

77 years ago today, Malta receives the George Cross

■ Albert Galea

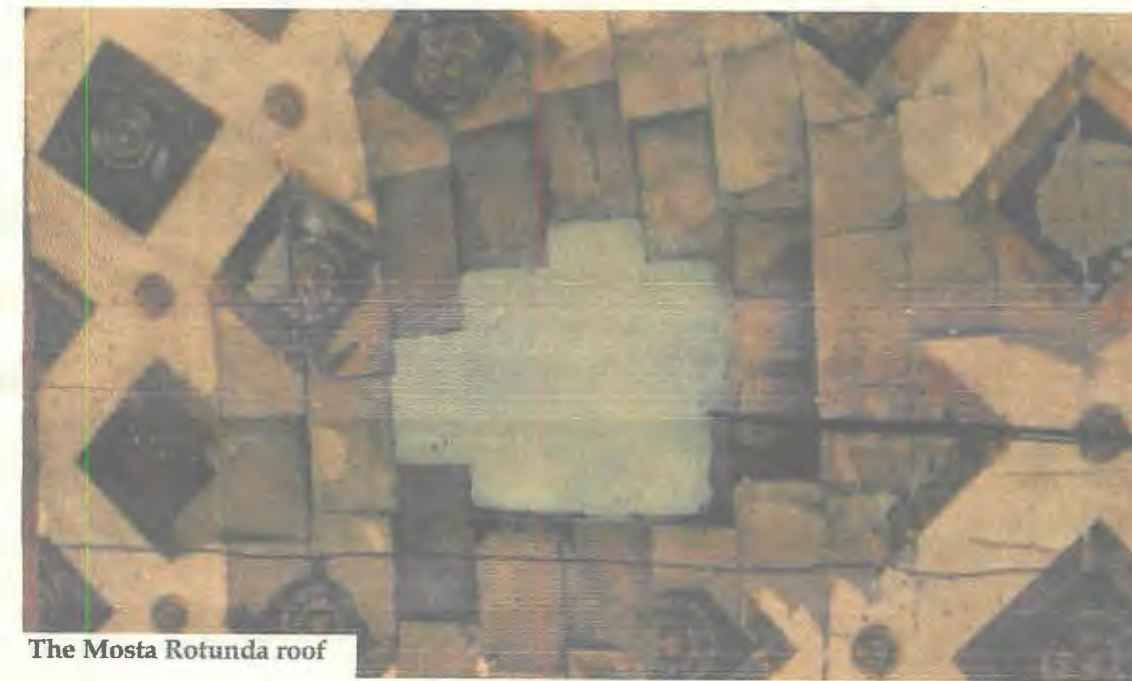
On this day, 77 years ago, the Maltese people were, "to bear witness to a heroism and devotion that will long be famous in history" awarded the George Cross. It's an award that many see as symbolising the bravery and heroism of the men and women who lived and suffered through World War Two, when Malta became the most bombed place on the planet.

One of Malta's main selling points for foreign occupiers was always its strategic position. Placed slap-bang in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea, leaders and powers from all across Europe recognised Malta's importance. The Knights used the island as their home and their naval base, Napoleon Bonaparte once said that he would prefer having the British in one of the suburbs of Paris rather than in Malta, and the British made Malta a hub for their Mediterranean fleet.

It was therefore only natural that with the Second World War expanding to include North Africa and the greater extent of the Mediterranean, Malta would, sooner or later, find itself in the sights of the enemy.

With Benito Mussolini's declaration of war against the Allies on 10 June 1940, it was only a matter of time before the attacks against Malta would begin. Sure enough, the day after, they did.

Malta came to be used as a base for attacking supply ships traversing between mainland Europe and the North African front. As the fighting in Africa esca-



The Mosta Rotunda roof

lated, so did the bombing against Malta; in May 1941, German General Erwin Rommel said that "Without Malta the Axis will end by losing control of North Africa," while British Prime Minister Winston Churchill described Malta as an "unsinkable aircraft

carrier".

The Axis resolved to bomb or starve Malta into submission, by attacking its ports, towns, cities, and Allied shipping supplying the island, and this became especially evident in the early months of 1942.

The height of the blitz was reached in April 1942, 77 years ago. Bombing raids were flown over the island nearly without respite, and they started to leave their mark.

On 7 April 1942, the Royal Opera House – one of Valletta's

major landmarks – was hit in the night by two bombs. The facade was left in a heap; the auditorium destroyed, and two gaping holes could be seen in the roof.

It was not the first time that the Opera House had been hit by destructive forces. Built in a classical style, with Greek columns surrounding the outside, the Opera House was designed by British architect Edward Middleton Barry and was opened in 1866. The budget for the prestigious building was initially that of £30,000; however it is calcu-

lated to have actually cost between £44,000 and £60,000. In today's money, that would equate to around £6.5 million.

However in 1873, the interior of the Opera House was destroyed by a fierce fire, forcing it to close down. It did, however, re-open to a performance of Giuseppe Verdi's Aida in 1877 after it was fully restored.

The rubble was cleared from the site after the war, but it was never restored to its former splendour; an indelible mark that the blitz left on Valletta and indeed on the

Maltese people.

A mere two days later, on 9 April 1942, Malta was nearly deprived of another major landmark.

When the air raid siren rang out at around 4pm on that fateful Thursday, between 250 and 300 people remained inside the Mosta Rotunda to continue hearing the day's Mass. At 4:40pm, three bombs were released towards the church.

Two deflected off the church's roof, but one crashed through into the church. It slammed into the floor and skidded across the church before coming to a halt. That's where it sat, unexploded, until it was removed by members of the Royal Engineers Bomb Disposal unit.

Lawrenza Faizon, 13 at the time, was in the church at that moment. In a documentary some years ago, she described to TVM the scene:

"The church was terrible. Beams and debris were falling everywhere but despite all this, by some miracle, only one person was slightly injured. It was Thursday, the hour long prayer meeting was about the start. We were a group of four; me, my sister, Katarina Agius and Mary Anne Gauci. All four of us ended up running all over the place; I ended up losing half my things, because as soon as we moved, the bomb skidded through our own chairs. It was a terrible day and a terrible time."

It's a miracle that the 500 kilogram bomb which slammed into the church floor did not explode.

The bombing continued to wreck havoc across the island, and it was at this point that King George VI decided that it was

time to act to recognise the bravery of the Maltese people.

The George Cross was established in September 1940 during the worst of the Battle of Britain. King George VI saw that there was a desire to recognise those civilians for their bravery and gallantry in the face of the enemy; and so the George Medal and the George Cross were created. The Medal was awarded on a fairly wide basis for acts of great bravery; the Cross meanwhile was awarded to those who conducted "acts of the greatest heroism or of the most conspicuous courage in circumstances of extreme danger".

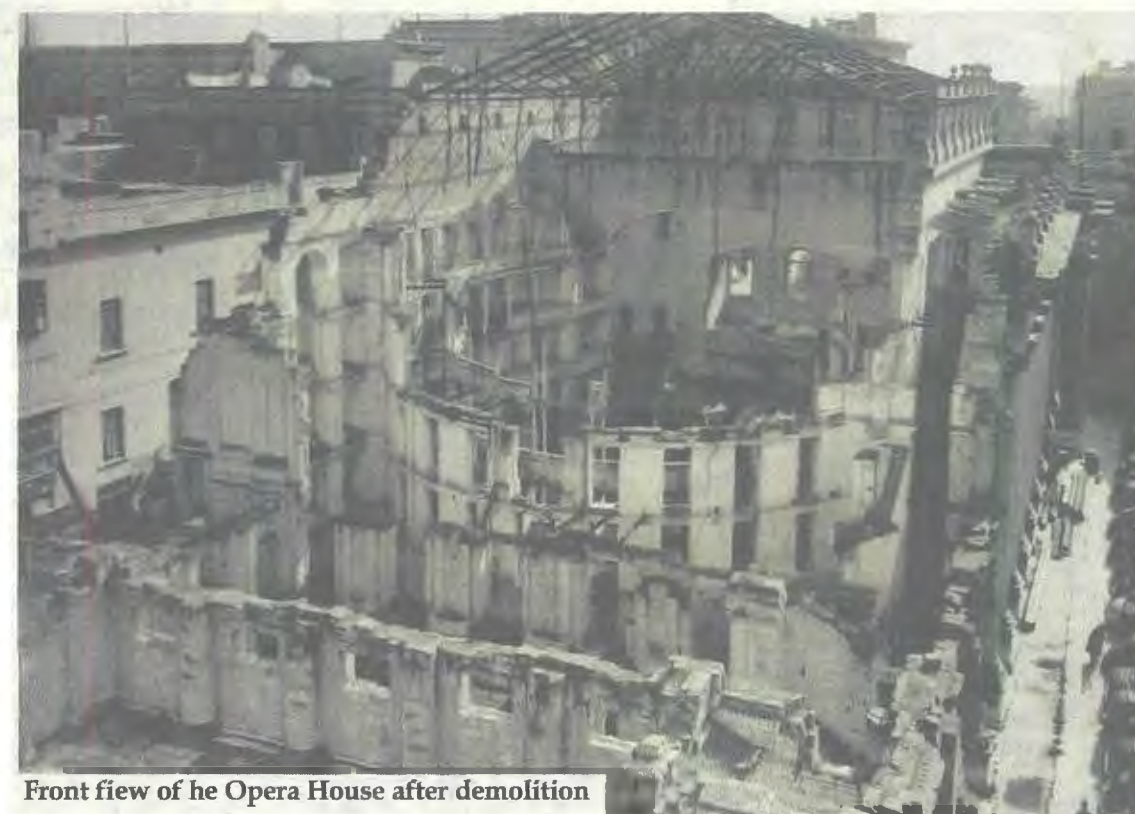
In the midst of the blitz, on 15 April, the King sent a letter to the governor Sir William Dobbie where he wrote: "To honour her

brave people, I award the George Cross to the Island Fortress of Malta, to bear witness to a heroism and devotion that will long be famous in history."

The cross was brought to Malta later on in that year. On September 13th, a month after what was left of the Operation Pedestal – or Santa Marija – Convoy steamed into Grand Harbour and saved Malta from effective starvation, a formal ceremony was held amidst the ruins in St. George's Square in Valletta.

From 1943 onwards, the George Cross was embedded into Malta's flag, initially with a blue background behind it. The blue background was removed in 1964 upon Independence; however the George Cross itself remains present on the flag to this very day.

The Cross itself can, today, be seen at the National War Museum in Fort St. Elmo, Valletta.



Front view of the Opera House after demolition