

Remembering Captain Sir Robert Cavendish Spencer

CHRISTOPHER
GRECH



Many British servicemen lie buried in Malta, yet one, Robert Cavendish Spencer, has been rewarded with two monuments: one at Blata l-Bajda and the other in Valletta. This article investigates who this naval officer was and why he was honoured in this way.

Captain Sir Robert Cavendish Spencer of the Royal Navy was, as his full name indicates, a member of the British aristocracy. His father, George John Spencer, 2nd Earl Spencer, served as Home Secretary in the UK from 1806 to 1807, and his brother John, 3rd Earl Spencer, held the office of Chancellor of the Exchequer from 1830 to 1834. He was therefore born to a noble family which was, in due course, to produce Lady Diana Spencer.

While Spencer's silver spoon may have sprinkled his life (and

death) with privilege and favour, his contemporaries seem to have held this young officer in high regard. We can glean the unvarnished facts of Spencer's career from John Marshall's highly-esteemed *Royal Naval Biography*.

Born in 1791, Spencer started his naval career in 1804 as midshipman to Captain Benjamin Hallowell. For a time he served on the 84-gun ship *Malta*, formerly the French ship *Guillaume Tell*, which survived the Battle of the Nile and was captured as it was making its escape from Malta in 1800.

Spencer did not shun action and was always to be found in the thick of things, as at the Battle of Rosetta (1807) and the Bay of Rosas (1809). Appointed lieutenant on December 13, 1810, he took his first independent command on the *Kite* brig of 16 guns and, soon after, the *Espoir*, 18 guns, in the Mediterranean.

Transferring to the *Carron*, 20 guns, he saw action along the coasts of Louisiana and Florida where he volunteered for some daring reconnaissance work and dangerous attacks on enemy piquets, which were taken without a shot being fired.

After tours in the Mediterranean in 1817, South America in 1819 and the English Channel in 1823, he returned to the Mediterranean in 1824 in command of the *Naiad*, 46 guns, charged with various negotiations with the Dey of Algiers. The *Naiad* was paid off in 1826 at which time it was reported that during Captain Spencer's command the system of discipline and perfection of the gunnery was "never to have been exceeded".

From 1827 to 1828 Spencer was appointed private secretary to the

"During Captain Spencer's command, the system of discipline and perfection of the gunnery was 'never to have been exceeded'"



Spencer's tomb on Spencer Bastion, Valletta, today.

Lord High Admiral, HRH the Duke of Clarence (later William IV) and, as a consequence, was nominated Groom of the Bedchamber to the duke, who also conferred upon him the title of Knight Commander of the Royal Hanoverian Guelphic Order (KCH).

On September 26, 1828, Spencer received his appointment to the *Madagascar*, 46 guns, and returned to the Mediterranean; however, when his brother, Lord Althorp, became Chancellor of the Exchequer in 1830, Robert Spencer was selected to represent the Navy at the Ordnance Board, so his ship was ordered home. Tragically, Spencer was not to return to England; while at Alexandria he took ill with an inflammation of the bowels and died two days later on November 4, 1830. He was just 39 years old.

We are fortunate to have a very fine likeness of Spencer that has a tangential link with Malta. This is a

lithograph by Maxim Gauci (1774-1854) based on a portrait in oils by Thomas Phillips, RA (1770-1845).

Gauci was born in Valletta and trained under Michele Busuttill before continuing his studies at the *Accademia di San Luca* in Rome at the recommendation of Grand Master Emmanuel de Rohan. Gauci settled in London in 1809 where he became one of the leading British lithographers; his coloured plates of botanical specimens are very highly praised for their accuracy and delicacy of line and wash.

Contemporaries have left their own written impressions of Spencer's personality and naval exploits. Edward Fanshawe, later Admiral Superintendent of the Malta Dockyard (1868-70), a midshipman in the *Madagascar* under Spencer's command, recounts how his captain was determined that all men should be well fed and cared for. He also insisted that his young

officers should improve themselves to the extent of arranging dancing lessons for them at the Palace. He was able to organise this since the Governor, Sir Frederick Cavendish Ponsonby, was a cousin.

When Spencer died, his fellow officers, seamen and marines subscribed to a monument which was initially erected at Corradino Hill. This site was chosen because it was visible from all the ships at anchor in the harbour. The monument took the form of an obelisk similar in size to Cleopatra's Needle. It is thought to have been designed by architect Giorgio Pullicino, professor of drawing and architecture at the University.

The obelisk, constructed of Maltese hard stone, was worked under the supervision of H. C. Smith of His Majesty's Naval Yard at Malta in just eight weeks. The monument remained at Corradino until the late 19th century when it was moved to its present site at Blata l-Bajda.

The inscription on the obelisk states that Spencer was buried in Valletta on December 12, 1830. According to Donald H. Simpson in his 1957 article 'Some Public Monuments of Valletta 1800-1955', Governor Ponsonby commissioned the original sarcophagus marking Spencer's grave; this is also attributed to Giorgio Pullicino; the Governor also sought a royal decree to have the lower portion of St Michael's Bastion named Spencer Bastion in honour of his cousin.

Until just a few years ago this site had become neglected and vandalised: the iron railings had vanished and the sarcophagus itself had disappeared with just the plinth remaining. It seemed as though the requirement for car parking in Valletta might cast Spencer into eternal oblivion.

Fortunately, the new Bank of Valletta offices on St Michael's Bastion, designed by architects DeMicoli & Associates, has resulted in the sensitive restoration of the area;



Spencer's Monument on Corradino Hill by Michele Bellanti. PHOTO: ALBERT GANADO COLLECTION



Sir Robert Spencer by Maxim Gauci

the sarcophagus has been recreated and a metal railing on the design of the original has been erected. Robert Spencer can rest in peace again.

The author wishes to thank Dr Albert Ganado, DeMicoli & Associates and architect Edward Said for their assistance in the preparation of this article.



Spencer's Monument at Blata l-Bajda today.