

The Malta Home Guard

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Entertainment

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Young and old volunteers. Photo: Heritage Malta

The need for a Volunteer Territorial Force or a Reserve Defence Force in Malta was being considered as early as the Abyssinian Crisis of 1935, when Fascist Italy invaded Ethiopia, and in 1936 when Italy sided with General Franco during the Spanish Civil War. Italy's friendship with Nazi Germany grew stronger with the 'Pact of Steel' in 1939, and when in 1940 it declared itself an ally of Germany. By then, Britain and the Empire had already been at war with Germany since September of 1939. The Mediterranean was a war zone.

In 1939, the Malta Auxiliary Corps was raised by means of the Malta Territorial Force Ordinance. The duties of these men were mainly as cooks, mechanics, orderlies and drivers, the latter even volunteered using their own cars and trucks. A number of businessmen who were not eligible for military service started contacting the British military authorities and offered to serve as required in the defence of the islands and for King and country. As early as April and May 1940, other letters were written by Maltese businessmen to (Sd) J.W.D. Locker, Assistant to the Lieutenant Governor, who offered their service, and of the men in their employment, for voluntary service. At the time, this subject was being discussed by the G.S.O. at Castille and the Local Defence Committee.

British intelligence had foreseen that an alliance between Italy and Germany was imminent. The military authorities realised that since the islands were already successful in attacking supplies to German troops in North Africa, Malta would be at the top of Italy's

population came into force and the following statement was issued from the Palace in Valletta:

“The decision of His Majesty’s government to fight until our enemies are defeated will be heard with the greatest satisfaction by all ranks of the Garrison of Malta.

“It may be that hard times lie ahead of us, but I know that however hard they may be, the courage and determination of all ranks will not falter, and that with God’s help we will maintain the security of this fortress.

“I call on all officers and other ranks humbly to seek God’s help, and then in reliance on Him to do their duty unflinchingly.”

Lieutenant-General Sir William George Shedden Dobbie had arrived in Malta on April 27, 1940, as Acting Governor-General and Commander-in-Chief of Malta. He was confirmed as Governor of Malta a year later.

On the day Italy declared war, Dobbie issued a statement to the garrison:

Regulations issued on June 1, 1940, stated that:

“Under Section 2 of the Malta Territorial Force Ordinance, 1939, as amended by Government Notice No 247 published on June 1, 1940, the Officer Adminstrating the Government hereby prescribes a unit of armed infantry designated ‘The Malta Volunteer Defence Force’.”

Under sub-section (1) of Section 3 of the Malta Territorial Ordinance, 1939, the Officer Adminstrating the Government set a number of regulations. Members of the Malta Volunteer Defence Force were to wear a uniform or badge while on duty as approved by the Governor.

“ The force was made up from among local hunters (kaċċaturi) and other game-shooters from the farming community

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Service in the Malta Volunteer Defence Force (MVDF) was to be unpaid, but the government could authorise the payment of out-of-pocket expenses, and in cases of hardship, of subsistence allowance to any member of the force. In case of injury or death on active service, the government would pay injury gratuities or death gratuities to any dependents. All weapons and equipment issued to any member was to remain the property of the government.

The MVDF was formed on June 2, 1940, to augment the local defence of the Maltese islands by providing static defence to villages, protection of vulnerable points and by giving timely notice of enemy movements to superior military organisations.

The force was made up from among local hunters (kaċċaturi) and other game-shooters from the farming community. A further addition was composed of Boy Scouts and government employees who were exempted from military service because their work was classified as essential, but opted to enlist as ‘volunteers’. Although being too young to join any of the services, there were also many enthusiasts, very often young boys in their teens. Within a few weeks, their numbers swelled to some 3,000 strong.



The Żebbuġ Home Guard Group with company commander Anthony Borg, winners of marksmanship competition, from Malta: Blitzed but Not Beaten by Philip Vella, 1998.

A few months later, the MDVF was renamed the Malta Home Guard and retained the role to shoot at any parachutists attempting to invade the island. New regulations were issued, cited as the Defence (Malta Volunteer Defence Force) Regulations 1941. Members of the Malta Volunteer Defence Force were to be male British subjects, to voluntarily undertake to serve therein without pay and subject to instructions as issued by the Governor. Volunteers were considered as members of the Armed Forces of the Crown, be subject to military law as a soldier, and the Army Act, 1881 (44 and 45 Vic. Cap. 58) and issued with a service number. Members of the Home Guard were also required to live away from their homes

Training was conducted by British and Maltese army instructors, mainly by the King's Own Malta Regiment and the 2nd/Queen's Own (Royal West Kent), to which KOMR Captains H. Parnis England and S.C. Xuereb were assigned. Many men were familiar with firearms, some even having served earlier in uniform and were now aged or invalid, but most attained a high standard of marksmanship.



Malta Home Guard volunteers.
Contemporary World War II watercolours by
Alfred Gerada. Photos: Dr Albert Ganado
Collection

In February 1941, Lt Col Edgar Joseph Vella, E.D. (66879) was promoted to a full Colonel and given administrative command of the four KOMR Battalions, the Malta Pioneer Group

his service, he was awarded the Order of the British Empire, as published in the London Gazette of January 6, 1944.

Initially, the Malta Volunteer Defence Force did not wear any particular uniform but civilian dress, mainly their normal daily attire. They were issued a 'Brodie' steel helmet, and recognised by an armband with the letter 'V'. The authorities wished for the men to be dressed in overalls as in the United Kingdom, but at a later date they were issued with dark khaki denim battle fatigues and not all units wore armbands. This uniform was found better suited than the thick serge battledress, especially in hot weather. They also wore the standard issue khaki baratheia field service cap, with a distinctive Maltese Cross badge.



Some men provided their own shotguns but since the number of Enfield .303's was limited to the regular troops, the remainder were issued with P14s and captured Italian Mannlicher-Carcano M-91 bolt action rifles and grenades. When on patrol, some men carried the 1907 sword bayonet. Webbing, when worn, was the 1937 pattern issue. They were also issued with respirators in case of a gas attack, and carried water bottles.

Following the surrender of Italy on September 8, 1943, the war abated from Malta, and therefore the services of the Home Guard were no longer required. In fact, Malta had become the base for the invasion of Italy. Many of the war-raised units in Malta were no longer required and their numbers were slowly reduced. The Malta Home Guard was demobilised on December 10, 1944, seven days after those of the UK.

During the period of its existence, the Home Guard did not meet any emergency other than a few false alarms, and suffered the same deprived conditions as the rest of the islanders.

“ The Malta Home Guard retained the role to shoot at any parachutists attempting to invade the island ”

To mark the disbandment, ‘Stand-Down Parades’ were held at Hamrun, San Anton, St Julian’s and Mellieha. The Home Guard eventually totalled 4,500 men. On December 11, a final parade of the Home Guard was held for His Excellency the Governor and Commander-in-Chief, Lieutenant General Sir Edmond Schreiber, with an inspection by Brigadier De La Bere. For this occasion, Sir Edmond issued the following message:

“It is now four and a half years since ‘The Malta Volunteer Defence Force’ first came into being. Your country was in danger and 3,000 volunteers immediately answered the call to come forward and help in its defence. Later your force was re-named the Home Guard, the same name as was given to your comrades in arms in the United Kingdom. Like them, you were at first badly armed and untrained, but again like them, that vital thing, the fighting spirit, permeated your ranks.

“As your name implies, your task has always been to guard your homes, in other words, to defend your towns and villages. Eighteen months ago you had nearly 4,500 men performing this duty.

“By God’s mercy and through the efforts of the Regular Services, backed up by your readiness to fight, Malta has been spared the horrors of invasion which have been suffered by so many less fortunate countries. The tide of battle has receded from the shores of Malta and is now entering the homeland of our arch enemy, Germany. Total victory has not yet been won, but it is within sight. That is why the Home Guard can now ‘Stand Down’.

“You may well feel proud of your efforts of the last four and a half years and that you volunteered to accept the great privileges of service. It is that spirit of service and devotion to duty, without thought of personal profit or gain, which has built up and preserved the British Empire to which we are all so proud to belong.

“On behalf of His Majesty the King, I thank you. This is my message to you – may the recent years of comradeship of arms bear fruit in a happy comradeship of peace”.

The legacy of the Malta Home Guard has since been rekindled, as for the past 10 years, Malta Command WW2 Living History Group, a local heritage interpretation NGO, has participated in many events that portray the Maltese soldier during those turbulent years of World War II. Other to detachments of the Royal Malta Artillery, the King's Own Malta Regiment and later even the Royal Air Force, a new unit styled on the Malta Home Guard is currently being formed so that this important unit in the defence of Malta will remain remembered.



Cap badges (from left) Officer, Malta Volunteer Defence Force; officer, Malta Home Guard; Volunteer, Malta Home Guard; Volunteer, Malta Home Guard (alternate badge).
