

Adolph “Sailor” Malan 24 March 1910 – 17 September 1963



Born to a farming family in Groenfontein South Africa, Adolph Malan got the adventure bug early when out of the blue he informed his family that aged 13½ he wanted to become a sailor. So on 15 February 1924 he joined the training ship: General Botha (formerly HMS Thames) in Simonstown. After graduating with a First Extra certificate in seamanship, Malan joined the Sandown Castle, a ship of the Union Castle Steamship Line in 1927 and set sail around the world for eight years – during which time pilot Charles Lindbergh made his famous solo crossing of the Atlantic.

While in the Merchant Navy, Malan also trained with the Royal Naval Reserve with the rank of Sub-Lieutenant. But when some of his friends applied for short-service commissions with the RAF, Malan decided to do the same, switching services at the age of nearly 25.

Following training he was swiftly promoted to Pilot Officer in January 1937 at No 74 Squadron, “The Tigers”, then acting Flight Commander in August that same year. Before the war started he was again promoted to Flight Lieutenant.

Malan saw a great amount of action during the first year of the war, his skill being recognised in June 1940 with the Distinguished Flying Cross for his: “great skill, courage and relentless determination in his attacks upon the enemy” during ten patrols over the Dunkirk evacuation. He received the DFC at the same time as Robert Stanford Tuck during a presentation at Hornchurch by King George VI and featured seventh on the published list of Aces. On 8 August 1940 Malan was given command of No 74 Squadron and promoted to Acting Squadron Leader.

A strict disciplinarian, Malan kept his men on their toes and never let up on training. To get all his aircraft up above cloud and still in formation, Malan would practise flying up through thick cloud and squadron take-offs in sections – exhilarating, dangerous and fun. Not a natural pilot he was an exceptional shot, a very aggressive air fighter and a strong tactician. He developed a set of simple rules for fighter pilots, disseminated throughout RAF Fighter Command and eventually found on the walls of most airbases:

1. Wait until you see the whites of his eyes. Fire short bursts of one or two seconds only when your sights are definitely “ON”.
2. Whilst shooting think of nothing else, brace the whole of your body; have both hands on the stick; concentrate on your ring sight.
3. Always keep a sharp lookout: “Keep your finger out”.
4. Height gives you the initiative.
5. Always turn and face the attack.
6. Make your decisions promptly. It is better to act quickly even though your tactics are not the best.
7. Never fly straight and level for more than 30 seconds in the combat area.
8. When diving to attack, always leave a proportion of your formation above to act as a top guard.
9. INITIATIVE, AGGRESSION, AIR DISCIPLINE and TEAMWORK are words that MEAN something in Air Fighting.
10. Go in quickly – Punch hard – Get out!

On 10 September 1940 No 74 moved to RAF Coltishall where it would fly down to Duxford to operate with the Big Wing. The Tigers, led by Malan, flew as rear guard of the three squadrons of the wing, with Malan’s unit being tasked to attack bombers.

After the Battle of Britain Malan became Wing Commander and Wing Leader of Biggin Hill on 20 February 1941.

Malan left the RAF in 1946 and returned to South Africa where he joined the Torch Commando, a joint project of the anti-fascist ex-serviceman’s organisation, the Springbok Legion and the War Veterans Action Committee, becoming president of the new organisation. He died in 1963 from Parkinson’s disease, then a rare and mysterious illness. A considerable sum of money was raised in his name to study the disease, which continues still.

In the 1969 film: Battle of Britain, the Squadron Leader Skipper character was explicitly based on Malan.