

The “Battle of Aljezur” - off the Algarve coast during WWII

An anonymous contribution

Prelude

Like many, I had always thought World War II here in Portugal was all spies, refugees and wolfram. Then I stumbled across a tweet about Hitler offering a medal to a Portuguese for having buried with honours the crew of a Luftwaffe maritime patrol aircraft that crashed on the Portuguese coast. Now I was brought up as something of an aviation nut, I built Airfix kits, drove teachers to despair by filling “topic” books with tracings from aircraft books and even did a bit of flying myself. Finding a WWII aviation link to Portugal was a big deal and I scoured the web for information.

More digging and it turned out there was such a thing as the “Battle of Aljezur”; a long range engagement between the British and Germans just off the Costa Vincentina in the western Algarve. Two days later I

was on my way.....and in Aljezur I discovered that I had missed the 75th anniversary of the battle (and commemorations) by a matter of days - but there was a still an exhibition on in town...

The poster is for an exhibition titled "A BATALHA DE ALJEZUR" (The Battle of Aljezur). It is part of the "CICLO DE EXPOSIÇÕES 2018" (Cycle of Exhibitions 2018) and is a "EXPOSIÇÃO FOTODOCUMENTAL" (Photodocumentary Exhibition). The exhibition is held at "Espaço +", celebrating the 75th anniversary of the "Batalha Aérea de Aljezur" (Aerial Battle of Aljezur). The dates are from July 14 to August 31, with an inauguration on July 14 at 15:00h. The location is Espaço + (Rua da Escola - Igreja Nova - Aljezur). The author is José Augusto Rodrigues. The poster features a central image of a pilot in a cockpit. Logos for Espaço +, Aljezur, and Airfix are visible at the bottom.



The battle

In July 1943, the Germans have been pushed out of North Africa and the Allies are starting Operation Husky, the invasion of Sicily. There is a lot of maritime activity as ships full of men and material are sent from Britain, past Gibraltar and into the Mediterranean. This obviously takes them through the Bay of Biscay and down the Portuguese coast.

The ships were harried by both U-boats and by German aircraft operating out of western France, notably (by the time they got down as far as Aljezur) the Focke-Wulf Fw 200 Condor. This was originally designed as an airliner but with the onset of war was pressed into service as a long range maritime aircraft. It was a large four-engined aircraft of a similar ilk to the allied heavy bombers. Coincidentally, I had been inside a Avro Shackleton (British maritime patrol aircraft from the 1950s - but based on the



A Luftwaffe Focke-Wulf Condor

WWII Avro Lancaster and also a 4-engined propeller aircraft) just the week before and it was not comfortable on the ground, never mind after



several hours on patrol. The ships were protected by an escort of destroyers and, when possible, aircraft.

A Bristol Beaufighter

The Battle of Aljezur took place on 9th July 1943, between four Condors and three RAF escort aircraft, two Bristol Beaufighters and a



Lockheed Hudson, resulting in the loss of a German FW Condor, which was trying to make land after being damaged, but failed to clear the top of the cliffs just south of the Arrifana headland.

The graves of the seven Luftwaffe crew are in the Aljezur cemetery and a stone commemorates the crash on the cliff overlooking the battle site



The Aljezur cemetery, western Algarve The memorial on the cliff

Further descriptions are available online¹ or in the book “A Batalha de Aljezur” by José Augusto Rodrigues, published by the Junta de Freguesia de Aljezur. At the exhibition I learnt about a blog called "Aterrem em Portugal"² which details other WWII aircraft incidents in Portugal. There were a surprising number, both Axis and Allied, with incidents ranged from forced landings (after which aircraft were interned), to aircraft losses on transit flights to north Africa and the Mediterranean. One example was a PBY Catalina of the RAF, which crashed just off Sagres; two of the crew are buried in Sagres cemetery.

¹ <http://amovate.com/index.php/2010/12/when-world-war-ii-came-to-vale-da-telha/>.

² <http://aterrememportugal.blogspot.com/>.

However, key to the story of the battle of Aljezur, was the loss in September '43 of a Beaufighter just up the coast; clearly the RAF did not have things all their own way in this apparently extended role along this coast. The graves of the two RAF crew are in the British



RAF graves, British Cemetery Lisbon

Cemetery in Lisbon - my first port of call on returning from the Algarve.

I had always thought the Beaufighter was single seater (as a nine year old I had made one in 1:72 scale) but it turns out there was a navigator. He sat behind the pilot, looking backwards. No windows, but a small cupola he could pop his head up into to take readings.... they flew like this from Gibraltar on detachment from Cornwall, in a 1940s aircraft at 1940s speeds, before being thrown around in a combat which they were unable to see – only to have to fly back to Gibraltar again!

This article describes a short, but intensive trip which I would heartily recommend. Visiting the graves was moving. All were well maintained, although not on the scale of the large WWII war graves ... this and the location arguably made the visits more personal and emotive.



“Blue skies, gentlemen”³

³ A salutation commonly used to salute deceased airmen.