

Nick Thomas, **Sniper of the Skies - The Story of George Frederick 'Screwball' Beurling**, DSO, DFC, DFM, Pen & Sword-Aviation, 2015, 257pg.

Sniper of the Skies is an account of the life and times of George Frederick 'Screwball' Beurling and his service in the fight for survival of Malta during the Second World War. Much has been written on Beurling's life and this offering would seem to be just one more offering on the life of an unlikely and tragic Canadian hero.

George Beurling was an outstanding Canadian aviator serving in the RAF. How he arrived there has been recounted extensively and Nixon covers that epic journey in detail. It would seem then, that Nixon's account of Beurling's life, would just be another book in the pantheon of this man's outstanding service, but it is not. Nixon uses Beurling's story as the backdrop for the Battle of Malta in 1942 and the squadrons and aircrew, erks – the ground crews and staff, and citizens of Malta who gave their all in a safeguarding this strategic bastion of critical importance.

Nixon's account is gripping as it details combat reports, acknowledging the score, skills and sacrifices of individual squadrons as well as their members. Of further importance is his account on the enemy side of the ledger in the great recounting of battles, kills, and losses by name, squadron, and dates. It is an outstanding achievement that paints a full picture of the battle from both sides, and differing points of view and perspective, something that is rarely done in such detail.

It would seem then that the author deliberately placed Beurling's story as the background of the text, giving full credit to the team that Beurling was a part of in saving of Malta from defeat and disaster. Rightly so, as it was indeed, a full team effort. Uncharacteristically Nixon paints Beurling as a modest yet dedicated airman; not the wild-man/loose cannon he was purported to be. He was thoughtful and academic in approach to combat and air operations. He was not wasteful, and although he tended to youthful exuberance, he adhered to regulations and orders.

Beurling was a private man, given to reflection with few if any vices, least ways while serving at Malta. He had a keen eye, saw the enemy first recognized danger and reacted to it that was often thought to be the actions of a lone wolf. Regardless his reactions likely saved many of his peers' that were unrecognized. It didn't help that Beurling was a bit of 'loner' though, not fond of officers, nor desiring to be one. He was a common man who felt more at home amongst the ranks rather than the officer corps. This attitude was probably the cause of another separation from his peers in a class conscious world of the Royal Air Force.

George Beurling's last air battle in Malta, in which destroyed three enemy aircraft, where he himself was wounded, and his Spitfire finally shot out of the sky, demonstrated his selflessness and devotion to duty by the rescue of his squadron mates from imminent disaster and destruction. He placed himself in danger to save them in their rescue and was very willing to sacrifice his life in that regard.

Perhaps most telling of his character is found in the following excerpt describing Beurling's recovery while in hospital, "As he chatted, Beurling noted how drawn his friends looked, the stress of continual combat taking its toll. Despite his wounds, Beurling remained desperate to get back into action to help the Squadron beat back the enemy raids."¹

¹ Nixon, Pg. 184

Beurling was released from the RCAF in 1944. He never adjusted to civilian life, suffering as he did from what we now know to be post-traumatic stress syndrome. It was a disease, then as now, that was largely unrecognized and untreated. It took its toll of relationships, as his short marriage dissolved.

Beurling was largely unable to deal with the personal trauma of combat, felt that he had not done enough, wanted action and excitement, and desired a to return to operations, a desire that went unrequited to war's end. He was a misplaced man, without support or care from a system that used him to extreme, an abuse widely felt and experienced by many other returning Canadian war vets in the post war years.

George Beurling's adventures ended 1948. He was killed in a flying accident while on a simple test flight in Rome in a Canadian Built Norseman being delivered to the young nation of Israel, 28 May 1948. Beurling was making his way there, to fight for the young nation, and to relive the combats of his youth. It was not to be.

George (Buzz) Beurling was finally laid to rest in Israel on 8 November 1950. His grave marker was stark and impersonal, bearing the inscription of "George (Buzz) Beurling- fell in action 20.5.1948".² There was no recognition of his rank or decorations and his passing, to this day, remains largely unremarked by his native land, Canada.

Nick Thomas paints a complete picture of George Frederick 'Screwball' Beurling's life and times in this written account. It is a worthy addition to one's personal library as a detailed account of the Battle of Malta in 1942 and of the service and operations in the RAF and RCAF during the Second World War.

Major (Retired) GD Madigan, CD, MSc, MA

15 December 2108

Pg. 149 – an observation on promotions from OR to Offr rank:

Meanwhile, the London Gazette of 22 September announced Beurling's promotion to the rank of Pilot Officer (serial number 1267053) with seniority of 25 July 1942 (appears new serial numbers issued on such promotions)

² Nixon, pg. 248