

H.M.S. ST. ANGELO – LAST BRITISH STRONGHOLD

It is only upon God and our own swords that we rely ... We shall not fail", once said that great Grandmaster, La Valette.

It was La Valette who strengthened the ancient fort of St. Angelo – the last British stronghold in Malta – and then constructed a battery below to command the entrance of the harbour.

Fort St. Angelo, built by the Arabs still stands proudly on the extremity of Vittoriosa. According to Naval tradition, St. Angelo or, as it became known, H.M.S. St. Angelo was officially classed as a "battleship".

Each floor is in fact a deck, each room a cabin. Of interest is the fact that the enemy claimed a hundred times during World War Two to have "sunk" this capital ship.

Many perhaps do not know that under the then Admiralty Constabulary Headquarters building, (known better as the Old Bakery) there was once a framed inscription which said:

"On this site of this building stood the arsenal of the Navy of the Religion built in 1597, rebuilt and enlarged in 1696 to accommodate three galleys on slips.

In 1819 the British converted this building into a Mast House for the Royal Navy.

In 1842 the arsenal was demolished and the present building erected as the Naval Bakery.

Since 1965 it has been converted for use as the Royal Naval Education Centre".

H.M.S. St. Angelo has a romance which goes back to the early days of the Mediterranean. After the victory over the Turks right up to the Order's expulsion by the French in 1798, St. Angelo was maintained in a state of readiness unequalled by any other fort in Europe.

In the year 1900, St. Angelo was transferred from the War Department to the Royal Navy as a naval barracks. In 1912, the old wooden hulk of H.M.S

H.M.S. St. Angelo in pre-March 1979 days ... the last hub of the Royal Navy in Malta



Egmont, the depot ship which had been in Grand Harbour for half a century, was moored alongside and the fort's name changed to that of the hulk only, for it to revert to its original name in 1953.

During World War Two, H.M.S. St. Angelo played a prominent part in the defence of Grand Harbour. Between 1940 and 1942, it was hit not less than 69 times by high explosive bombs but those massive walls commenced in the ninth century withstood the Nazi and Fascist attacks magnificently.

H.M.S. St. Angelo fulfilled to the last the purpose for which it was originally built. The fort was the last hub of the Royal Navy in Malta, the last British stronghold and up to Friday March 9th, 1979 wore the flag of the Commander British Forces Malta – Rear Admiral O.N.A. Cecil – the last in line after that of Rear Admiral's Flag of the Flag Officer Malta.

From this ancient fort, the British organised the day-to-day running of the Royal Navy and had accommodation for officers, senior and junior ratings and the whole of the W.R.E.N.S.

It also encompassed the whole range of facilities of a small naval barracks in cabins, mess decks, dining halls, administration offices, the N.A.A.F.I. shop and bars, a cinema, a small bore rifle range, classrooms and a parade ground, including a helicopter

platform, a post office, a full-size sick bay and a dental surgery.

H.M.S. St. Angelo also housed a Roman Catholic Chapel and the Captain's House, one of the most beautiful buildings in Malta. Along the wharf which joins the fort to Vittoriosa were warships used to support visiting frigates, destroyers and guided missile cruisers.

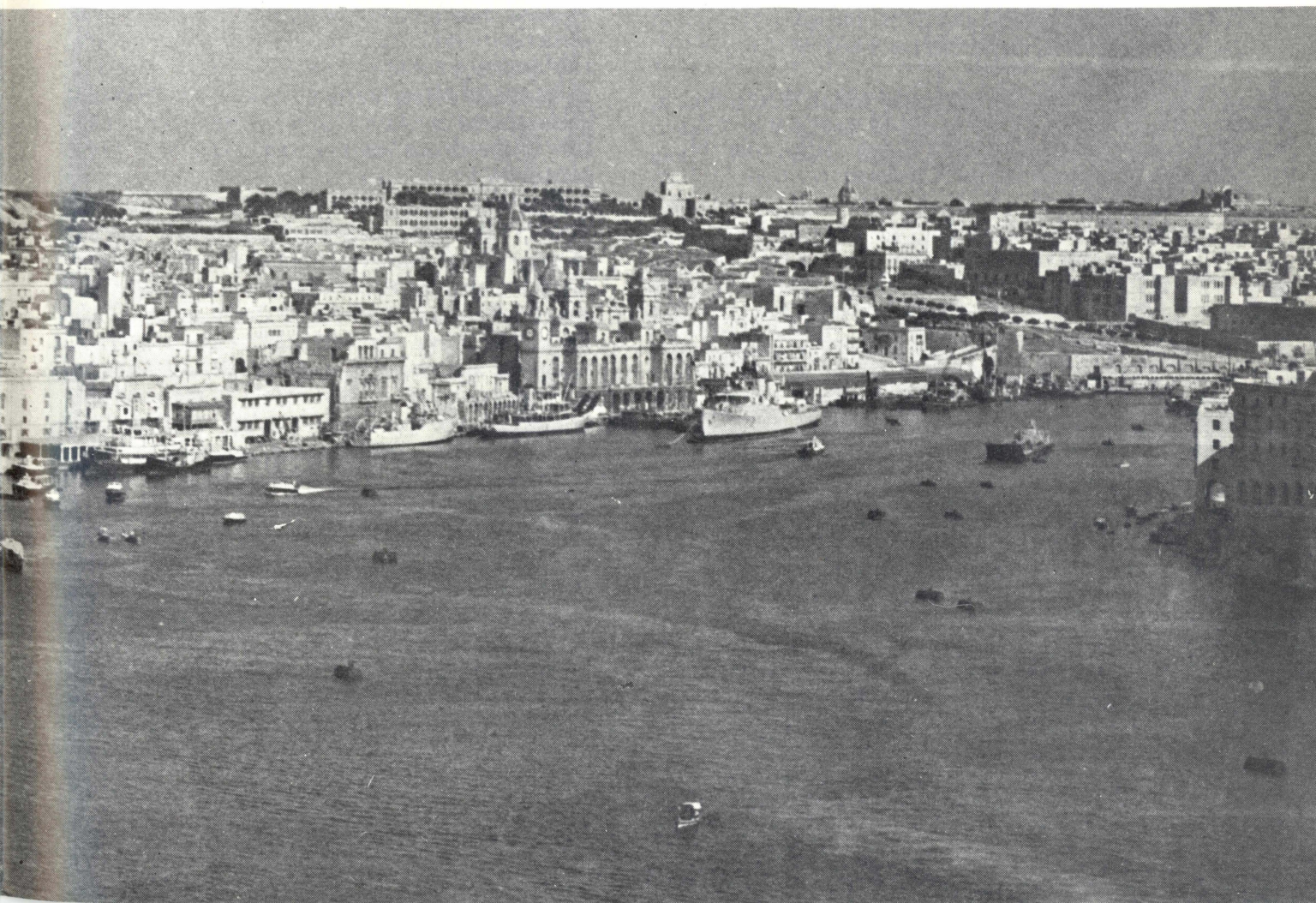
In H.M.S. St. Angelo there were also store rooms and a sail loft, the pay master's offices and the Anglican chapel and of course, the Headquarters of the Admiralty Constabulary Malta.

One could also add the naval division and the Department of Environment. Many small craft, fuel lighters, MFV's and fleet tenders adorned those famous walls of the jetty together with various naval passenger and store boats and the frigate walk-ashore.

The Colonade Wharf at H.M.S. St. Angelo is the site of an ancient church dedicated to St. Andrew. Under the Colonade Arches, a few yards away from the then Commander's House, there is a sacred painting.

In 1845, the jetty or wharf was used by the British Admiralty and, according to legend, there was always a candle burning before this image.

It was the English who built the Colonade Arches



and named it so. In 1968 the Cross was restored and until a few years back, it was being lit by the Admiralty on the feast of the Invention of the Cross on Good Friday and on St. Lawrence Day.

H.M.S. St. Angelo served also as the home of the Malta Port Division – that Maltese band of ratings and other ranks who, with their skill and courage kept their traditions to the last.

Then came the final stages of H.M.S. St. Angelo – that of maintaining and supporting the last British warship to visit Malta before the forces left the Island.

Every year, that is on September 7th and 8th, H.M.S. St. Angelo was opened by the British authorities to visitors. These visitors were allowed entry through St. Angelo Gate. Landing by boats on any part of the wharf was always forbidden. Those drivers of cars who were authorised entry were reminded that the speed limit within the fort was fifteen miles per hour. The parts of establishments covered by Police were St. Angelo Gate, (point of entry); the wharf from the gate to the near side of St. Angelo bridge, comprising the Commander's House, workshops, offices and entrance to the Boat Camber and the Starkey Block area.

Visitors to this fort had to leave by 5.30 pm. "Out of bounds" areas consisted of the Captain's inner courtyard and house, (including the West side of St. Anne's chapel), the Wardroom area; Senior Rates Messes; the tunnels; the Wrens Quarters and cinema; all buildings in the fort, other than the chapels, slave quarters, Oubliette and Crypt; the lower fort west of Quarter deck, the Cruiser block and the Commander's House.

In 1976 the Commander British Forces Malta, Rear Admiral Cecil gave a presentation at Lascaris for the benefit of the Prime Minister Mr. Dom



St. Anne's Chapel

Mintoff, during course of which the various properties occupied by the British Forces in terms of the 1972 Military Facilities Agreement which were due for surrender during the rundown were described and demonstrated on plans. The presentation included a tour of the Grand Harbour and a tour of H.M.S. St. Angelo.

Then on Friday September 2nd, 1977 the then Spanish Prime Minister Senor Adolfo Suarez spent a portion of his brief visit to the Island of Malta touring some of the historical parts of H.M.S. St. Angelo. He was greeted by the Commander British Forces Malta, the Chief of Staff, Colonel P.W.G. Seabrook and the Commanding Officer H.M.S. St. Angelo, J.L. Duffett. The Spanish Prime Minister visited the Chapel of the Nativity, the Oubliette, the Knights Cemetery and the Chapel of St. Anne. His guide for the tour was Chief Petty Officer "Gerry" German.

To conclude this brief insight into the history of Fort St. Angelo as a base of the British forces in Malta, one must say that this place, once the pride of the Royal Navy, after many years of active service is now a silent bastion being converted into an exclusive tourist complex.



The "Old Bakery", formerly the Admiralty Constabulary Headquarters

Joe Galea