

# THE ROYAL NAVY AND VITTORIOSA — OLD AND NEW DOCUMENTS

**Can. Ant. Zammit Gabarretta**

When the British base in Malta came to an end on March 31, 1979, the old, historic town of Vittoriosa found itself in the limelight. For over a hundred years, it had witnessed the ebb and flow of Britain sea power in the Mediterranean. One, consequently, understands why the British Admiral donated the white ensign, which once fluttered on the battlements of H.M.S. St. Angelo to the Historical and Cultural Society of Vittoriosa a few days before the closure of the British Naval base. On that occasion, the Secretary of this Society addressed the following letter of thanks and appreciation to Cdr. J.L. Duffett of the Royal Navy.

19th March 1979

Cdr. J.L. Duffett R.N.  
H.M.S. St. Angelo  
Vittoriosa

Dear Sir,

The President and Members of the Vittoriosa Historical and Cultural Society wish to express their thanks for your gesture in donating the British White Ensign to our Society. Please convey our thanks to the British Admiral.

I wish also to take this opportunity to state that Vittoriosa and its main Fort St. Angelo have had great links with the British Navy. Ever since the British came to Malta, they immediately utilised the historical buildings left by the Order's Navy at our wharf and for many years Vittoriosa had its first British Naval Hospital at the Armerija Palace, until this was transferred to Bighi.

A great number of our citizens helped in making the British Navy respected on the seven seas.

The White Ensign which you generously donated to us, and which we fully appreciate will make us for ever remember the historic links between our City and the Navy of Her Majesty.

Yours sincerely,  
**Lorenzo Zahra**  
Secretary

This documentary evidence, (1) written at a time when Malta was bidding farewell to the last British sailor, recalls another document, still extant not-

1. Commemorative pamphlet "Historical and Cultural Society, Vittoriosa — 25th Anniversary 1954 — 1979", Lux Press, 1979, p.16.

withstanding the three hundred years which have passed by since it was first written. Jealously kept in the Capitular Archives of the historic Parish Church of Old Vittoriosa, it sheds an interesting light on the conduct of the British sailor when he first stepped on Maltese shores. (2)

It was the year 1675. In England the Stuart King Charles II had been reigning for fifteen years, since the monarchy had been happily restored in 1660. The British Navy was making its presence felt on the blue waves of the Mediterranean — a fact which brought it into direct contact with the problem of the barbary corsairs and which made it feel the lure of the enticing safe haven of Malta, where the Knights Hospitallers ruled securely established behind the impregnable fortifications which they had built. Nicolas Cotoner, a French Knight, was Grand Master at the time and he seemed to have been quite friendly inclined to the British monarch whose ships were asking permission to make use of Malta's harbour.

On 22nd March 1675 three British warships entered the Grand Harbour. This event has been duly recorded in the registers of the Councils of State of the Order. From those records one learns that the commanding officer, Admiral John Narborough "portava stendardo alla Maestra di color torchino, incrociato doppiamente dalla croce rossa". (3) He had come to the Mediterranean to check the barbary corsairs who were a constant menace to Christian shipping. He brought a letter of presentation to Grand Master Cotoner from King Charles of England. On 26th March 1675, the officers commanding the ships and a group of followers landed in Valletta and had a look at the City, even though their ships were still kept under observation by the Health Authorities in Malta, as they were coming from North Africa. (4) On 21st October 1675, Admiral Narborough came again to Malta. This time, he had six vessels with him and claimed the right to receive first the formal salute of welcome from the batteries ashore, as he had claimed on his first visit in March. (5)

One needs not, here, enter into the details of protocol which regulated the manner of saluting the foreign ships which entered the harbour throughout the years when the Knights ruled Malta, (6) a matter profusely dealt with in the records of the Councils of State of the Order of St. John. Nor needs one take up the controversy whether the British ships coming from Tripoli were

2. Capitular Archives, Vittoriosa: Cartolaro Vol. III, p. i, ff. 243-244.

3. National Library: Liber Conc. Status, Arch, 262, f. 39.

4. *Ibid.*

5. National Library: Lib. Con. Status, Arch. 262, f. 44.

6. Dal Pozzo, *Historia della S. Religione*, Venezia, 1715, Vol. II, p. 439.

the cause of the outbreak of plague in Malta in December 1675, (7) when the epidemic caused widespread havoc, one of its many victims being Don Pietro Asciasq, the parish priest of Vittoriosa, who died of plague on May 13, 1676. (8)

Particularly interesting are the several orders which Admiral John Narborough issued to the Captains of the ships of His Britannic Majesty in Malta on January 2, 1676. (9) These Orders are to be found in the above-mentioned document, which has been preserved for all that length of time in Vittoriosa, happily surviving the fire and smoke of the terrible air attack of the Luftwaffe, when the Chapter Hall of St. Lawrence Church, where it was kept, was razed to the ground on Thursday, January 16, 1941.

Since the sixteenth century, the Apostolic Delegate and Inquisitor, sent by the Holy See, had been established in Malta with the duty to safeguard the preservation of the Catholic Faith in the Island. In 1676, Mgr. Rannuccio Pallavicini, residing as his predecessors had done in Vittoriosa, was Inquisitor. It seems that he was not at all pleased with the conduct of the British sailors, who came that year to Malta with Admiral John Narborough. He consequently, expressed his regrets to the British Consul in the Island, Alfonso Desclaus. Mgr. Pallavicini prudently told Desclaus that the British sailors should not cause trouble in the Island, nor should they by their conduct offend the religious sentiments of the people. The British Consul duly referred the Inquisitor's comments to the Admiral. The latter was only too willing to meet Mgr. Pallavicini's wishes and without hesitation issued the necessary orders. "I have been informed," stated Admiral Narborough, "that the officers and sailors of His Majesty's ships have been the cause of many disreputable actions in Malta. This has caused embarrassment to the Grand Master and his Government, from whom we have received great and uncommon favours. These favours in no way deserve to be answered with disrespect: such an attitude would be derogatory to the good name of the British Nation."

After this introduction, the Admiral asserted that he wanted to take adequate steps to prevent similar actions in the future. He, consequently, forbade all officers and sailors of His Majesty's Ships from going ashore without a special licence. After landing, they were not to enter into any Church, especially during religious services, nor could they force the inhabitants of the place to prepare for them meat dishes on days of abstinence. They were further forbidden to take with them ashore tobacco nor could

7. P. Cassar, *Medical History of Malta*, London, 1964, p.172.

8. A. Ferris, *Descrizione Storica delle Chiese di Malta e Gozo*, Malta, 1866, p.277.

9. Capitulare Archives Vittoriosa: Cartolaro Vol. III, p. i, f. 243.

they trade on land without the explicit permit of the British Consul in Malta; and — last, but not least — no sailor could pass the night ashore without the permission of his Captain.

One should here add that Admiral Narborough's orders were not only intended to be obeyed by the officers and sailors who came with him to Malta on the occasion of his expedition into the Mediterranean. In fact, he gave directives to the British Consul in Malta to see that these orders were adhered to by all British Captains who were later to call at Malta's harbour.

Alfonso Desclaus duly made and signed an official translation of the Admiral's orders from English into Italian and presented it to Mgr. Pallavicini on January 18, 1676.

The importance of this document justifies, in my opinion, the publication of its text *in toto*:

Essendo Io stato informato di molte insolenze, che sono state commesse nella Città di Malta dall'Officiali e marinari delle navi di S.M. à grand' incommodo del G. Maestro e Governo, dal quale noi habbiamo ricevuti si grandi e straordinarii favori, e però non devono in nessuna maniera esser remunerati con le inciviltà, tanto derogando all'onore della Nazione Inglese e tutti buoni costumi, per esser tanto ingrati d'intraprendersi colla giurisdizione di qualsivoglia luogo, si come per esso à sturbare la pace e quiete del medesimo: e però per il futuro prevent.ne (sic) di simili insolenze per il presente richiedo tutti li Capitani delle Navi di S.M. all'arrivo di Malta, vedendo il presente strettamente ordinare e comandare à tutti gli suoi officiali e marinari di non andar'in terra senza speciale licenza; et havendo licenza, non si opponeranno in nessuna maniera alla potestà e governo del luogo soprad.to, ma bassarsi con tutto civile rispetto; ne presumere d'entrarci nelle loro Chiese e specialmente quando sono alle loro devozioni; ne frequentare discorsi o argomenti alcuni in materie di Religione; ne sforzare nessuno dell'abitanti del luogo à cucinare carne nelle loro case, ne mangiare carne nelli giorni proibiti; ne portar in terra alcun tabacco o mercanzia di qualsivoglia sorte per vendere senza la licenza del Console Inglese di Malta; ne nessuno huomo di dormir in terra senza licenza di suo Capitano sotto pena di grandissimo castigo. Dato sotto la mia mano, questo giorno 2 di Gennaio 1676, à bordo la nave di S.M. Harivvich, in Malta, Giovanni Narborough. — Ordine da seguire tutti li Capitani di S.M.B. che arriveranno in Malta.