama of close-quarter destruction and death. Yet, a breezy treatment of deadly circumstances also had a serious intent: to lighten grim reality, to weaken the power of stomach-turning fear. As a commander, Malan was keenly aware of the danger to pilots of the taste of fear, of how nerves could drain away what for him were the prime qualities of a first-rate fighter pilot – cold intelligence, relentless aggression, the adrenalin rush of attack and the completion of the kill.

An airman who was unable to quash fear was next to useless and stood a good chance of getting himself killed very quickly. To win, Malan stressed, ‘he has to be cold ... he must have an aggressive nature ... He must at all times be an attacker ... He fights with his head not his heart. It is against the nature of a Spitfire to run away.’ As a machine, it ‘had no vices ... she was a perfect lady’, so that even when ‘your eyes were popping out of your head ... she would still

36 BBCSA, WR/Aitken/8/4/3, 9 August 1943.

37 Hynes: 90-91.

38 *The Tatler and Bystander*, 29 July 1941: 6.

39 G. Wellum, personal communication with author, February 2007.

answer to a touch'.⁴⁰ For Sailor Malan, as for numerous others, the Spitfire became more than a machine. Its allure lay in its capacity to fuse with pilots, who felt that they were not climbing into it but strapping it on or donning it as if it were clothing, 'it became part of you'.⁴¹ Cocooning its airman, Malan's plane became a mortal machine, a trusted combatant in its own right. In many tingling narratives of male combat flying, *that* plane was almost sexualised, stamped as the female subject of a honeyed love affair that demanded responsiveness and fidelity. Forty years later, as Patricia Hayes has suggested, jet fighter pilots in South Africa's Angolan 'Border War' were a continuation of this tradition, expressing a spirit of connection with their aircraft, machine-men in which one became 'the extension of the other'.⁴²

In what were dubbed 'line-shoots' for the Ministry of Information, several ace pilots regularly adopted the pose of a hunter. In Malan's case, that was an especially ruthless identity, rooted in folklore memory of an earlier, great colonial war. Then, British soldiers had been gunned down by the German Mausers of South Africa's Boer commando warriors, deadly marksmen and natural hunters. During the South African War of 1899–1902, those mounted republicans had been endowed with apocryphal qualities by nervous British newspapers and periodicals which portrayed them as tough countryside men with spooky powers of sight, possessing uncanny 'magnifying' eyes and 'miraculous' night vision.⁴³

Was Malan, surely, not one of those gifted Boers? *The Tatler and Bystander* certainly needed no convincing. A 1942 issue declared with mock relief that it was as well that he was now aiming at Dönitz instead of Dowding, for he had a fearsome colonial fighting line.⁴⁴ Here, and elsewhere in 1940, 'Sailor' was soon being admired for his exceptional eyesight, ease in drawing a bead upon a fleeing quarry, and was applauded for his ability to 'spot a fly on the Great Wall of China, at five miles'.⁴⁵ As a South African, he had brought the cunning, tenacity, and satisfaction of prime hunting skills from the African veld to air battle over the Home Counties and the English Channel. When closing in on his Düsseldorf prey, what he was actually doing was swapping bok for the Boche, or hartebeest for the Hun.

In that respect, Malan's description by one London journalist as the South African Springbok who had become a British Lion was not too wide of the mark.⁴⁶ For one thing, his rock-like loyalist impact on the mood of 1940s Britain was not without South African antecedents. Some of that gain was obvious. In imperial political unity after Union, there was Jan Smuts, whose fate it would be to be loved more in Lambeth than in Lichtenburg. When it came to selfless galantry overseas, there was the volunteer First World War pilot Captain Andrew

40 *The Tatler and Bystander*, 26 August 1940, 12; J. Glancey, *Spitfire: The Biography* (London: Atlantic Books, 2006): 63.

41 L. McKinstry, *Spitfire: Portrait of a Legend* (London: John Murray, 2007): 105; M. Arthur, *Forgotten Voices of the Second World War* (London: Ebury, 2004): 76.

42 P. Hayes, 'Vision and Violence: Photographies of War in Southern Angola and Northern Namibia', *Kronos*, 27 (2001): 149.

43 Nasson, *The South African War, 1899-1902* (London: Arnold, 1999): 254.

44 *The Tatler and Bystander*, 13 March 1942: 15.

45 *Daily Mail*, 25 September 1940.

46 *The Times*, 22 October 1940.

Beauchamp-Proctor, whose exploits in the Royal Flying Corps had earned him the Victoria Cross. Perhaps even more telling were those ordinary, rough-diamond Boers who had let bygones be bygones and had warmed up their attitudes. In these terms, an early Malan prototype was the Orange Free State journalist Charles Fichardt, who had once led a southern Boer commando and had fought the British at Paardeberg. With old enmities buried, he spoke for England at the 1909 Imperial Press Conference, with the assurance that ‘if ever need arises, there will speak for England on the wild and lonely veldt the unerring rifle of the Boer’.⁴⁷

Similarly, there were literary allusions which, for the earlier twentieth-century reading public, would by no means have been obscure. Take the famous thriller *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, which sold tens of thousands of copies. Its author, John Buchan, a household name by the time of the First World War, was highly partial to an imperial South Africa and its select band of clean-living Afrikaner patriots. In one of the many desperate Scottish moments in *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, ‘a stout Afrikaner pony’ was exactly the kind of inventive prop needed to help in averting the collapse of British civilisation. Buchan’s wartime yarn, *Greenmantle*, was, if anything, even more precise and prescient. Prominent among the good who rally to the defence of the British Empire against a villainous German plot to topple it was the healthy and virtuous Boer warrior of the open air, the pilot hero.⁴⁸

As a later flyer of that mould, in combat style Adolph Malan came close to mutating into Captain James Bigglesworth, the fictional Biggles character created by W.E. Johns in the 1930s. Like that gruff romantic hero of the Biggles stories, he cultivated a terse and laconic manner in the best sports tradition of the English country gentleman. Squadron sorties were counted as Hun hunts, at times there was some grudging respect for an audacious and elusive adversary, and German aircraft that were brought down made up a personal ‘bag’ or ‘tally’, as if ‘the kill’ were really pheasant or grouse. Still, the granite stiff upper-lip is an old cultural attribute of the English at bay, and scarcely original in the circumstances of their country’s numerous wars, imperial or otherwise. Rather, there may be no less telling a factor to consider. Many invading airmen tumbled towards their end encased in a disintegrating machine, sparing an ecstatic RAF pilot any gruesome reality beyond a corkscrew of smoke and flame. In effect, the air war dead were invisible.⁴⁹ There were no corpses over which to stumble. There were no maggots to turn the stomach. Scrambling servicemen smoked cigarettes to relax, not because they needed to shield their noses from the stench of charred flesh.

Seeing not just your enemy but your own comrades die, frequently at close quarters, was part of the average infantryman’s experience. For Malan and his pilots, dead bodies, whether of foe or friend, were curiously absent from their war, unseen and muffled by the shroud of distance. Granted, on occasions, a doomed fellow pilot’s radio telephone would be left switched on, and his despair-

47 A.S. Thompson, *Imperial Britain: The Empire in British Politics, c.1880-1932* (Harlow: Longman, 2000) 30.

48 J. Buchan, *The Thirty-Nine Steps* (Harlow Thomas Nelson, 1982 ed.): 99; *Greenmantle* (London: Longman Green, 1916): 184.

49 Hynes: 94.

ing screams and curses could chill your headphones. Yet, even then, it was a fleeting tremor of horror. Death usually occurred well away from a home base, and dealing with a body, or whatever bits of it were left, was the responsibility of others. Again, unlike their infantry counterparts, it was not routine for pilots to have to form burial parties. Accordingly, the experience of someone such as Peter Townsend was by no means untypical. In pre-war flight training, Townsend certainly witnessed fatal airfield accidents, including one in which a flyer burned to death in front of his eyes. Yet, in his entire wartime RAF service, he never once saw a single corpse.⁵⁰

Like the best fighter pilots, Malan was essentially a duelling industrial engine – cool, precise, detached, his overriding emotion that of satisfaction at a telling hit in which ‘everything I had learned had come right’.⁵¹ That included getting in very close, to make sure of a kill. In Fighter Command, the recommended range for opening fire was 400 yards. For Malan, it was usually a more intense and more lethal 250 yards. Sometimes it was less, an edgy 150 or even 100 yards. Indeed, in one incident over Dunkirk in May 1940, being ‘very short of petrol’ he ‘couldn’t afford a long chase’, and therefore ‘closed rather rapidly’, racing in head-on and gunning at a nerveless 50 yards.⁵² In another such encounter, five months later, Malan reported that he had ‘blacked out for 5 seconds’ because of the tightness of his turn across the bow of a Heinkel bomber before firing in bursts at 100 yards and 50 yards.⁵³ This zest for break-neck attacks continued to be displayed well after the end of the Battle of Britain. Over France during May 1941, for instance, when diving on Messerschmitt fighters, Malan ‘had to pull up suddenly to avoid a collision’.⁵⁴ For the enemy, death at the hands of the ‘Springbok Spitfire Killer’ was the death of a plane, its occupants as incidental as they were inaudible. In its aftermath, ‘you knew Sailor would be rubbing his hands, a bloody hard and cold pilot. He just hated the Germans, always wanted to make a mess of them.’⁵⁵

At the same time, it would be misleading to portray the commander of 74 Squadron as entirely imperturbable, or wholly emptied of feeling or reflection. On one occasion, his concern for a junior pilot who had been hit in combat over the French coast led him to follow the stricken fighter and to provide cover for a beach landing near Dunkirk, despite his own aircraft being low on petrol and short of ammunition. Even his pathological dislike of Germans could be tempered by a patronising pity for enemy airmen viewed as lacking in courage. Snorting at a German pilot who broke away from his formation during an attack and turned tail, Malan did not take up pursuit, surmising that ‘he seemed more concerned with getting away than with helping his pals, so I concluded that he was either badly damaged or badly frightened, or quite possibly both’.⁵⁶ Certainly, Malan was not a dehumanised Danny Kaye screen character, so memorable as the satirised, self-

50 Bishop, 208.

51 Quoted in McKinstry: 199.

52 RAFA, FCCR (74) 653/40, A.G. Malan, 27 May 1940.

53 RAFA, FCCR/653/40, A.G. Malan, 11 September 1940.

54 RAFA, FCCR/653/40, A.G. Malan, Intelligence Patrol Report, 27 October 1940.

55 Interview, A. McCrae (ex-RN Fleet Air Arm pilot), May 2008.

56 RAFA, FCCR (74) 1041/40, A.G. Malan, Intelligence Patrol Report, 15 November 1940.

contained RAF pilot parodied in the 1947 *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty*. Ground down by exhaustion, fatigue, and the dispiriting loss of comrades, one bleak night in September 1940 he buckled. Overwhelmed by despondency, he later confessed to a fellow Biggin Hill pilot, he locked himself away in his room and cried.⁵⁷

Roughly a year earlier, there had been a different kind of crisis with far-reaching consequences. Just three days after the declaration of war in September 1939, Spitfires were scrambled from the Tiger Squadron base at Hornchurch to deal with what was judged to be hostile aircraft crossing the Essex coast and heading for London. Malan's flight section led the charge, with its 'hard' and 'highly skilled' leader well out in front.⁵⁸ The unidentified planes were spotted in the distance and Malan immediately signalled 'Tally-ho' for an attack. It was swift and successful. Two of the planes were shot down and one of the pilots was killed. However, they turned out to have been RAF Hurricanes.

At the very moment of ambush, Malan had a panicky realisation that a mistake had been made and had blurted out a change of orders. But it came too late for two of his novice pilots, bristling to get into their first combat. Lunging in, they seem not to have heard his countermanding instructions, nor to have spotted the red, white and blue roundels on the targets of their fire. On landing, Flight Sergeant Paddy Byrne and Pilot Officer John Freeborn found themselves in hot water. Freeborn, a mere eighteen years old at the time, was personally appalled by this disastrous blunder. He and a just-qualified Flight Sergeant had inadvertently destroyed RAF machines and had killed one of their own. He tried immediately to confront his impulsive commander. But, as he discovered, Malan was 'in quite a state. In fact, he had done a bunk completely. Never saw him for some time.'⁵⁹ An angry and petrified Freeborn was arrested along with Byrne and arraigned for court martial. With Malan appearing for the prosecution, it was bound to be a bitter business. At the proceedings, Malan alleged that Freeborn had been irresponsible, impetuous, and had not taken proper heed of vital communications. For his part, Freeborn was adamant that he had never heard the last-second order to break off the attack. In the event, the tribunal on what became known, notoriously, as 'The Battle of Barking Creek' accepted the defence case of confusion and the pilots were acquitted. Given the muddle of inexperience on 6 September, no blame was apportioned.

Freeborn felt, however, that he had been betrayed by a 'ruthless and ego-driven' commander who had rounded on him in order to save his own skin. Inevitably, the episode soured things, creating a festering legacy of coolness and mild distrust within 74 Squadron. 'From then on', Freeborn remarked, 'Malan and I never got on again.'⁶⁰ Tensions at the squadron base were often felt by incoming pilots – when on the ground, somehow, there was something in the air. For the New Zealander Bob Spurdle, who joined during the Battle, Malan's force

57 J. Levine, *Forgotten Voices of the Blitz and the Battle of Britain* (London: Ebury, 2006): 84; also Bishop: 315.

58 McKinstry: 137-38.

59 Quoted in Bishop: 107.

60 Quoted in Bishop:108; see also, McKinstry: 138; B. Cossey, *A Tiger's Tale* (Hailsham: J&KH Publishing, 2002):98.

always combined sinuously in airborne combat. Yet, despite its sheer 'élan in the air', it was 'a curiously divided and unhappy unit on the ground'.⁶¹

For all that, the existence of prickly personal divisions could not be laid entirely at the commanding officer's door. The RAF, after all, had its fair portion of condescending, petty snobberies. These included mild ridiculing of 'colonial Johnnies', the outsiders from beyond Europe who so conspicuously colonised Britain's Spitfires and Hurricanes. Tiger Squadron, of course, had a dominating 'colonial Johnny' in command. 'With Malan, we would have flown anywhere against anything', wrote an admiring Spurdle.⁶² Still, he felt that the squadron carried a curse. In part, it was the supercilious presence of 'Auxiliary Airforce Types', former wealthy weekend amateur flyers who showed off by affecting longer than regulation hair, and who wore bright red socks with their uniform or natty, tailored overalls. To be sure, 'they knew how to fight'. But they had an unfortunate 'tendency to treat menials and pilot officers as they must have treated fags at their public schools'.⁶³ It was all a reminder that even in the extremities of total war, unity against a common enemy has rarely ever been complete.

By contrast, *overseas* men like Malan seem to have had a unity of purpose and a sacrificial motivation in enlisting for RAF service. To be sure, the outbreak of European war was seductive for some independent, younger, middle-class men in various corners of Britain's imperial world. It promised incandescent action, the individual chance to be where danger was, and to do something there through the desire to fly. But there was also a far more sober pull for those who had a customary tie with Britain. It was something felt by the roughly three hundred New Zealanders, Australians, Canadians, South Africans and Rhodesians who flew in Fighter Command during the battle crisis of the summer of 1940. That was a clear, even simple, sense of moral duty or of moral obligation to go to war in defence of the home country or Mother Country. It was the loyal voice of Adolph Malan on the BBC, a volunteer 'inspired by a sense of duty to serve Britain and to fight on to save it from being conquered by an uncivilised dictatorship'.⁶⁴

In that sense, it is perhaps arguable that some overseas airmen were gripped far more by a sense of international crisis and by informed political conviction than ordinary British school-leavers who had applied for RAF Short Service Commissions in the later 1930s in order to learn to fly before 'going up' to Oxford or Cambridge. Geoffrey Wellum, for example, recalls being 'happy' as England was 'a peaceful place' in which he was 'only vaguely aware' that the country 'was rearming'. While a couple of school friends 'seemed to think there might well be a war', at his own Air Ministry interview in March 1939 he admits that he had not 'given much thought to it at all'.⁶⁵

Here, even among clear-eyed Dominion entrants, Malan stood out for his conscientious attachment to the cause of Britain. A New Zealander like the

61 Quoted in D. Robinson, *Invasion, 1940: The Truth about the Battle of Britain* (London: Robinson, 2006): 151.

62 RAFA, AC72/1/7/7/4, SO Book 125, R. Spurdle note January 1942.

63 Quoted in Bishop: 36.

64 BBCSA, WR/Malan/1/4/1, 10 January 1941.

65 G. Wellum, *First Light* (London: Penguin 2002): 8.

sheep hand Al Deere had ended up in the Battle of Britain as a consequence of his youthful pre-war urge to learn to fly, turning out as 'a hopeful' in 1936 after learning of a RAF recruiting campaign in the Antipodes.⁶⁶ Against that, Malan was not taking up aviation for its own sake. Merchant Navy service had already equipped him with specialised technical competencies. It had, as we have seen, also exposed him to the nature of Nazi Germany. Conscious of being on the brink of an unavoidable war, he took to the air essentially in order to ready himself to fight in it. That, in turn, begs a further question. What did it amount to? For what had Sailor Malan been risking his life?

Back in his home country, radical anti-war Afrikaner nationalists had a blunt answer. Although Malan was mostly studiously ignored, he was caricatured occasionally in the nationalist press as a deluded flying poodle, a leather and goggles version of a Jan Smuts empire loyalist.⁶⁷ A contemptible Malan was squandering his time, helping a British war effort aimed at saving a detested imperialism. At the same time, in overseas Britain there was also a strong answer, if more affectionate in tone. Sailor Malan was, unquestionably, the very finest of its bronzed colonial heroes, lined up with Wing Commander Johnnie Johnson by 1944 as 'The Two Greatest Fighter Pilots of the War'.⁶⁸

Moreover, his public identity was always more than that of one of the RAF's most assured and effective Spitfire pilots. For an Allied Adolph had sprung from a divided white South African society that could not make up its mind squarely over where it ought to stand on the war issue. Instead of humming and hawing, he had had no hesitation in turning RAF blue and in committing himself to the defence of a great British Empire. In that sense, far more than any Canadian, New Zealander or Australian, his life was a parable of true imperial commitment, a war of empire the truest expression of his patriotic character.

The intriguing question, though, is: *was it?* Here, it may be useful to ponder the judgement of one distinguished historian of British imperialism on the wider meaning of the conflict for Britain's ruling class. In an astringent recent study, Bernard Porter concludes that when all is said and done, 'Churchill was one of the few people to believe that he was fighting the Second World War *for the Empire*'.⁶⁹ When all is said and done, it is difficult to imagine Group Captain Malan as one of those few. Was he really securing Winnie's fields and beaches in 1940 so that the Colonial Office could continue to look after Nigeria, and the Crown could cling on to its Asian jewel? Given the circumstantial evidence, the most that could surely be suggested is that he fought for Britain, rather than for its comfortable imperial corset.

For Malan's Battle was a do-or-die commitment to the survival of a free European Britain. It sprang from solidarity with the European need to defeat the totalitarianism of a Nazi future. For 'the Sailor', as much as for another uncon-

66 R.C. Smith, *Al Deere: Wartime Fighter Pilot, Peacetime Commander* (London: Grub Street, 2003):93.

67 *Die Oosterlig*, 17 September 1940.

68 *The Tatler and Bystander*, 6 September 1944: 25.

69 B. Porter, *The Absent-Minded Imperialists: What the British Really Thought About Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004): 282; see also, C. Barnett, *The Collapse of British Power: Empire, Society and Culture in Britain* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1972): 586-89; P. Clarke, *The Last Thousand Days of the British Empire* (London: Allen Lane, 2007): 5-6.

ventional incomer, the Southern Irishman Paddy Finucane, it was vital to hold the line above Southern England. To such pilots, this would ensure the survival of those common generalities of the Allied cause, ‘democracy’, ‘liberty’, and ‘freedom’. It was also, of course, about more. It was about how the anti-Nazi struggle was moving the moral compass of an increasingly liberal and reform-minded officer class, an issue on which scholars such as Raymond Williams and E.P. Thompson have been so personally eloquent.⁷⁰ That needle pointed leftwards, in the direction of creating a more decent and more fair society after winning the war.

An emerging vision of a new post-war age of fairer shares influenced a British tank officer like Edward Palmer Thompson. How much would it also have mattered to a progressive airforce Group Captain from the segregationist Union of South Africa, mindful of its troubled social order. It was perhaps no coincidence that Sailor’s close flying comrade, Al Deere, had experienced the sapping effects of joblessness and poverty in rural New Zealand during the Great Depression and had maintained links with the labour movement throughout the war. The respective welfare interests and concerns that he and Malan shared through the 1940s and beyond were not merely those of their families.

In the first instance, the future prospects of any broadly democratic aspirations seemed to rest completely on the saving of Britain. Assuredly, this appears to have been how Malan viewed it. And, in this, he was by no means a lone white South African serviceman. By way of illustration one could take the classic upper-crust Union anglophone, Guy Butler. Sprinting into the South African army following the fall of France, it was, as he testified, a case of joining up now or never. *Never* could mean Germany having its way, not only with Britain, but in all likelihood with the world. That included South Africa and its insidious fifth column of the Afrikaner extreme right. *Now* implied some hope and optimism. If Britain could be shored up, that would, as Butler asserted, ‘buy time for the world to stop that evil man, Hitler, and his followers’.⁷¹

Armed men like Malan and Butler were the inheritors of a particular brand of *British* imperial mentality. This was forged by a notion that went beyond British society standing for freedom and tolerance against tyranny. It was the presumption of a currency of moral legitimation of Britishness, in the sense that the idea of Britain derived from an ideal of integrity. If South Africans with a tie to Britain could think this, so could Britons with a tie to South Africa. In his 1953 volume, *The Second British Empire*, the leading historian of South Africa, Eric Walker, clearly had something like it in mind when he pointed out admiringly that Britain’s impact upon the world took its tone from moral considerations which, to the annoyance of rival powers, had rarely ever been lacking when its citizens thought aloud.

70 E.P. Thompson, *Writing by Candlelight* (London: Merlin, 1980): 129-30; *The Heavy Dancers* (London: Merlin, 1985): 240; S. Collini, *English Pasts: Essays in History and Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999): 211-13.

71 J. Hyslop, ‘An Anglo-South African Intellectual, the Second World War and the Coming of Apartheid: Guy Butler in the 1940s’, in Dubow and Jeeves: 215; see also, M. Cardo, ‘“Fighting a worse imperialism”: White South African Loyalty and the Army Education Services (AES) during the Second World War’, *South African Historical Journal*, 46 (2002): 141-74.

Indeed, that was perhaps not the only consideration. In the preceding decade, no less significant than the buying of time was the experience of how that time was being bought. Here, for Sailor Malan, it was the very distinctive character of wartime RAF service. At one level, what could be said is that his war was not entirely unlike the war of other white patriots who volunteered for service in the Union's own forces. Those most deeply committed campaigned beyond their borders, including overseas. There, they found themselves in the shared struggle of a cosmopolitan British war effort, as South African soldiers were deployed in various theatres along with troops from the Asian and African Empire. There was, of course, little sense of soldiering equality, as segregated canteens, clubs, recreation fields and hospitals confirmed. So, depending on where they came from, all infantrymen knew their place or were assigned to it, in well-defined European and non-European spheres.⁷²

The RAF, however, was a somewhat different social universe. Granted, as an expanding modern service arm of the British 'warfare state', to employ David Edgerton's cleverly inverted formulation, it reflected the knotty grain of a society 'divided by geography and social class, riven by popular prejudices and a complex form of snobbery'.⁷³ Therefore, it contained more than its fair share of supercilious old Etonians or Harrovians who lorded it over their deferential Cockney inferiors, the chirpy Bert's, the Alfs, the Freds and the Gingers who maintained and repaired their battered planes. At the same time, however, the RAF was also the most technologically modern and progressive of the services. It was a sector with notably high educational levels and an integrated airfield work culture in which even pilot officers were not necessarily spared labouring duties. At times, highly trained officers of 'outstanding fighter squadrons' could find themselves having to muck in when trenches had to be dug as cover from German raids.⁷⁴

To a considerable degree, other ranks also displayed far less deference to their officers than was customary in a more traditional and stiff-necked army. Ground crew would snipe at fighter pilots for being 'bleedin' useless', sometimes insolently offering 'a quid' if they could manage to bring back aircraft undamaged. Forced by rationing to eat ice-cream made without sugar, on one occasion in 1941 a sweet-toothed Malan was hailed by cheeky mechanics, 'Sailor, guess what? The war's over. We've got sugar. If you want some, you'd better make it over here bloody quick.'⁷⁵

Furthermore, in another way, the RAF service queue had a degree of rotational meritocracy. A fair number of aircraft fitters, riggers and instrument mechanics finished up as Fighter Command pilots, a new urban technical school manual elite alongside an older, sherry and vintage port elite. This was a professional training grid for individual skill and individual rights, not least one in which air cadets

72 D.G. Friend, 'The Non-European Army Services', in J. Keene, ed., *South Africa in World War II*: (Cape Town: Human Rousseau, 1995): 161-66.

73 Edgerton; Overy: 14.

74 P. Richey, *Fighter Pilot* (London: Pimlico, 1955): 17, 23.

75 G. Wellum, personal communication to author, January 2007.

could smoke without fear of being stripped and flogged. In short, it was a big step on from the disciplinary rigidities of interwar Simonstown sailing for 'Bothie boys' like 'Sailor' Malan, 'Jannie' Smuts and 'Zulu' Brown.

Politically, too, the Battle of Britain RAF came to embody a reforming modernity. A month into the conflict, the Colonial Office pressed hard for the repeal of racially discriminatory armed services regulations which restricted home enlistment and commissions to men of European descent.⁷⁶ A massive imperial war effort required greater attention to the national pride and racial susceptibilities of non-European 'British citizens of the Great British Empire'.⁷⁷ The Air Ministry ensured that the RAF did not dither in toeing the new line. By 1940 its cockpits were open. That meant occupation not only by pale New Zealanders, Canadians and Continental flyers like Poles and Czechs. It also meant a leg-up for educated and technically able men from India, the Caribbean, Nigeria, the Gold Coast, Sierra Leone and the Malayan peninsula. 'In Britain', if not necessarily in other imperial theatres of war, 'complaints of unfair treatment within the RAF on the grounds of colour discrimination were rare'.⁷⁸

In the early 1940s, that put Malan slap in the middle of an open, relatively egalitarian world of front-line aviators.⁷⁹ a small and select military elite in which the comrades one counted on included Flight Sergeant James Hyde of Trinidad and Pilot Officer Mahinder Singh Puji from India, 'a real fire-eater' who insisted on flying his Hurricane in a Sikh turban.⁸⁰ Pilots like these represented a new breed of unconventional individual warrior-heroes for an age of speed. Transcending their social or geographical origins, trained and ruthless specialists countered an even more ruthless enemy in a conflict projected as a meritocratic 'people's war', set apart by its democratic objectives from an older British style of imperial warfare.

It followed, then, that Empire-Commonwealth volunteers, too, would become recognised as self-made British warriors of a sort, and not only then. *We Were There*, a recent British Ministry of Defence schools brochure detailing the part played by the country's 'ethnic minority population and their forebears' in the world wars, depicts the renowned Station Commander of RAF Biggin Hill deep in conversation with Flight Lieutenant Vincent Bunting from Kingston, Jamaica.⁸¹ In that Commander's native Western Cape today he is also commemorated, although in a more ornamental and more homespun cultural setting. At the Huguenot Museum in Franschoek, a portrait of 'Sailor' in RAF uniform is displayed by the Malan Family History Society in a long Cape ancestral cradle dating back to 1688.

76 B. Nasson, *Britannia's Empire: Making a British World* (Stroud, Tempus, 2004): 169.

77 N. Ferguson, *Empire: How Britain Made the Modern World* (London, Penguin, 2003), 305.

78 R. Lambo, 'Achtung! The Black Prince: West Africans in the Royal Air Force, 1939-46', in D.Killingray .ed., *Africans in Britain* (London: Cass, 1994): 157.

79 The gendered setting of the air war placed women pilots in the rear, maintaining supply by flying planes from factories to forward bases: see G. Whittell, *Spitfire Women of World War II* (London: HarperPress, 2007).

80 C. Somerville, *Our War: How the British Commonwealth Fought the Second World War* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1998) 140.

81 *We Were There*, United Kingdom Ministry of Defence (London, 2002), 47. I am grateful to Jan Fredrickson for bringing this to my attention.



Figure 7: Diamond Days: Sailor Malan with Harry Beck, Secretary of De Beers, c.1950 (Mrs Elizabeth Reynolds)

For a Second World War warrior like Malan, the spirit of the times was never merely a lengthy string of decorations for courage and achievement, including in his case the French and Belgian *Croix de guerre* and France's *Legion d'honneur*. It was also that what he and Vincent Bunting were establishing together was a portent of better times to come. This may surely have been part of the reason why Malan's war remained to the end a *good* war, for all its vicious conduct and hideous costs. What counted was not just a good military result. As sweet as that was, the real measure of its magnitude was that it bore within it the affirmation of common aspirations to a more just and better world. Sailor Malan did not let go of that in 1945. For the war had left him with a politically vigilant state of mind, unlikely to curl up retiringly after the fall of Berlin. In its aftermath, there would be a different threat to established liberty from Pretoria.

This time, it would be resisted behind petitions and speeches rather than propellers. But it would have Malan still firing, as in his address to a September 1954 rally outside Johannesburg, exclaiming, 'the men and women who fought for freedom still cherish what they fought for. We are determined not to be denied the fruits of that victory.'⁸² Eight years earlier, in a poignant and candid greeting to Al Deere, he had written self-mockingly of having a colossal 'ego' on the loose after having decided that a dull peacetime air force would not suit him. Still, he

82 *Rand Daily Mail*, 28 September 1954.



Figure 8: Back on the Hunt: Sailor Malan with furry quarry, Northern Cape, c.1950s (Mrs Elizabeth Reynolds)

felt well able to ‘flatter’ himself that he was ‘still young enough to be adaptable and yet old enough’ to ‘exploit’ his experiences. Whatever his future after he had arrived back in South Africa, those there would not find him as ‘entertaining and attractive’ as the young daughter he and his wife, Lynda, had produced. Instead, what lay in store for them would be his ‘bloody mindedness, obstinacy and general faults’.⁸³ In war, that temperament had probably helped to make his reputation, or had at least done nothing much to dent it.

In peace, that same war ensured that Sailor Malan would not lose his place in Anglo-South African history. It would remain always its high point. It would sustain his ‘insider’ stature in the Clement Attlee Labour Britain that he left in 1946 and in Harold Macmillan’s welfare state Conservatism that followed it. Malan witnessed Macmillan’s dismantling of what remained of the British Empire and his highly publicised ‘winds of change’ visit to South Africa in 1960.⁸⁴ The year of his death, 1963, also turned out to be Macmillan’s last as prime minister. He, too, had fought hard and at great personal cost in an earlier world war.

⁸³ Smith: 118.

⁸⁴ R. Hyam and P. Henshaw, *The Lion and the Springbok: Britain and South Africa since the Boer War* (Cambridge Cambridge University Press, 2003): 317.

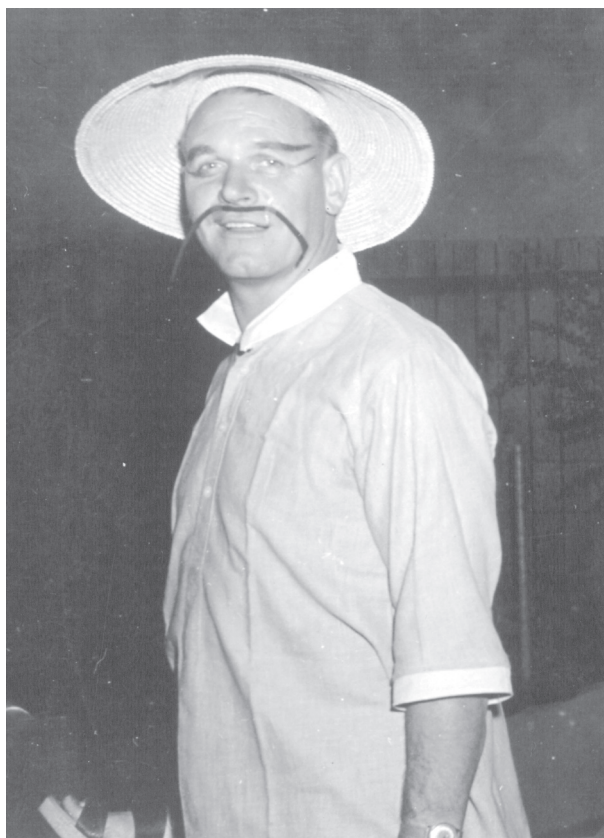


Figure 9: Post-war Party Animal: Sailor Malan playing Chinese rickshaw driver, Kimberley, c.1950s (Mrs Elizabeth Reynolds)

Once again, in conclusion, it is the echo of John Buchan's hero-worship of the lone soldier that remains audible. In the person of *Greenmantle's* Peter Pienaar, the 'real Boer' is authenticated 'in fiction' by 'being made useful' to British scheming.⁸⁵ Before the end of 1940, in Sailor Malan Britain had acquired a 'real Boer' hero from real life, a free crusader who had risen above a society that had, in part, gone to war against itself. His mythic due overseas was to be celebrated as part of the Tory historian Sir Arthur Bryant's 'great company of Englishmen', who 'had battled in these skies' to 'inscribe on England's shield an imperishable glory'.⁸⁶ It may well not be too far a stretch to see A.G. Malan as a newer version of Bryant's yeoman warriors of 1914, war-made patriots whose visions of rebuilding after demobilisation were to be dashed by 'the bitterness and strife' brought by 'the money-changers' and the utilitarian callousness of their laissez-faire economics.⁸⁷ This was utopian Tory paternalism, fretting over the extinguishing of a mythological pre-industrial heritage of English roses and nightingales.

At the same time, Malan's relationship with an emerging apartheid utopia may be no less poignant. For in the Union the Second World War and its after-

85 K. Macdonald, 'Writing "The War"', *The Times Literary Supplement*, 5445 (2007):15.

86 A. Bryant, *English Saga, 1840-1940* (London: Collins, 1940): 316.

87 P. Wright, *The Village that Died for England: The Strange Story of Tyneham* (London.: Jonathan Cape, 1995): 237-38.

math hastened the deterioration of his relations with its governing establishment. At its low point, it would make him an 'outsider', a betrayal of another kind. As such, in the seventeen years between his return to Cape Town and the end of his life, there would be much in his own country upon which he, in turn, would turn his back. Unlike the RAF, it was not an individual place in which he would almost invariably get his individual way.

*An initial version of this sprawling essay was first presented as a public lecture at the 2008 UCT Extra-Mural Studies Department Summer School, and subsequently as talks at the Africa and Comparative History Seminar in the UCT Department of Historical Studies, at the Ship Society of South Africa in Cape Town, and at the Karookring in Beaufort West. I am grateful to these audiences for valuable comment and helpful information. My thanks, too, to Mrs Elizabeth Reynolds for her generosity in providing some of the photographic illustrations used here, and for her continuing interest in the larger biographical project of which this is an early shot.