

# The Invasion of Sicily: Personal Experiences of a Young Man in Ghasri

INFORMATION COMPILED AND WRITTEN BY TONI CALLEJA<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

The 10th July 2018 marked the 75th anniversary of the invasion of Sicily, which event represented a great relief for the inhabitants of the Maltese islands, since it was going to ward off the war from our country. The success of this massive, military operation was fundamental because, first and foremost, it was going to eliminate the apprehension connected with a possible invasion of Malta by the Nazi and Fascist forces. Success was also important

for the Mediterranean in order that it would become less dangerous and thus the Merchant Fleet would be able to deliver provisions in a regular manner, so as to alleviate the shortages that were a cause of starvation for the population.

In 1993, our fellow countryman, Francis Galea (known as Frenç ta' Marcell: 1926-2013), who was born and bred in Church Street, Ghasri, and who had emigrated to Australia, thought it fit to forward to the present author some material containing his



Aerodromes in Pantelleria, Sicily and Reggio Calabria from where the Italians and Germans used to take off for their air attacks on Malta.

<sup>1</sup> A version of this article (in Maltese) has appeared in the publication "Il-Korpus"- Issue No. 45 (2018) published by the Ghasri Parish. The article was translated into English by Miriam Muscat.



1943 - Anti-Aircraft Cannon Battery

memories and other experiences of Ghasri during World War II.<sup>2</sup> The following text is taken from a much longer article, which actually relates to the Invasion of Sicily by the Allied Forces. In order to give more structure to the writings as sent to the present author by Frenč and also to portray them in a wider historical perspective, the text is expanded by historical footnotes.

### **The Invasion of Sicily**

When the Allied Forces managed to seize the whole coast of North Africa, they started to prepare for the invasion of Sicily. Thousands of troops and armaments arrived in Malta. The US forces decided to construct an aerodrome on Gozo<sup>3</sup> from which they could fly their aeroplanes and for this they

chose a site in the limits of Xewkija. Many Gozitans said amongst themselves: “so the war is going to stretch for years if the Forces want to wait until they build an aerodrome!” It was also generally felt that there would be work for all Gozitans for a long time. Ships docked at Marsalforn, unloading a profusion of machinery, bulldozers, mechanical shovels, road-rollers, large trucks and other engines and machinery about which the locals had no idea least of all how and for which they were used. In less than three weeks the Allied Forces flew their aeroplanes from the new aerodrome.<sup>4</sup>

When the aerodrome was ready a number of enemy aeroplanes flew over it for surveillance. One day Frenč was asleep in a hut on the threshing floor in a field in front of his family’s house.

<sup>2</sup> Correspondence: Frenč (Francis) Galea to Toni Calleja [Letter no:112 – 01 Apr 1993] 17-19.

<sup>3</sup> Those interested to learn more about the history of this aerodrome are kindly referred to : F. Bezzina, “Il-Mitjar ta’ Ghawdex fl-Invażjoni ta’ Sqallija”, in *Il-Berqa* [21 Apr 1961] 3-4; L-Orizzont [18 Jun 1975] 7-8; and C. Bezzina, *The Gozo Airfield*, Malta 2008.

<sup>4</sup> In 1948, Dwight E. Eisenhower (1890-1969), the 34th President of the United States of America, published a book entitled *Crusade in Europe*. The book, which is very interesting, is dedicated to the troops of all three services: the Army, the Air Force and the Navy of all Allied countries. Amongst other issues in this book, the President writes about the American aerodrome on Gozo. Eisenhower writes: “Following our success in winning Pantelleria we were quick to transfer a strong air force and in the meantime we strengthened our position by establishing a new site from where to fly airplanes on Gozo. The US President continues writing: “The building of an aerodrome on Gozo posed a great challenge and it could never be finished in time for the invasion of Sicily. Amongst other problems, and at such a critical moment, an American engineer, a specialist in the building of aerodromes visited Air Marshal Park, who was responsible of the Air Force in Malta. Air Marshal Park informed him about the difficulties encountered in Gozo and updated him on what had been done so far, following which he asked him how long he thought it would take to finish it. The American engineer replied: ‘Ten days’, which took Air Marshal Park, a very efficient and dynamic official, by surprise in a way that at first he thought it was a joke prompting him to ask: ‘When will you start?’ with the expert replying: ‘Just as my tools arrive – which will take many days’. Urgent messages were dispatched and thirteen days following the arrival of the first construction machinery in Gozo, the first fighter flew from the island”. Eisenhower admitted that for the accomplishment of this miracle, the engineers worked with all sorts of modern tools that were used in all types of big construction works in America, and which the British engineers never imagined that it would ever have been possible to bring to such a critical place situated at the forefront of war. The President went as far to write: “Thanks to this aerodrome we acquired a new base from where we could strengthen our attacks on Sicily”.





Gourgion Tower built by nobleman Giovanni Gourgion and inaugurated by Grandmaster Adrian De Wignacourt in 1690. On 16 June 1943, it started to be dismantled to make way for the New Aerodrome in Gozo.

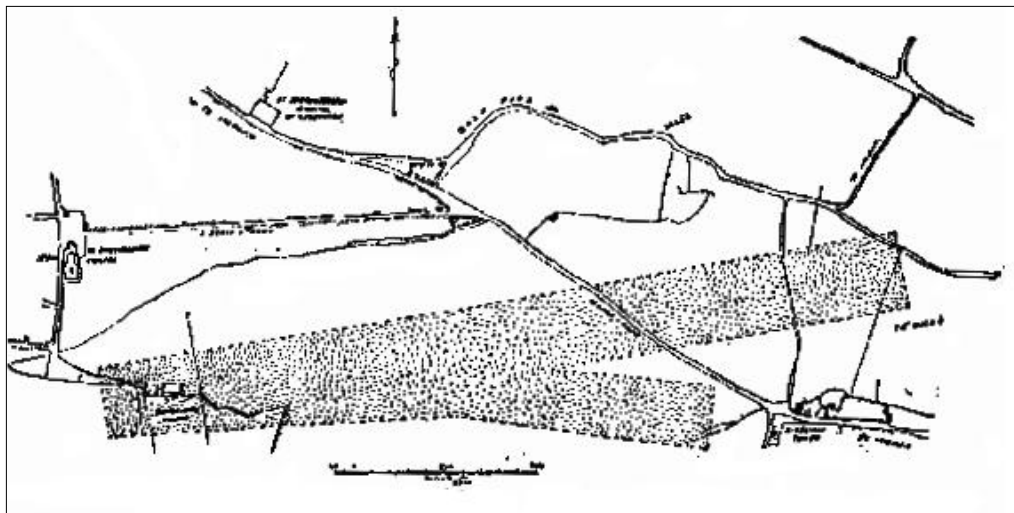
Ġorġ Portelli (il-Goga: 1914-1997) and Grezzju Sultana (ta' Ċirnienu: 1924-1996) who had their threshing floors a little distance from that of Frenċ, were going in for a nap and when they saw Frenċ sleeping they decided to play a prank on him by stacking up bales of wheat against the door of his hut. A short time later Frenċ heard loud bullet shots coming from the vicinity, which made him wake up immediately and run out from behind the wheat stacks to see what was happening. As Frenċ himself recounted, he witnessed a scene that forever remained in his memory. The searchlights surrounding the aerodrome in Xewkija were all directed in one whole circle towards the sky, with an enemy plane captured in their midst and all the small and big cannons firing upon it. On seeing that attack happening before his eyes, Frenċ started shouting for his parents so that they would wake up and also see that memorable scene, for themselves. George and Grezzju, from whose threshing floors this scene had apparently not been visible, started laughing because they thought Frenċ was calling his

father so he could help him out of the hut. This was the only time that an enemy plane was fired upon from the island of Gozo.

On the 10th July, 1943, precisely a year after the date which Hitler had set as the day of the invasion of Malta, the invasion of Sicily started. Frenċ recalls how he and his family were on their threshing floor, threshing wheat. Aeroplanes were flying from the new aerodrome, together with many others that took off from Malta, constantly flying low over their heads, such that the loud incessant noise was unbearable. The invasion was a huge success although it could not happen without the loss of many lives and armaments.<sup>5</sup>

Another experience which Frenċ remembered from the war days was when a few days after the attack on Sicily, he had gone for a swim at Wied l-Għasri. Notwithstanding various warnings not to touch anything which could be potentially dangerous, Frenċ had spotted a metal tin (not wider than a

<sup>5</sup> In a symbolic gesture during the Invasion of Sicily that started from Malta on the 20th October, in Castille Square, Major General W.A. Oxley, C.B.E., M.C., A.D.C., Commander of the British troops in Malta, presented an Italian cannon to the Committee of the People of Valletta – the first Italian gun that had been seized during the battle of Sicily – donated by the 51st Highland Division, in commemoration of the fact that troops from that Division embarked from Malta to go on that offensive. On a brass plaque mounted on wood, the following words are inscribed: “*To the people of Valletta from the 51st Highland Division. Source: **The first Italian gun captured in the Sicilian Campaign, July, 1943.***” (Presentation of an Italian Cannon to Malta, in Lehen is-Sewwa (23 October, 1943).



Gozo Airport June 1943 (Il-Berqa - 21st April 1961)

penny) which he managed to fish out of the water. Inside he had found a piece of paper with the name of someone called “James Pruitt” and the words “Somewhere at Sea”, together with an address in America written on it. Thinking this was intended as a last message by this person for his family, Frenč wrote a letter describing his find and posted it to the address written on the note. However, later Frenč regretted acting on impulse, since he never received a reply and with hindsight he reasoned that his letter might never have reached its destination, because, in those days, mail from and to Malta was censored.

### The Surrender of Italy

The Allies continued their advancement in Italy, and when Mussolini realised that all was lost, he resigned and escaped, but did not manage to get too far because he was captured by a group of Italian Partisans who killed him. The same fate also fell on his companion, Clara Petacci, who was also captured alongside him.

On the 8th September, when Malta was celebrating the famous victory of the Great Siege of 1565, the long-awaited news of the surrender of Italy reached our shores. Two days later, Italian Admiral Dzara surrendered the Italian fleet to British Admiral Sir John Cunningham at Malta’s Grand Harbour.

All Maltese and Gozitans who served with the British Services were awarded medals and commendations. Amongst them there was also our fellow citizen Fr. Cherubin Sultana OFM Cap. (tač-Ĉemperlin: 1901-1945). The present author is not aware as to why this commendation was bestowed upon Fr. Cherubin,

but it would be logical to think that it was for the friar’s ceaseless work as Chaplain of the Maltese hospitals. Fr. Cherubin followed the example of his relative, Rev. Can. Francis Mercieca (il-Pačikkan: 1805-1872), who was born and bred in the same house. At great risk to himself, Fr. Cherubin assisted the wounded and dying during World War II in the same manner as Fr. Francis before him had assisted the sick during the cholera epidemic, with much sacrifice and hazard for his health.

### Conclusion

This is how Frenč brings his recollections to an end: “When the dangers of war had been warded off, the Gozitans rejoiced and organised great celebrations. The musical bands came out again to play in local streets, we rang our church bells, and we, the community of Għasri, fulfilled the pledge we had made by participating in a pilgrimage to the Basilica of Our Lady of Patronage, where we thanked our Lord and the Virgin Mother for the immeasurable graces bestowed upon us.”

### References

- Bezzina, F. (1962). *Il-Mitjar ta’ Ghawdex fl-Invażjoni ta’ Sqallija*, in Bezzina, C. (2008). *The Gozo Airfield*, Malta 2008.
- Eisenhower, D.E (1948). *Crusade in Europe*. US: Doubleday.

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