ALISON HOPPEN

THE KNIGHTS HOSPITALLERS

AND THE DEFENCE OF MALTA

The Order of St John of Jerusalem, the Knights Hospitallers, had, by the time of its arrival in Malta in 1530, a history stretching back over four hundred years. It survived in Malta until ousted by Napoleon in 1798 and even in its final years strove to remain faithful to the two principles which had shaped its development and provided its raison d'être: service to the sick and the defence of the Faith. Although the original purpose of the Order had been to provide hospitality and alms for pilgrims visiting Jerusalem, the turbulent condition of the crusading kingdoms in the twelfth century and the need to protect the Holy Places had compelled it to assume a military role. The Hospitallers together with the Templars, played an essential part in the defence of the Latin kingdoms: not only did they supply major contingents to the crusading armies, they were also entrusted with the defence of important strongholds. The gift by King Fulk of Jerusalem of the castle of Bethgibelin in 1136 provides the first evidence of Hospitaller military activity. By the eve of the Battle of Hattin in 1187 the knights controlled over twenty fortresses including Crac des Chevaliers, Castellum Bochee, Lacum, Felicium, Margat and Belvoir. (1) The defeat at Hattin still further emphasised the military role of the Order of St John, an organisation which, because it could draw on European resources of money and men, played a major part in the defence of the impoverished remains of the crusader states.

As the Order gained prestige it attracted support in gifts of land and money and soon built up a network of European estates. It also attracted men from all countries anxious to join a supranational organisation to oppose a common foe. Although at first not a socially elite body the Order in time restricted entry to those who could prove aristocratic ancestry. Nonetheless, upon its arrival in Malta admission was denied to the local nobility.

During the twelfth and thirteenth centuries the Hospitallers built up a fleet to transport men, provisions and military equipment from Europe to the East. Within twenty years of their expulsion from the Holy Land in 1291, the knights had made use of their small fleet, and with the assistance of the Venetian pirate Vignolo de’ Vignoli, captured the island of Rhodes from the Byzantines. Once established in their new base an efficient fighting navy became essential: in the early years to launch crusading attacks on the Moslem powers; later, especially after the fall of Byzantium in 1453, to protect the Order from the Islamic onslaught all knew to be inevitable. And after an un-

successful siege in 1480 the Turks under Suleiman the Magnificent finally ejected the knights from Rhodes in 1522. When, following several years’ wandering, the Order arrived in Malta it had thus already enjoyed a long tradition of military confrontation with the infidel and was possessed of a navy capable of providing a springboard for land attacks as well as being active in the task of harassing Moslem shipping at sea.

This pattern of activity continued after 1530 but with the knights now based in the western Mediterranean their field of operation naturally changed. At first Malta was regarded as a temporary refuge for the reconquest of Rhodes and the galleys continued to take part in campaigns in the East. Although some conquests were made in the Morea in the early 1530s, these were of no lasting significance to the knights whose attention was soon diverted to matters nearer home. (2) The sixteenth century saw the contest between the Spanish and Ottoman empires for control of the Mediterranean and North Africa, and on its acceptance from Charles V of the fortress of Tripoli along with Malta and its smaller sister island Gozo, the Order of St John became directly involved in the struggle. Since its land forces were unable to fight outside Malta without naval assistance, any land engagement inevitably involved a combined operation. Contingents of knights and their soldiers joined the armies of Spain in the various North-African campaigns against Tunis, Goletta, Mahdiya, Algiers, Djerba and, after its loss to the Moslems in 1551, against Tripoli itself, while the galleys assisted in the essential task of transporting men and war materials. (3) By 1574 Spain had failed in attempts to establish herself in Tripoli, Tunis and Algiers; instead these states were ruled by corsair princes dependent on the Ottoman sultan. Thereafter Spanish interests in North Africa were focussed on Morocco, chiefly with a view to safeguard-

could fail to provoke a response from the Moslem powers. The Maltese islands had always been subject to raids from Barbary corsairs and these continued into the early eighteenth century. The corsairs, occasionally allied with the Ottoman fleet, plundered Gozo in 1548, 1550, 1551, 1560, 1563, 1572, 1574, 1582, 1598, 1599 and 1708; landings were made on Malta itself in 1547, 1551, 1554, 1565 and 1614; and the Turkish navy appeared off the island as late as 1722. (8) A full-scale assault by a combined Turkish and corsair fleet occurred only once, in 1565, when Malta withstood a four months' siege. (9) On numerous other occasions, however, rumours of an impending attack compelled the Order to take defensive measures against a similar eventuality.

Although the difficulty of obtaining supplies faced any fortress under siege, such problems were particularly acute in Malta. The island was in no way self-sufficient in foodstuffs although, fortunately, the knights retained the pre-1530 right to export quantities of grain from Sicily to Malta without payment of duty. (10) Moreover Malta possessed none of the raw materials necessary to manufacture munitions, weapons or other instruments and provisions of war. Most of the imports came via Sicilian harbours and even when not under blockade the island could suffer as a result of the activities of corsairs in the channel between Sicily and Malta. The authorities therefore laid in large stocks of grain to guard against the interruption of supplies brought about by crop failure, the political manoeuvrings of France and Spain or the intervention of the Moslems. These supplies were stored within the lines of fortification in large jar-shaped granaries cut out of the rock and sealed with round stone lids. The provision of fresh water within the forts also proved a problem. Malta has few springs and during the campaigning season, from April to September, very little rain falls. Although the aqueduct built by Grand Master Wignacourt in 1614 bringing water from springs over six miles away, ensured an adequate supply to Valletta and Floriana in peacetime, it was vulnerable to attack. The knights therefore decreed that all houses were to be provided with underground cisterns to store rain for use in an emergency. (11) And from time to time when the grand master's spy network suggested that the Moslems were preparing to attack, the cisterns, provisions and other materials necessary to endure a siege were inspected and replenished as the knights made ready to face their old enemy, the infidel.

The Order normally had warning of a threatened assault. The grand masters had an efficient intelligence system and received reports from ambassadors accredited to the courts of Europe and from agents and spies stationed around the Mediterranean. Often the actions of the knights themselves or of the Maltese corsairs provoked the hostility of the Moslems and the threat of an attack came as no surprise. When such news reached the Council of the Order (the body in charge of day-to-day government) the councillors would normally appoint commissioners to attend to supplies, to inspect men and their arms and to check the condition of the artillery and of the fortresses. Inspections were carried out, for example, in 1565, 1633, 1645, 1670, 1714, 1722 and 1761. As there was a tendency in times of relative peace to allow the preparedness of the military organisation to run down, the reports of these commissioners often reveal an unsatisfactory state of affairs. Unfortunately the emergencies which prompted

sufficiently subsided, funds dwindled and building continued in a desultory fashion. Consequently several important schemes remained unfinished for many years, while new proposals which caught the knights' fancy were often commenced regardless of uncompleted projects elsewhere. Thus before Floriana was anywhere near completion the Order stretched its resources to the limit by embarking on the ambitious project of constructing the Sta Margherita lines. But the fact that the Turks turned their attention to the protracted siege of Candia (1645-69) lifted the immediate threat to Malta and interest in fortification waned. Neither Floriana nor Sta Margherita was complete in 1670 when the grandiosely-planned Cotonera lines were begun. Eventually in 1715 the Order came down to earth and decided that henceforth the first priority should be the completion of all works already in hand. (16) By the end of the century this had been achieved after a fashion, but only at the price of considerable modifications being made to the original designs. For example, the outworks of the Cotonera lines had been sacrificed and it was all the Order could manage to close the ring of the main rampart. Moreover, as the defences proliferated costs of repair and maintenance soared. The fortifications—the most permanent legacy of the Order's military activities—thus represented a constant drain on its resources, while at the same time demonstrating the extent of the knights' commitment to their military role. In the eighteenth century increasing attention was paid to the coastal defences of both Malta and Gozo. A series of batteries, redoubts and retrenchments was built with the intention of opposing any attempted landing by an enemy. This marked a change from the earlier strategy which had merely envisaged a swift withdrawal into the complex of fortresses around the harbour.

Whatever its defence strategy, however, the

(13) For a full account of the development of the Maltese fortifications see my forthcoming work on the fortification of Malta by the Order of St. John.
(15) A.O.M. 112, f. 117v (30 December 1639); A.O.M. 261, f. 169v (28 August 1670).
(16) Reports on the state of the defences in 1715 and 1716 were compiled by the French engineer LOUIS FRANÇOIS D'AUBIGNÉ DE TIGNÉ (see National Library of Malta, MS. vol. 1301, pp. 57 and 153).
Order was faced with the necessity of obtaining sufficient men without whom no strategy was possible. The knights themselves naturally played an important part in the defence of their island realm. Although they assumed overall control and direction of the troops and the leading command posts were filled by senior members of the Order, the knights could form only a small part of the fighting force. The number of knights resident in Malta fluctuated from year to year: at the end of the sixteenth century there were over 550, in the late-seventeenth century generally under 450, and finally, in 1798 Napoleon was opposed by only 332 knights of whom fifty were too old or infirm to fight. (17) Even this total of 332 was probably inflated by the recent arrival of destitute knights who had fled from France after the confiscation of the Order’s property in 1792 by the revolutionary government.

It was normally the Order’s practice in an emergency to demand the return of members residing on its European estates. Should the intelligence network indicate a strong possibility of attack, as in 1565, 1635, 1645 and 1715, a general citation would be issued calling knights to Malta. (18) The total membership of the Order during the Maltese period appears to have fluctuated around the 2000 mark, but not all knights were invariably willing or able to respond to the issuing of citations. In the year of the Great Siege (1565), for instance, 540 knights were present in the Spring and no more than a further 225 or so arrived with relief forces in the course of the Summer. (19)

The higher positions in the command structure were filled by knights and under them were men of two main categories: mercenary troops hired abroad and native Maltese serving in various capacities. The population of Malta and Gozo was such that it could never supply all the men necessary for the increasingly complex system of fortifications. (20) Foreign troops were therefore hired to make up the deficiency, and were deployed within the fortresses or in open countryside according to military requirements. After the siege, for example, the fortifications were so completely ruined that a large body of soldiers was considered necessary to defend the island should the Turks chose to return the following year. (21) So open was Malta to attack that the Order actually debated withdrawing its headquarters to Sicily. (22) But after promises of support in men and money from the Catholic powers, the knights decided to construct their new citadel of Valletta and building commenced under the protection of an infantry encampment which in April 1566 the Spanish authorities reckoned to number 12,000 men, comprising 3000 Italians supplied by the pope, 3000 Spaniards and 3000 Germans sent by Philip II, as well as soldiers recruited at the Order’s own expense. (23)

The military situation in the years immediately after the siege was unusual. In normal times the Order would not have expected to defend Malta from behind ruined fortresses and to have been faced with the added burden of a half-completed city which, once conquered, could be turned to the enemy’s advantage. As a rule the chief concern was the procurement of soldiers to garrison the forts. In the late-sixteenth century it was estimated that the harbour fortresses of Valletta, Birgu and Senglea together with the associated forts of St Elmo and St Angelo required a garrison of 4000, and it was certainly not possible to rely too heavily on the islanders to provide such num-

(17) These figures are taken from Mifsud, « L'approvisionamento », pp. 183 (1590); A.O.M. 6393, f. 225v (1664); and F.W. Ryan, The House of the Temple (London, 1930), pp. 279-80 (1798).
(18) Vertot, III, 433 (1565); A.O.M. 111, f. 119v (1635); A.O.M. 257, f. 195 (1645); A.O.M. 266, f. 126 (1715).
(20) Blosset (pp. 89-92) estimates the population as 20,000 in 1530, 50,000 in 1590, over 50,000 in 1632, 66,000 in 1760 and 100,000 by 1798.
(22) Colección de documentos inéditos para la historia de España (Madrid, 1842-95), XXX, 132; Bosto, III, 738.
(23) Colección de documentos, XXX, 209; Bosto, III, 720 and 730.
bers. (24) The simplest solution would have been the employment of a battalion from each of the Christian princes but such a course would have created difficulties if the powers involved happened to be at war with each other as Spain and France were in the sixteenth century until the Peace of Vervins finally ended Spain’s attempt to intervene in the French Wars of Religion, while in the seventeenth century the countries were again on opposing sides in the Thirty Years’ War. Although the use of neutrals such as the Swiss avoided this problem, it was unlikely that more than the odd company could be raised in this way. (25) In any case the number of troops required to man a particular work was often the subject of dispute. The designer, to make the project more attractive to the Order, tended to underestimate numbers. The critics of a scheme, on the other hand, frequently drew attention to its (excessive) manpower requirements. Most engineers argued that, as no enemy could land an army large enough to attack simultaneously on all sides, the defending troops could be concentrated at the points of assault. Moreover, as outer rings of defence were added it was possible for the defenders to fall back from one line to the next, so that the numbers required did not increase in direct proportion to the size of the new works built. It appears that the estimate of the total manpower needed to defend the fortifications at their widest extent, in the eighteenth century, was 20,000 infantry with an appropriate complement of artillerymen. (26)

From the late-seventeenth century the Order became concerned not only to garrison its fortresses but also to command sufficient troops to oppose the enemy in the field, and, particularly, on the beaches. Although foreign soldiers were used for this purpose the main burden fell on the Maltese. A local militia force had several advantages over mercenaries: the problems and expense of recruiting abroad and conveyance to Malta were avoided; the men would not be an additional drain on the island’s already restricted food supplies; and, as was proved on numerous occasions, foreigners found it difficult to adapt to the heat of the Maltese summer. (27) Moreover the Maltese had long been required to fulfil certain military duties even before the coming of the knights, who merely continued the obligation to serve in a militia with both mounted and foot sections. (28) The mounted men were designed to oppose any small raiding party while the infantry acted as lookouts signalling any suspect movement on land or sea. In the seventeenth century the guard duties were taken over by professional soldiers and an attempt was made to form a 4000 strong militia regiment, which, being composed of stout robust peasants accustomed to the local weather, was supposed to be worth 8000 foreign troops. (29) This force became increasingly important in the eighteenth century as the Order’s strategy emphasised the need to oppose an attacker before he could lay siege to the harbour forts.

However the frequent reports on the state of the militia and the various regulations which were repeatedly issued suggest that the peasants did not live up to the hopes that they would become first class troops. Not that the foreign soldiers employed in the second half of the eighteenth century were much more reliable. Following an uprising led by local priests in 1775, the Order, doubting the loyalty of the Maltese, decided to raise abroad a force of 1200 men to be known as the Regiment of Malta. (30) It was not a success. The recruits were deserters, beggars and general riff-raff who occupied themselves in terrorising the countryside. Discipline was imposed only

(25) A.O.M. 6547, f. 75.
(26) A.O.M. 6598, f. 84v.
(27) Bosio, III, 776 (1565); A.O.M. 120, f. 213v (1615 and 1645).
(28) A. Mifsud, «La malizia e le torri antiche di Malta» in Archivum Melitense, IV (1920), 55-100.
(29) A.O.M. 260, f. 31v (1658) and A.O.M. 120, f. 213v (1659).
(30) A.O.M. 309, ff. 103v-104.
after the worst troublemakers had been weeded out and thereafter Maltese soldiers were allowed to enlist so that the whole nature of the force was changed.

Although the regiment soon became a major item in the Order's expenditure, economy measures reduced its effective strength from over 1000 in 1788 to 500 in 1798 when Napoleon invaded the island. (31) Napoleon's 40,000 veterans were opposed by a modest force of 332 knights and some 17,000 troops. The Order followed the plans of defence drawn up after invasion scares in 1715 and 1761 which were based on the principle of an "active defence of the islands" whereby all accessible points on the coasts were to be defended and any landing was to be opposed. (32) Should a landing be effected and the forces in the field overcome, the troops were to withdraw to Valletta to prepare for a long siege. Although this plan was opposed by the Order's engineer Stephan de Tousard (a Frenchman later to serve with Napoleon's army in Egypt) who feared that troops would be cut off in the open and thus in consequence that the garrisons would be inadequate, (33) the forces were divided into several commands and an attempt was made, none too effectively, to hold the French in the countryside. The majority of the defenders were militiamen with neither the training nor the experience to offer prolonged resistance to Napoleon's men. They soon fled, while those soldiers defending Valletta and the other harbour forts were never put to the test. Grand Master Hompesch, his position undermined by dissent among the knights (some of whom had become influenced by revolutionary ideas from France), and fully conscious of the precarious financial position of the Order, surrendered within three days. (34)

Despite this last fiasco it is clear that in the eyes of the knights themselves the importance of military affairs in the life of the Order had not diminished during the period in Malta. They saw themselves in the forefront of the Christian struggle against the infidel, although by the late-eighteenth century their part in such of the contest as still continued had degenerated into little more than skirmishing with opposing piratical powers. The fortifications were primarily defensive, constructed to repel an invader or to withstand a siege. The offensive actions of the Order—the exploits in the Morea, the campaigns against the North-Africa states, the harassing of Moslem shipping—touched the fortifications only in so far as they excited retaliation against the home base of the troublesome knights. Yet the threat of such an attack produced a defensive reaction. The fabric, the design, the artillery, the provisioning and the garrisons of the fortifications were constantly inspected, while, on occasion, large and costly new works were initiated. Once the hope of reconquering Rhodes had been abandoned, the material and financial rewards accruing from the Order's aggressive foreign policy were far outweighed by the ever-increasing cost of maintaining the fortresses, towers, redoubts, batteries and entrenchments, and of providing an adequate garrison. It could be argued that had the Order ceased its military activities the vast investment of energy and money in the defence of Malta would no longer have been necessary. But leaving aside the fact that the aggression was not one-sided, the entire abandonment of a military role would have completely changed the nature of the Order, for its institutions had been built around its dual origin as a hospitaller and military organisation. Any fundamental challenge to its crusading ideals would have severely shaken the whole foundation and purpose of the Order. In the delicate international diplomatic intricacies of the eighteenth century there was no alternative military employment to which the knights could turn without jeopardising their supranational status. Thus the Order of St John continued to

(32) A.O.M. 266, f. 163v (1715); A.O.M. 6555 (1761) and A.O.M. 6558, ff. 53-69v and 100-122v (1761).
(33) Ryan, pp. 264-5.
(34) Good accounts of the Order's closing years in Malta and of the siege are found in Ryan, pp. 143-346 and Cavaliere, pp. 181-235.
shoulder a heavy defence burden, which, by
the late-eighteenth century, was beyond its
means and which in the final analysis could
not compensate for the increasing failure of
erve and doubt as to mission which were
such features of its members and its leaders
during the last decades in Malta.

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RÉSUMÉ

Quand l'Ordre de St. Jean de Jérusalem prit
possession de Malte en 1530 sa tradition hospitalièremilitaire et militaire était déjà vieille de bien quatre siècles. Son double rôle d'assistance aux pauvres et aux malades, et de défense de la Foi, lui avait acquis un prestige considérable, qui lui avait valu des donations de biens meubles et immeubles dans la plupart des pays de l'Occident chrétien.

Au cours des siècles l'Ordre s'était construit une marine puissante que l'infidèle avait appris à craindre. Il s'agissait désormais de l'employer pour défendre la Méditerranée occidentale contre les assauts des forces ottomanes. La guerre de course servait aux deux adversaires pour alimenter leurs armées respectives et bientôt Malte fut considéré par les Turcs comme le centre de la piraterie ennemie qu'il fallait détruire. Des tentatives de débarquement eurent lieu en 1547, 1551 et 1554, culminant en 1565 dans le Grand Siège glorieusement repoussé par les forces de l'Ordre.

La victoire, achetée au prix d'énormes sacrifi-
ces, ne rendait que plus évidente la nécessité de se prémunir contre des attaques futures.

La ville fortifiée que fit construire le Grand Maître de La Valette, devait servir à abriter le quartier général des Chevaliers et à défendre les mouillages du Grand Fort et de Marsamxett. Venaient ensuite les fortifications de Floriana, le long des côtes, puis les lignes de Sta Margherita et de Cotonera. Plusieurs de ces grands travaux devaient rester inachevés par manque d'argent et par des changements de stratégie survenus pendant leur construction et annulant leur utilité.

Un autre grand problème à résoudre était de trouver les hommes nécessaires pour garnir des fortifications si étendues. L'efficacité de ces grands ouvrages ne fut jamais mise à l'épreuve. La prise de Malte par Napoléon en 1798, fut facilitée par les idées révolutionnaires qui sapèrent toute volonté de résistance et par le doute qui régnait parmi les Chevaliers quant à la vocation militaire d'un Ordre international dans l'Europe du XVIIe siècle finissant.