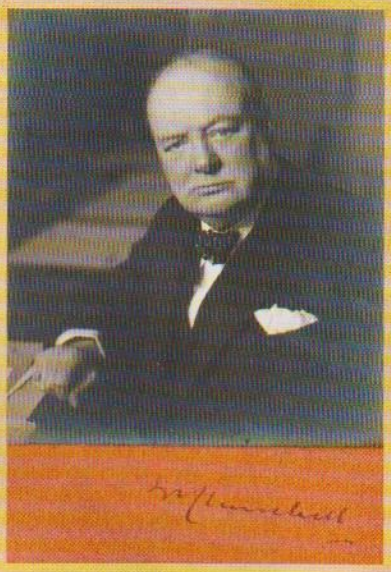
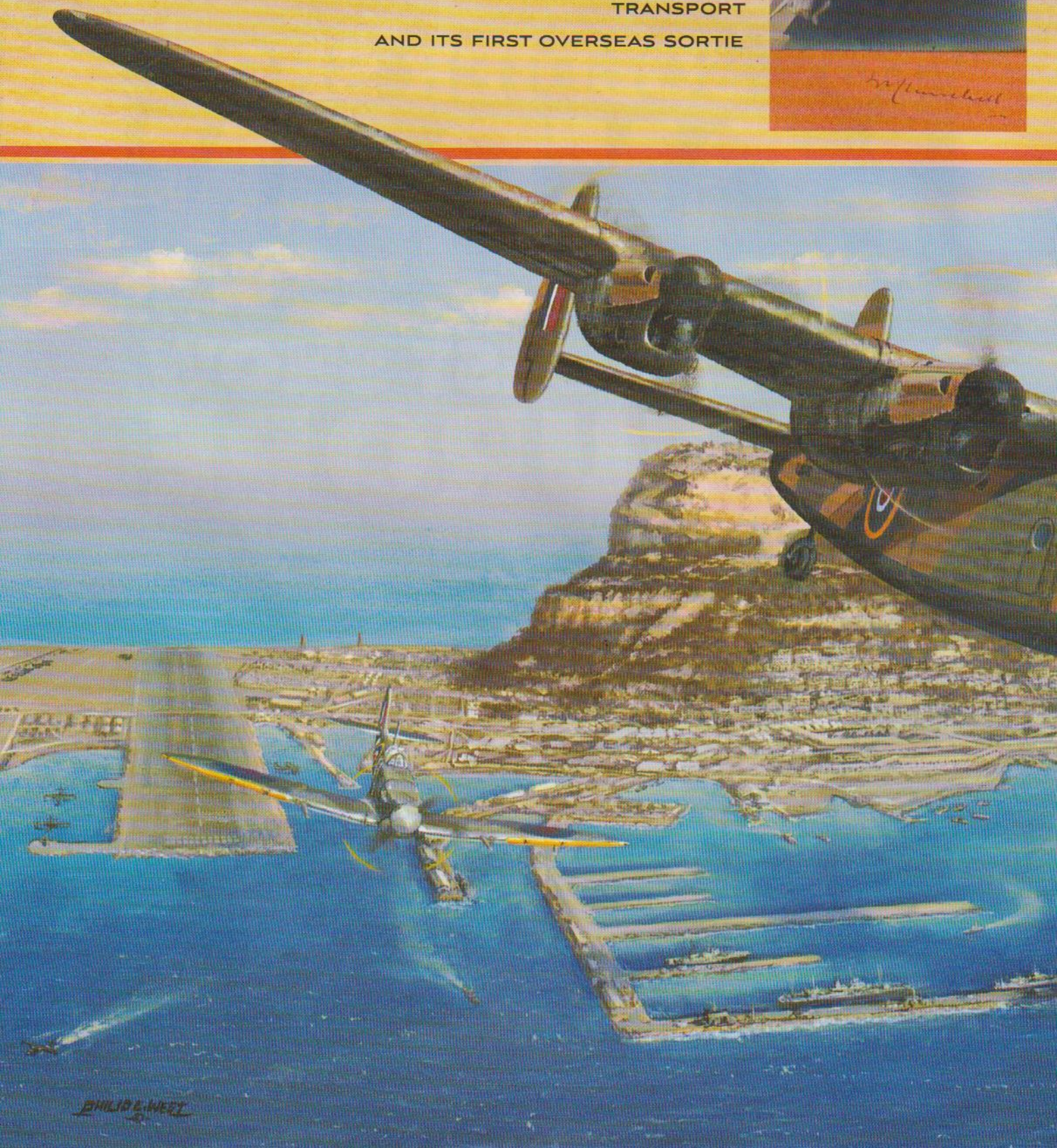
CHURCHILL'S NAVIGATOR



AIR CDRE JOHN MITCHELL DESCRIBES THE ADVENT OF A VERY SPECIAL AVRO YORK TRANSPORT AND ITS FIRST OVERSEAS SORTIE



An challenging posting in North America was coming to an end and like it or not Flt Lt John L Mitchell DFC looked set to be 'flying a desk' upon his return to the UK. It was September 1942 and the inevitable occurred, he watched the paperwork grow at the Air Ministry's Directorate of Navigation Training. John takes up the story:

Although a desk job, I was able in the November to wangle a week's flying with 24 Squadron at Hendon, navigating both [Lockheed] Hudsons and Electras on a series of UK trips...

While I was there I caught sight of a strange new aircraft in the famous Grahame White hangar. It was similar in size to the Avro Lancaster, with familiar wing-shape and four engines, but its fuselage was entirely different. I didn't know what it was, neither what it was doing at Hendon. I certainly didn't know just how closely I was to become associated with this aircraft – an Avro York – over the next two years...

Although comfortable in my role, I had been actively looking for a new challenge. I had kept in touch with John 'Jackie' Sproule; he knew of my anxiety to get out of the Air Ministry, and my name was evidently put forward to a selection board being assembled to interview for the position of navigator to fly the VVIP York that I had seen at Hendon. The idea of using my navigation skills in long-range flying very much appealed to me and I accepted the post.

I reported to the Aeroplane & Armament Experimental Establishment (A&AEE) at Boscombe Down for training with the rest of the 'specially selected' crew on our equally 'specially selected' aircraft. It quickly became clear just exactly what we had been let in for. Until that time, the organisation for transporting the Prime Minister had been a somewhat haphazard affair. What little VIP flying which was

Left
A photo of 'The Owner' presented to the crew of LV633.

Below
Avro York 'Ascalon' climbing out of Gibraltar in May 1943 carrying Winston Churchill for the first time. Two copies of this superb print by Philip E West can be won by readers thanks to SWA Fine Art – see later.
COURTESY SWA FINE ART

"My only comment, and complaint after the maiden flight, was that the navigator's seat was too plush and took up too much space..."

required had been provided by 24 Squadron from Hendon in a variety of operational aircraft slightly modified to give the passenger some modicum of comfort.

It was Winston Churchill, beyond all others, who fully exploited the inherent flexibility that air travel provided to conduct official business. He first used 24 Squadron when he was First Lord of the Admiralty to visit his opposite number in Paris in March 1940. He flew to France no fewer than five times in May and June of that year to try to keep pace with a rapidly developing military situation and to stiffen the French resolve to fight.

After the fall of France and victory in the Battle of Britain, Churchill continued to use air travel for himself and his closest staff, returning from the first Washington Conference in January 1942 in the BOAC's flying-boat Boeing 314A 'Clipper' G-AGCA *Berwick* having journeyed out on the battleship HMS *Duke of York*. For the second conference he took another BOAC 'Clipper', G-AGBZ *Bristol* both ways.

[These two and G-AGCB *Bangor* had been acquired in 1941 from Pan American Airways specifically to keep an Atlantic 'air bridge' available for VVIPs. They returned to the USA in early 1948.]

Regarding long-range landplane transport, the Chief of the Air Staff suggested a Consolidated Liberator. One of these, Mk.II AL504 *Commando*, had been adapted for VIP purposes, and was diverted for the PM for Operation BRACELET, his flight to Cairo and on to Moscow in August 1942.

Churchill was still determined to use aircraft again five months later for Operation SYMBOL, the conference in Casablanca, Morocco, in January 1943. He flew from Lyneham direct, meeting President Franklin D Roosevelt and the US joint chiefs of staff who had flown directly from the US, mostly in Douglas C-54 Skymasters.

DRAGON SLAYER

[Avro flew the first prototype York, LV626, on July 5, 1942. Initially it featured twin fins, it was the first of four development aircraft. The third example, LV633, was the first with the distinctive triple fins and it joined A&AEE for trials. It was during this time that John Mitchell saw it at Hendon, while the RAF was evaluating its potential use as a VVIP aircraft.]

The Air Council decided that LV633 was to become a VVIP aircraft, and be furnished accordingly. It was also to be put at the disposal of the PM for his future visits to the Middle East, Russia and India.

As such it was designated as York (Special) and was instantly recognisable as the only York with square windows. It was also given a name: *Ascalon*, which was the lance (or in some versions, the sword) with which St George had slain the dragon.

The comfort provided within was everything *Commando* didn't have: there was a state-of-the-art board room and en-suite toilet aft. A dining room with a central table, seating eight, could double as an on-board conference room. Accommodation in the rear was separated by a galley – albeit a rather primitive one – and forward comprised two Pullman-style bays of four bunks in each, two up and two down like an American sleeper car. Two more Elsan chemical toilets, with folding washbasins, were situated between the bays.

Left
'The Owner' descending from his York.

Below left
York LV633 lifting off from USAAF base at Châteaudun du Rhumel in June 1943.

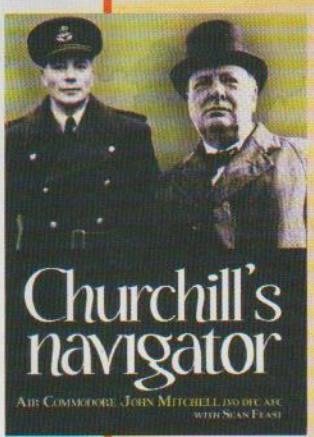
Bottom left
A view of York (Special) LV633 at Boscombe Down – the square cabin windows were its hallmark. KEY COLLECTION

HAND-PICKED CREW

The crew to which I would belong was made up of some exceptionally talented and experienced aviators, all experts in their respective fields.

The captain, Wg Cdr Henry Collins DFC, had been the first to be chosen and, as commanding officer of 24 Squadron, was perhaps the most obvious choice as pilot.

'John' Collins was a regular of the old school and so 'old' that we referred to him as 'Dad'. After a five-year short service commission between 1926 and 1931, John spent eight years as a pilot with Imperial Airways. As a captain he had flown [Armstrong Whitworth] Argosies, AW Atlantas and Handley Page HP.42s on the Empire air routes. Recalled in 1939 to serve with the commandeered aircraft of the civil airlines, in 1940 he had flown an unarmed AW Ensign pre-war luxury airliner to the beleaguered



CHURCHILL'S NAVIGATOR

This feature has been abridged and adapted from *Churchill's Navigator* by Air Cdre John Mitchell LVO DFC AFC with Sean Feast. Hardback, 216 pages and illustrated, the book charts John Mitchell's remarkable career from serving as an RAFVR officer to operations with 58 Squadron on AW Whitleys and a ditching in the North Sea.

From 1943 he became a member of the elite crew flying Prime Minister Winston Churchill around in Avro York *Ascalon*. The book describes flying in North Africa and taking the PM to the crucial conferences at Teheran and Yalta. Another passenger entrusted to John's crew was 'General Lyon', the codename for King George VI.

John's post-war career included long-range flights in the famous Avro Lincoln *Aries III*, diplomatic appointments and a spell with air intelligence.

Between them John and Sean have produced a superbly-written book giving insights into the arrangements for top-level summits during World War Two and the adaptable nature of a crew flying a VVIP aircraft. Published by Grub Street at £20 this is a great read.

www.grubstreet.co.uk

WIN ONE OF TWO PRINTS OF CHURCHILL'S MAIDEN VOYAGE

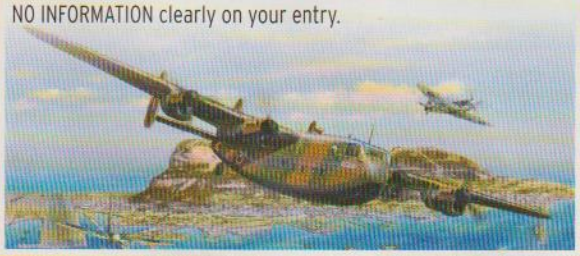
Latest print from SWA Fine Art is *Churchill's Maiden Voyage in 'Ascalon'*, a vivid portrayal from the perceptive eye of Philip E West. It shows Avro York LV633, carrying Winston Churchill and other VIPs, escorted by Spitfires out of the airfield at North Front, Gibraltar, ready for a tour of North Africa, as described in this feature. A fabulous study, the 20 by 27½in (51 x 70cm) primary edition is a limited run of 100 at £125, signed by the artist and Air Cdr John Mitchell. There are 50 artist proofs at £150 and a special 'Navigator's Edition' of 25 which includes a matching signed and numbered copy of Air Cdre Mitchell's book, *Churchill's Navigator* at £195. Finally, there are ten remarques at £275. All the prints have been signed and numbered by Philip E West and countersigned by Air Cdre John Mitchell LVO,DFC,AFC, AE.
For more details, call 01225 444929 or take a look at **www.swafineart.com**

YOUR CHANCE TO WIN

Thanks to Sean Whyte of SWA Fine Art Publishers, we are giving away two primary edition prints of *Churchill's Maiden Voyage in 'Ascalon'*, each worth £125. Simply answer the question below and send your name, address and e-mail (if you have one) on a postcard or sealed-down envelope to Churchill Competition, *FlyPast*, Key Publishing, PO Box 100, Stamford, Lincolnshire, PE9 1XQ. Or fax your answer, name and postal address to 01780 757261. Or e-mail the same information to: debbie.thomas@keypublishing.com with 'Churchill' in the subject box.
Was the serial number of Churchill's York?

a) LV633
b) G-YORK
c) 88-633

Closing date for entries is February 27, 2011 by 12:00 GMT. One entry per household. The first two corrects answer drawn from the entries at the closing date will win the prizes. There is no cash prize alternative and the editor's decision is final.
On occasions Key Publishing Ltd may make offers on products or services that we believe to be of interest to our customers. If you do not wish to receive this information, please write NO INFORMATION clearly on your entry.



"...the 'Reina Christina Hotel' in Algeciras – even though British-owned – had a whole wing given over to Italian and German intelligence staff."

units of the British Expeditionary Force in and around the Calais enclave with quantities of urgently needed anti-tank ammunition. Coming under attack both on the way in and on the way out, he had won a well-deserved DFC for his extreme coolness under fire.

Joining John on the flight deck was Sqn Ldr Ernest 'Bill' Fraser. The job had been initially offered to an ex-Bomber Command officer called Crackston, but he had wanted to return to his squadron. Bill, however, was far from second best. He was an experienced transport pilot who had come up the hard way pre-war.

Our flight engineer was Flt Lt Sydney 'Jack' Payne AFM, a particularly interesting character. Jack was the eldest of us all at 41, an ex-Halton 'brat' who had seen service in India and later became one of the first commissioned flight engineers. He came to us from A&AEE Boscombe Down where he had been working on the acceptance trials of all the new four-engined aircraft.

Like most of the early-stage flight engineers, Jack was an experienced fitter on both engines and airframes. More than this, Jack also held various civil ground engineer licences and was thus qualified to 'sign out' the serviceability of the York at any time without the say-so of an RAF ground branch engineer officer.

Completing the crew was our wireless operator, Flt Lt Willie 'Jock' Gallagher, ex-Coastal Command. A fierce Glaswegian, Jock had considerable experience of transatlantic ferry operations, and I believe had flown several times with the coastal 'ace', Sqn Ldr Terry Bulloch.

SHAKE-DOWN

Our instructions were simple. We were to fly the York when required to do so by the PM and that meant being on virtual permanent stand-by.

We spent the three weeks shaking down as a crew, while conducting handling trials of the aircraft at Boscombe Down. My first flight in LV633 took place on May 2, 1943 at Boscombe, a 40-minute trip with a test pilot, Gp Capt Purvis.

My first impressions were encouraging. The flight deck was relatively commodious, with a fine navigator's position from which astro-observations could be made without leaving the table.

My only comment, and complaint after the maiden flight, was that the navigator's seat was too plush and took up too much space when standing in action with sextant. Perhaps I should have stayed quiet. No-one had ever heard of a crew position being *too* comfortable! A folding stool was substituted and proved more than adequate.

The majority of our handling trials then took place under the watchful eye of the test pilot in charge of 'B' Flight, Wg Cdr Charles Slee AFC. We had consumption trials, and tested the automatic pilot and the calibration of our IFF [identification friend or foe] system. Endurance tests and API [air position indicator] tests were complemented by our first fully loaded (63,000lb - 28,576kg) take-off trials – happily successful.

Our first flight with Henry Collins in command took place on May 17 and LV633 joined 24 Squadron. The following week we were ready to meet 'The Owner' – this was how Churchill was always referred to by the crew.

Below
York (Special) 'Ascalon' during its time at Boscombe Down, May 1943. KEY COLLECTION

Below
'Ascalon' attracting considerable attention during its first 'tour'. ALL IMAGES COURTESY AIR CDRE JOHN MITCHELL AND GRUB STREET UNLESS NOTED

GIBRALTAR ASSIGNMENT

We were required to position in Gibraltar by May 27 and await the arrival of the PM and personal staff from the third Washington conference, Operation TRIDENT. They were flying in on 'Clipper' *Bristol*.

The runway at Hendon simply wasn't long enough for a large aircraft like ours and this meant that we had had to leave Hendon and move to Northolt, where the York would now be permanently stationed. It was conveniently situated on the A40, half way between the PM's country residence, Chequers, and Number 10 Downing Street.

It was from Northolt, therefore, that we departed on May 25 for the short trip to Portreath in Cornwall intending to cross the Bay of Biscay that night. The weather, however, was against us; we would be flying into an Atlantic low, with all of the problems that would give us, and decided to think again.

We were carrying our first passengers: John Peck of the Foreign Office, one of the PM's private secretaries; and Gp Capt George 'Jimmy' Jeffs, the Transport Command air traffic officer who was going to accompany the whole trip to organise ATC services at the various landing grounds we might expect to visit. Also, flying as first pilot but not in command was Wg Cdr Slee, whom the AOC-in-C Transport Command had ordained should accompany the crew in view of the relatively few hours of development flying that the aircraft had undergone, and us with it.

Our only alternative, if we were to make our rendezvous, would be a daylight sortie the next day. We eventually made Gibraltar without incident after eight hours, only to be told that the PM and his party were delayed, and would not be arriving until May 28.

We could also see that an American C-54 had arrived via Gander for General George C Marshall and senior American officers who were to accompany the PM's North African tour, no doubt to prevent him from trying to bully General Dwight D Eisenhower into doing something the President would not have approved of!

MEETING 'THE OWNER'

Henry Collins positioned *Ascalon* at the end of the runway nearest the flying-boat base. We assumed that the party might want a quick transfer from one aircraft to the next and an immediate departure with the minimum exposure to the public gaze.

As it was, they were to stop-over at 'The Convent', the governor's residence, and Churchill seemed to be in no mood to heed the advice of his security staff and conceal his presence. As it was he was seen by a great number of locals and service personnel, and no doubt his whereabouts were soon communicated far and wide.

The use of Gibraltar for VIP transits to Algiers and all points further east was always open to security criticism. 'The Duty Spy', as he was known, was said to be situated on the high ground above La Línea at a site known as Queen Catherine's Chair, with binoculars focused on the comings and goings of all aircraft.

Within minutes, the information he gathered on all aircraft types and numbers could be with the German Embassy in Madrid and transmitted onward to Berlin. It was also known that the 'Reina Christina Hotel' in Algeciras – even though British-owned – had a whole wing given over to Italian and German intelligence staff.

'The Owner' finally joined us, a big man in every sense, and we set off for Maison Blanche, Algiers, a trip of around 2½ hours that we would take with a fighter escort – a group of Lockheed P-38 Lightnings from their base at Oran.

I remember it very clearly as the excitement for the fighter boys of escorting one of the most important men in the Western world meant they

came a little too close for comfort.

RAF Spitfires from Gibraltar always kept a discreet and useful distance and height from us, from where they could defend us from enemy attack. Not so the Americans. They seemed more interested in getting close enough to see the great man himself, who didn't help matters by waving at them and giving his ubiquitous 'V' sign from his state room window!

It was understood that our VVIP aircraft was to be run as a luxury yacht, albeit an airborne one. As we had taken off after lunch, we did little more than provide a running, or rather flying, tea buffet for the passengers.

Besides the PM, our passengers included General Marshall, Anthony Eden, Air Marshal Arthur Tedder, General Ismay, Commander 'Tommy' Thompson (the PM's aide de camp), Inspector Thompson from Scotland Yard and the Churchill's loyal valet, Swayers.

We landed in the late afternoon and, having offloaded our passengers, headed into the centre of Algiers. Jimmy Jeffs had the good sense to use the PM's metaphorical 'weight' to secure us rooms at the 'Aletti Hotel'. The facilities there were more usually reserved for officers of brigadier rank or above – and we spent three delightful days and nights amid its luxury.

TAKING CONTROL

We returned to the airfield early on the morning of June 1, to prepare the aircraft for a short hop to the USAAF base at Châteaudun du Rhumel, near Bône. The journey was uneventful and the PM and his party disembarked. The following day we were ordered to position LV633 to an airstrip at Grombalia, south east of Tunis, which was more convenient for our passengers, who had by now been joined by General Sir Harold Alexander.

We had expected to fly as far south as Enfidaville and onwards to inspect The Mareth Line, perhaps proceeding on to Tripoli. But we had yet to learn the vagaries of 'The Owner's' travel requirements, and how quickly he could change his mind. No sooner had we circled the Kasserine Pass than he decided he wanted to return directly to Algiers.

We knew that Churchill had, at an earlier time, flown with 24 Squadron as a pilot under training at the same time as Lord Londonderry. His lordship had passed; the PM had not. That did not, however, put him off from the joys of wanting to fly, and on our return leg we were joined in the cockpit by the PM, who took the co-pilot's seat.

He asked whether he could try out the controls and our captain, with a barely perceptible hesitation, agreed. Collins, of course, was no risk taker, and attempted to smooth out some of the resulting attitudes of the aircraft with discreet use of the tail trimmer, at which point 'The Owner' admonished him. He soon conceded that perhaps they would share the controls: Collins to work the rudder, and he would try climbing and diving.

Churchill was clearly enjoying himself, much to the consternation of his passengers being thrown about in the back, and to the astonishment of the USAF fighter escorts who were trying to keep station, and decided to back off. On landing at Maison Blanche, Collins was quick to explain to our escort commander who was doing the driving!

We spent two more comfortable nights in Algiers before starting out for our return to the UK. We left our US fighter escort behind over Oran where we picked up a Spitfire wing, much to the PM's pleasure.

At Gibraltar we saw that the flying-boat *Bristol* was on stand-by to take the PM home; we guessed it was there in the case he did not take a liking to the York. As it was, Churchill was more than happy with 'his' new aircraft and was ready on board in good time for our departure to Northolt.