

**W**hen Adolph Gysbert Malan died from Parkinson's disease at the age of 52, The Times of London ran a glowing obituary. The paper, like everyone else, referred to him only as "Sailor" Malan:

"One of the great fighter pilots of the Second World War died yesterday at Kimberley ... In all the years of his air fighting he was never shot down, never had to use his parachute; yet he destroyed over 30 enemy aircraft and had at least 20 'possibles' to his credit ... In 1951 he led an ex-Servicemen's organisation in opposition to the Bill of his distant cousin, Dr. Malan, which was to deprive the coloured electors in Cape Province of their votes. He led a 'torch commando' 60,000 strong in protest against the Republic Bill, asserting that he was continuing the fight against fascism ... His post-war flying was done as a passenger but he will be remembered as long as Battle of Britain pilots survive, as one of the greatest of their number."

In Sailor's native South Africa, however, the Naspers papers were only allowed to run an official obituary, which downplayed his wartime heroics and ignored his role in the Torch Commando. English papers got a bit more emo, but even they placed most of their focus on his World War 2 exploits.

His funeral was an equally contradictory affair. "While the apartheid government snubbed Sailor," explains his relative Yvonne Malan, "Kimberley and the world celebrated his life."

Hendrik Verwoerd's government didn't just deny the family's request for a military funeral, but also banned South African service members from attending in uniform (Verwoerd made it clear that not attending at all was an even better option). In response, says Yvonne, "the Royal Air Force, Royal Rhodesian Air Force and US Air Force sent officers in full uniform to attend the funeral". At Sailor's insistence, the coffin was covered with the Moth flag (Memorable Order of Tin Hats), not the *oranje-wit-en-blou*.

"The hearse was accompanied by a lengthy procession of outriders and the city of Kimberley came to a complete standstill as crowds, including a German soldier, lined the streets. Sailor wasn't a religious man, but the civic service took place in the Anglican church," says Yvonne.

The foreign officers in uniform acted as pallbearers and a "visibly distraught" Harry Oppenheimer gave the eulogy.

One unnamed "leading ex-serviceman" who attended the funeral told the Cape Times: "It's despicable. If Sailor Malan had died in Germany itself, he would probably have been accorded a military funeral."

Today, he's been all but forgotten. It's a travesty that one of South Africa's finest is better known in Britain and America than he is back home. But his erasure from the national record is far more than an accident of history.

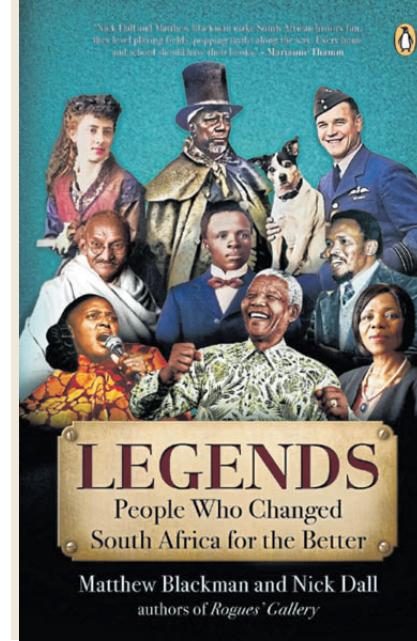
**B**y the middle of 1940, all the smart money was on Hitler's Germany winning the war, or at least forcing an armistice. The marauding Nazis had rapidly overrun continental Europe and now had the green and pleasant isle of Great Britain in their sights. The British ground forces may have miraculously managed to evacuate Dunkirk on the coast of Nazi-occupied France, but Britain would now have to deal with the might of the German Luftwaffe (Air Force), which was under strict orders to go for the jugular.

The Luftwaffe had more planes than the Royal Air Force and its machinery was supposedly superior. But Hitler and his air commander Hermann Göring hadn't bargained for the courage and cunning of the RAF's pilots or the speed and power of the recently upgraded Supermarine Spitfire. Thanks largely to the heroics of RAF pilots during the Battle of Britain, the Germans didn't manage to take Blyth and the Allied forces were able to gradually regain the upper hand. As Winston Churchill famously said of the RAF's exploits during those three heady months in 1940: "Never, in the field of human conflict, was so much owed by so many to so few."

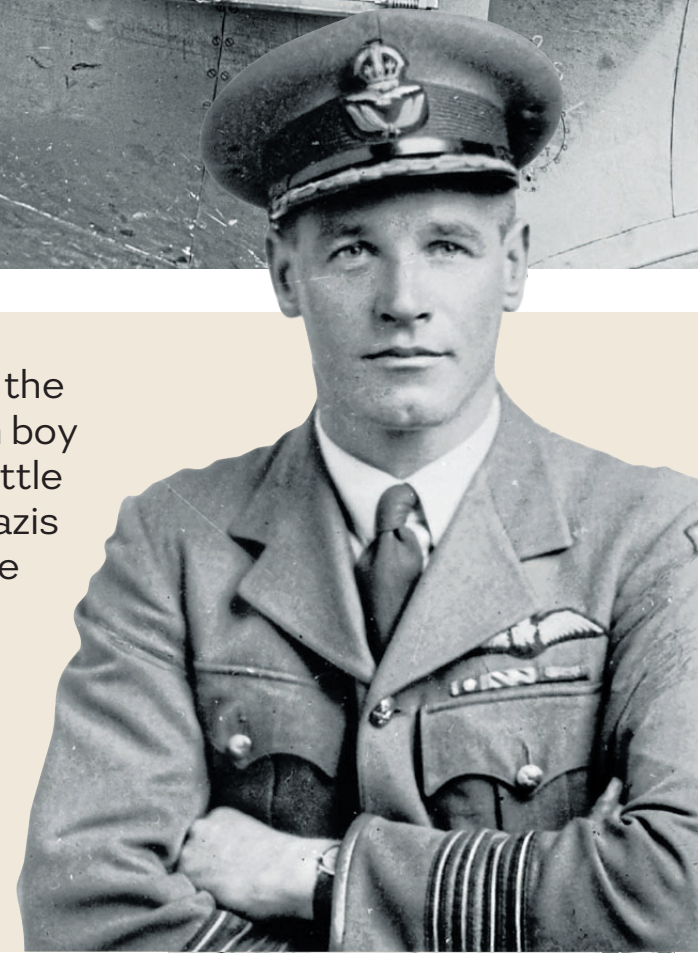
When Churchill spoke of "The Few", he was referring to 3,000 men from across the British Empire

# The true story of Sailor Malan

Today marks the 60th anniversary of the death of Sailor Malan, the Boland farm boy who became the most successful Battle of Britain pilot of them all. Once the Nazis had been defeated, Sailor came home and took the fight to DF Malan's apartheid machine. This lightly edited excerpt from *Legends: People Who Changed South Africa for the Better* by **Matthew Blackman** and **Nick Dall** explains why you might never have heard of him



**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP**  
**1. Sailor Malan in the cockpit of his Supermarine Spitfire.**  
**2. The air ace in uniform. On August 11 1940, 74 Squadron shot down 38 enemy aircraft. Malan described it simply as 'a very successful morning of combat'.**  
**3. Malan with his dog Peter, 'a remarkable dog of doubtful parentage'.** Picture: Imperial War Museum  
**4. Malan, second from left, with Royal Air Force and Free French officers on D-Day, June 6 1944, when the Allied forces invaded Normandy.**



when great gifts were called for. Tremendous courage, relentless determination and that quality of leadership which carried the whole squadron to do great deeds for him."

Capt Cuthbert Orde had this to say: "All would agree Sailor is the outstanding pilot fighter of the war ... I have seldom been more impressed by anyone than by him the first time I saw him ... I do not think Malan could join a squadron without improving it, however good it was. Not by sword waving, but by strength of mind and integrity that are at once recognisable and effective."

After the war Sailor briefly contemplated a career in the RAF, but as Yvonne puts it: "He didn't like the idea of flying a desk and his nerves were shot." What's more, he was desperate to return to South Africa and make a home there. Both his children had been born in England during the war and Lynda had had to move house 29 times.

**B**ut what would Sailor do in South Africa? He had become very friendly with Harry Oppenheimer, the heir to the vast Anglo-American mining empire. When Oppenheimer offered Sailor a job as his personal and political secretary, he jumped at it. For a while Sailor tried to immerse himself in the high-flying Joburg life, spending his evenings at the Rand Club and his weekends on the golf course. But, notes Yvonne, "he was still the same guy as before, who would nurse the same drink the entire evening".

Things took a turn for the worse in 1948, the year the National Party (NP) won one of the most controversial elections in South African history. Oppenheimer ran for parliament and was elected as the United Party (UP) member for Kimberley. Sailor, who had begun to realise "the job didn't suit his temperament" and was probably suffering from PTSD, took this as a sign that he should try something new. With Oppenheimer's help, Sailor moved his family to Benfontein, a De Beers farm outside Kimberley. Farming was much more his vibe and he and Lynda finally had a chance to make a home for themselves and give their kids a solid base. Sailor wanted nothing more than to live out his days with only sheep, wildebeest and guinea fowl for company, but his "profound sense of injustice" had other ideas.

He was lured out of his idyllic Northern Cape retirement in March 1951 when DF Malan's government announced plans to strike the Cape's coloured voters from the voters' roll, in direct contravention of the terms agreed at Union in 1910. Coloured people were understandably furious, but many white South Africans were outraged too. Particularly incensed were the ex-servicemen who'd returned from fighting Nazis and who now found themselves facing similar threats at home. As historian Thula Simpson writes:

"On 21 April 1951, 3,000 World War 2 veterans gathered at Johannesburg's Cenotaph and laid down a coffin that was draped with the South African flag, above which a large scroll read: 'Within this casket lies the constitution of South Africa, deposited for safe keeping with those comrades who fell in the name of freedom.' On 4 May, a torchlight procession wound its way to Johannesburg City Hall, where Sailor Malan, referring to the war, told the 4,000-strong crowd: 'We are determined not to be denied the fruits of that victory.'"

This veterans' movement became known as the Torch Commando, named after the makeshift paraffin torches all protesters carried. (As John Kane-Berman, whose father was a Torch Commando leader, noted: "Although the Afrikaans press called the tin-can torches *blikfakkels*, leading Torch members said that 'to us they were torches of freedom'.") Within three months, the Torch had almost 100,000 members enrolled in 206 branches. By the middle of 1952, its membership had swollen to a barely believable 250,000.

Sailor's Torch attempted to pull out all the stops in the lead-up to the 1953 election, supplying the opposition with 15 full-time organisers, 5,000 cars and 60,000 canvassers. Despite their best efforts, the UP received a seriously bloody nose at the polls, with the Nats extending their majority in parliament by 19 seats. Though it took a while for the Torch to officially shut up shop, its flame was reduced to a flicker in the wake of this electoral bloodbath.

Ten years later, on September 17 1963, Sailor died.

\*Legends: People Who Changed South Africa for the Better is published by Penguin

and beyond who were awarded the Battle of Britain clasp. But there was probably no one man to whom more was owed than Sailor Malan. While he would have disagreed vehemently with this assertion (he was the definition of a team player), the facts and opinions of his contemporaries tell a different story. On August 11 1940, 74 Squadron shot down 38 enemy aircraft. Sailor described it simply as "a very successful morning of combat", but the rest of the world celebrated it as "Sailor's August the Eleventh".

Sailor was the most successful pilot in the RAF when he retired from active combat in 1941. He took bravery and daring to almost absurd heights. During one skirmish he famously changed his gunsight mid-flight before returning to the fray. And a few nights later he demanded to take off alone at 20 past midnight. In a plane that was not designed to fly at night and wearing only some of his uniform, he shot down two German Heinkel bombers. His own combat report makes exhilarating reading, provided you

compensate for the deadpan delivery:

"During an air raid in the locality of Southend various E/A [enemy aircraft] were observed and held by searchlights for prolonged periods. On request from Squadron I was allowed to take off with one Spitfire. I climbed towards E/A which was making for coast and held in searchlight beams at 8,000 feet. I positioned myself astern and opened fire at 200 yards and closed to 50 yards with one burst. Observed bullets entering enemy aircraft and had my windscreen covered in oil. Broke off to the left and immediately below as E/A spiralled out of beam. Climbed to 12,000 feet towards another E/A held by the searchlights on northerly course. Opened fire at 250 yards, taking good care not to overshoot this time. Gave five two-second bursts and observed bullets entering all over E/A with slight deflection as he was turning to port. E/A emitted heavy smoke and I observed one parachute open very close. E/A went down in spiral dive. Searchlights and I followed him

right down until he crashed in flames near Chelmsford."

As soon as Sailor landed, he phoned the nursing home to find out how [his wife] Lynda and his infant son Jonathan were doing. They had slept through it all.

Air Chief Marshal Hugh "Stuffy" Dowding, the biggest cheese in the RAF, described Sailor as "one of the great assets of the Command - a fighter who was not solely or mainly concerned with his own 'score', but one whose first thoughts were for the efficiency of his squadron and the personal safety of his junior pilots. I know that he was regarded as a heroic figure by the small fry over whom he spread his influence and I personally shared their opinion."

As Douglas Tidy, who fought alongside him in 74 Squadron, put it: "I find the most endearing thing about him was that apart from being an exceptional shot, he was just an ordinary chap; quiet, unassuming and gentle in manner. His great gifts came from within



MIKE SILUMA

Quote goes here