



The Bren Gun Carriers' garages in the Mellieha primary school.



Part of the anti-tank wall at Tat-Tomna, Mellieha.



A soldier from the 1st KOMR starting a Bren Gun Carrier. It has no camouflage. This was usually applied with a paint and brush. Photo taken probably at Ghajn Tuffieha or Ghadira Barracks. PHOTO: PETER SZAAK and the KING'S OWN MALTA REGIMENT ASSOCIATION

Bren Gun Carriers, bridges and ditches

JEFFREY SAMMUT

Mellieha during the 1930s was an isolated village. The only traffic in its streets were mules and carts and the occasional military truck and private car. However, as war approached, to the villagers' amazement, steel monsters took to the roads.

In the photo reproduced here-with, two Bren Gun Carriers are being driven at great speed on the narrow roads leading to the once small village. In the background, Selmun Palace overlooks surrounding fields.

The stone pillar adjacent to the road marks the area as Church property. In fact, it was situated at the beginning of the road that leads to Tal-Ibraġ and Ghajn Żejtuna, both Church territories. Today the fields shown in the photo no longer exist, having been replaced by a petrol station and myriad houses.

In 1934, Vickers Armstrong Ltd started producing a light tracked armoured vehicle, equipped with a machine gun and capable of towing an artillery piece. The Universal Gun Carrier, or, as it is better known, the Bren Gun Carrier, had a crew of three: driver, commander and machine gunner. The back of this tracked vehicle could be used to carry munitions or other supplies. In Malta, the Bren Gun Carriers were painted in stone camouflage, to make them less visible among the rubble walls which dot the Maltese Islands.

Some Maltese troops did not like their new mounts. The Ford engine guzzled petrol and they were not really suitable for Malta's rocky terrain, which could break their tracks, leaving them stranded. Armour protection was minimal, sufficient only against small arms fire. Anything bigger turned them into a sieve. Being open-topped left them vulnerable to hand grenades. However, most soldiers took a more practical view and preferred riding them than marching.

The Bren Gun Carriers were issued to the King's Own Malta Regiment, six to each battalion. In

Mellieha, there were six of these armoured vehicles since the 1st Battalion KOMR was stationed in the locality.

The British dug underground garages in bedrock to hide the carriers from the air. These garages still exist, in the yard of Mellieha primary school. They also carved out two small underground chambers under what today is the Mellieha Bypass, in which munitions and petrol were stored. The carriers were often seen loading supplies from these small depots.

One of the drivers of the Bren Gun Carriers was Anthony Cauchi. He became a driver after being grievously wounded while digging trenches at Fort Campbell. Having primed explosive charges to blow up some rock, these did not go off. When he and two others went to see what went wrong, there was a huge explosion and all three were badly injured.

"The British were expecting a German/Italian invasion, so to make roads impassable to enemy vehicles they started digging deep ditches in all roads leading to Mellieha"

The Bren Gun Carriers were frequently used during military manoeuvres. This often led to conflict with local farmers. The armoured vehicles were sometimes driven straight through fields with no consideration whatsoever to the havoc they wreaked. When this happened, the farmers would ask for compensation.



Map showing the anti-tank wall at Tat-Tomna. The part in red does not exist anymore.

On August 5, 1940, Luigi Pisani reported that the Royal Irish Fusiliers drove their Bren Gun Carriers in his fields and damaged his fig trees and vines. He claimed £2 in damages.

On August 11, 1940, Paul Vella reported that at around 11am, troops from the Royal Irish Fusiliers tore up his dirt roads with their Bren Gun Carriers, demolished rubble walls, drove over his vines and squashed grapes in his fields at Ahrax. He asked for £1 in compensation.

Interestingly enough, both farmers claimed that the Royal Irish Fusiliers, who were also stationed in Mellieha, and not the KOMR, were driving the carriers.

Sometimes, reckless driving also caused damages. On January 21, 1943, a soldier from Headquarters Company of the KOMR crashed into a wall that bordered the road from Mellieha to Manikata and demolished two-and-a-half-square canes (around five metres) of it, causing damages worth £117.6.

During the war, the British were always expecting a German/Italian invasion, so they decided to make roads impassable to enemy vehicles. They started digging deep ditches in all the roads leading to

Mellieha. In order to allow British traffic to go through, these ditches were spanned by wooden bridges, which could be easily removed in case of an attack.

Daniel Bonanno remembers one of these ditches on the stretch of road leading to Mellieha, near the old road to Selmun. He and his brother Ninu would wait for a British truck to appear and they would rush underneath the bridge and listen to it roll on the wooden planks above them.

Sometimes, these bridges also had a barbed wire fence to block access. This was removed once the identity of the driver was ascertained. In fact, on one occasion, a British soldier drove straight into the barbed wire and the farmers in the vicinity had to lend him a pair of pliers in order for him to free his truck.

Daniel was witness to some strange manoeuvres involving Bren Gun Carriers or Vickers Mk VIB Light Tanks near Selmun. He remembers armoured vehicles passing between two horizontal iron beams embedded in the road and then driving into a sheet held by metal wire. What he had seen is probably explained by quoting the Home Guard Manual, a training book issued for the volunteers of

the Home Guard. After explaining how an enemy tank driver's view is limited by thin observation slits, the manual continues: "A sheet is disguised to resemble the ground in a narrow lane. On either side of the lane is a man and when the vehicle is about to pass them they each drag on a piece of rope or wire running through the edge of the sheet and passing over tree branches of gate posts. The sheet rises from the ground and before the tank can stop, it is completely enveloped and blinded."

The driver would have to stop or risk an accident. When he braked, other soldiers would come out of hiding and blow off the tank tracks with improvised explosives or throw petrol bombs at it.

Daniel and Ninu were lucky to have survived the war. One night, a German bomber dropped bombs in the vicinity of their farmhouse at Tal-Ibraġ near Selmun. These demolished part of the roof in the room where they were sleeping. Seven stone slabs fell on the loft, and although the loft was dislodged, it stopped the slabs from falling on top of them.

Another anti-tank ditch was at the top of the road that leads from Mellieha Bay to Ċirkewwa. In fact,



Bren Gun Carrier with stone camouflage. PHOTO: [HTTPS://COMMONS.WIKIMEDIA.ORG](https://commons.wikimedia.org)

the area is still known as Ta' Fuq il-Pont (On the Bridge). This ditch was equipped with a secret weapon – The British dug a chamber in the vertical rock face close to the ditch from which they could throw Molotov cocktails (bottles filled with flammable liquid) on enemy tanks.

It seems some had little respect for military equipment. Lance Corporal A. Debono reported that he found a bolt missing from the wooden bridge that spanned the ditch on Miżieb Road, to the detriment of the military authorities. On the road to Ghajn Żnuber, the ditch was exactly on the bend near the old winery. Another ditch, below Ghar u Casa, on the road to Ghadira, was around half a storey deep and its bridge, which resembled a wooden door, was removed at night, making the road impassable. One wonders if the British ever thought that the German tanks could pass through the surrounding fields.

When the war started, the British decided to build an anti-tank wall at Tat-Tomna, on the outskirts of Mel-

lieha. It was a very thick and high rubble wall, in which no cement was used. The wall was supposed to block the advance of enemy armour towards the village.

Many villagers from Mellieha toiled on the 350m wall. Two of them, Anthony and Edward Debono, should have been conscripted in the army. But they pleaded to a farmer to lease some of his fields to them. Although the land consisted mainly of rock and garigue, it was enough to convince the recruiting officer that they were to be exempted from the draft. Being 'farmers', they could not be drafted as they were producing food in a time of need. However, they could not live off the rocky terrain so when workers were required to construct this wall, they immediately grasped the opportunity. It was winter and so cold that one of them recalled snow fell! Where the wall had to cross a road, another ditch was dug and this too was spanned by a bridge.

When the wall was finally finished, the British brought a tank to test this new anti-invasion measure.

With its engine roaring, armoured beast and wall met, and the wall immediately collapsed. The tank passed through the breach and the anti-tank wall was judged a failure and abandoned. The two 'farmers' could go back to their 'fields'! Interestingly enough, both ends of the wall still survive. The rest was destroyed years ago.

Another man from Mellieha who laboured on this wall was Joseph Aquilina. Before the war, he was a truck driver. His job consisted of collecting barrels of oranges and other fruits and vegetables from Grand Harbour and then selling them at Mellieha, Mgarr and Manikata. With the war, all this stopped and he ended up in a queue waiting to be drafted into the army.

Like the Debono brothers, he produced papers stating that he was a farmer and he was sent back home. On the other hand, the youth in front of him, a refugee living in Mellieha, was conscripted despite his desperate pleas to the recruiting officer to allow him to finish his

studies. The poor lad ended up being killed by enemy bombs at St Andrew's. Aquilina still has the scene of the unfortunate student begging to be exempted engraved in his mind.

Today, no military vehicles trundle over Mellieha roads, and no ditches are dug in order to hinder traffic. Instead, there is a never-ending procession of cars and trucks. Ironically enough, it seems that Mellieha's streets were more peaceful in time of war.

Acknowledgements

The author wishes to thank the following, without whose assistance this article would not have been possible: Gilbert Fenech, Anthony Rogers, Daniel Bonanno, Ninu Bonanno, Karmnu Bonanno, Ernest Vella, Ganni Debono, Dun Mose Debono, Morris Bartolo, Fredu Sammut, Salyu Mifsud, Joe Camilleri, Joseph Aquilina, Mary Rose Cordina, Peter Szaak, Ruben Vella, The King's Own Malta Regiment Association and the National Archives.



Caves dug into bedrock where supplies for the Bren Gun Carriers were stored.