

War artist Frank Mason in Malta and his April 1919 exhibition

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Twenty-six years ago *The Sunday Times of Malta* published an article by A. E. Abela entitled *Frank Mason and the Malta Convoy*. Since the article was published on August 16, 1992, it was timed to coincide with the 50th anniversary of the Santa Marija Convoy.

The article elaborated upon the commission received in 1943 by Frank Mason, a well-established British marine artist, from local naval outfitters C.H. Bernard and Sons to paint four scenes marking the progress of the iconic convoy on its way to Malta. Abela correctly surmised that since Mason was already in his 60s, it was unlikely that he would have travelled to Malta on this occasion to find his inspiration.

However, Mason was no stranger to Malta. During World War I the artist held a commission in the Royal Volunteer Reserve and had visited Malta on a voyage to the Mediterranean and to Egypt for the first time in May 1915. The artist had been brought to the attention of the Imperial War Museum (IWM) by MP Sir Walter Runciman, who became an early patron of the artist, and in July 1918, Mason was appointed official war artist with a brief to scout out naval subjects in the Mediterranean.

Mason sailed with the Mediterranean Allied Fleet and witnessed the signing of the Turkish Armistice on HMS *Agamemnon*. He was later to paint this vessel berthed in Grand Harbour. Later on, in 1918 Mason received a Malta-based commission from the Admiralty sub-committee of the IWM and arrived on the island in early January 1919.

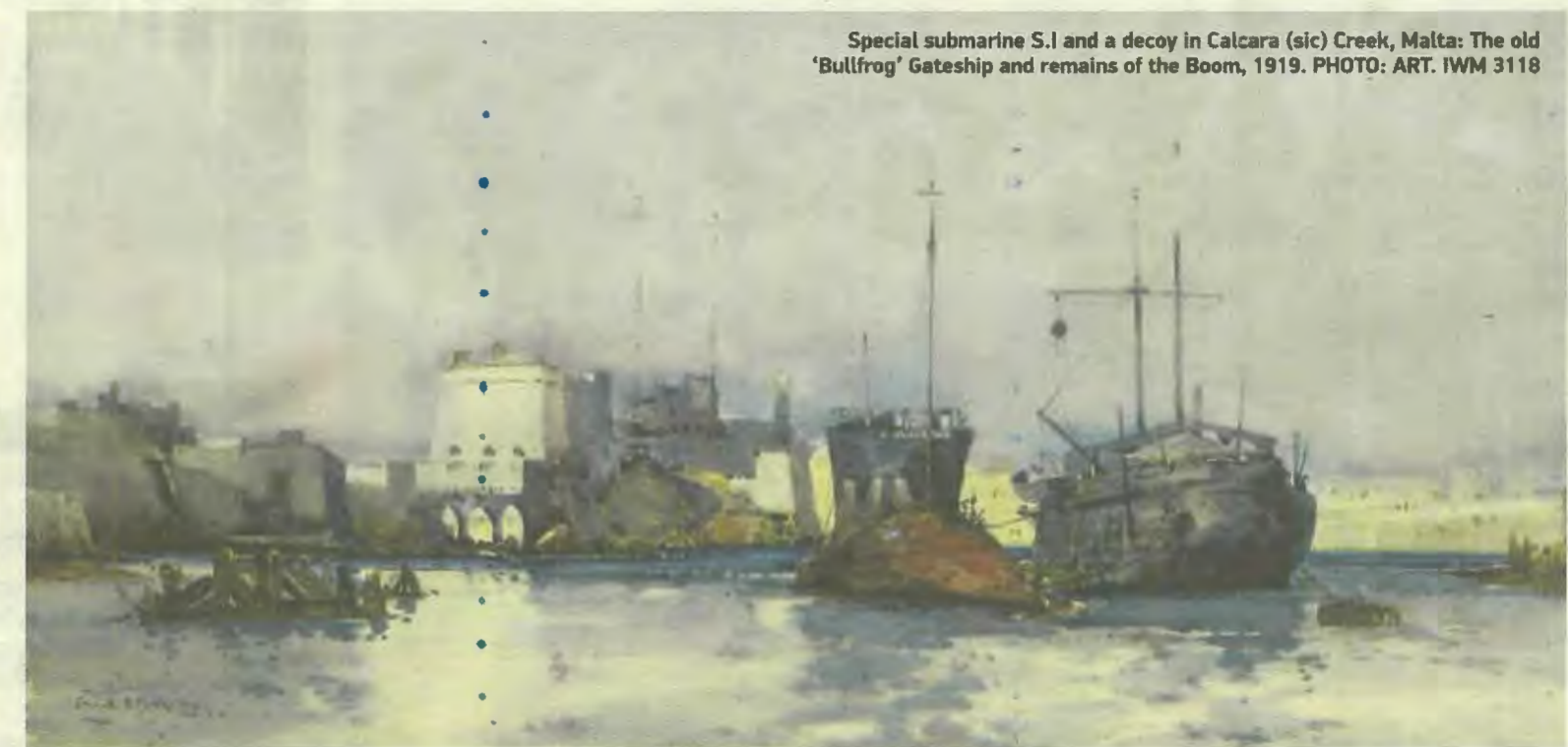
Mason spent the next four months painting naval subjects, and he became a regular guest at the Governor's Palace. On April 7, 1919, in order to coincide with Governor Methuen's departure from

Malta, an art exhibition was organised at the Palace in Valletta showcasing a selection of Mason's local watercolour sketches. These were exhibited for a limited time only, and a one shilling entrance fee went towards to The Lady Methuen Fund for Distressed Families, a registered local charity set up by the Governor's wife, Mary Ethel, as a special fund for families adversely affected by the Great War in Malta.

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British war art schemes during World War I were an act of government sponsorship of the arts, initially tied up with fund-raising activities, but by 1916 they had become an essential component of the country's war effort. The Department of Information opted to employ artists in order to meet the public demand for images from the conflict zones and to provide eyewitness accounts of the hostilities. Initially reproduced to feature in illustrated publications, the war images were later also extensively reproduced on ephemera such as postcards, calendars and matchboxes as these proved to be popular with the British public.

In 1917 the IWM was set up to house material documenting the



HMS *Agamemnon* arriving at Malta and passing Fort St Angelo, 1919. PHOTOS: IMPERIAL WAR MUSEUM (ART. IWM 3119)

Special submarine S.1 and a decoy in Calcara (sic) Creek, Malta: The old 'Bullfrog' Gatheship and remains of the Boom, 1919. PHOTO: ART. IWM 3118

war and became the final resting place of the government's official war art collection. The IWM subsequently commissioned its own artists to produce works for its 'Hall of Remembrance' to commemorate those who had fought and died, and a final spate of war-related artwork was undertaken after the hostilities had ceased. This clarifies the broad context of Mason's second trip to Malta in early 1919.

The Admiralty sub-committee at the IWM that had directly commissioned Mason fell under the responsibility of Rear Admiral Sir Douglas Brownrigg, the Chief Naval Censor. Commander Colpoys Walcott, the first chairman of the Admiralty sub-committee, assumed responsibility for the day to day running of the Admiralty Art Scheme and both men agreed that every branch of the Royal Navy with regard to types of ships, bases and areas involved in naval operations should be

represented pictorially for commemorative purposes. An initial team of eight artists were selected and assigned to naval bases in Britain. In 1918, this team was supplemented by other artists, including Frank Mason, to visually record the activities of the Navy overseas.

The artist arrived in Malta in early January, 1919. Mason's biographer, Edward Yardley, mentions that Mason exhibited his Valletta paintings "with the help of Lady Methuen in aid of Distressed Malta". This is confirmed in an article appearing in *The Daily Malta Chronicle* on April 1, 1919, and reproduced below:

"By kind permission of His Excellency the Governor, an opportunity will shortly be given to view at the Palace a selection of Water Colour Sketches by well-known Marine Artist, Lt Frank H. Mason RNVr who has been commissioned by the Admiralty to collect subjects of inter-

est in connection with recent naval warfare in the Mediterranean area.

"These sketches will form the basis of oil paintings which Lt Mason is to execute for the Imperial War Museum and the opportunity for seeing them should not be missed. He joined the Royal Navy Volunteer Reserve in 1914 and had active service in command of motor launches in the Suez Canal and home waters.

"In the spring of 1918 the Admiralty decided that his special gifts should be employed in a sphere which was largely instrumental in pressing the Allied Merchant shipping from effective submarine attack and was also placed in charge of the camouflage designing in the great exhibition centres in North East England. Many of the strange designs to which we have become almost reconciled are the result of his genius.

"Lt Mason is a frequent exhibitor in the Royal Academy at London

and his work is well known to all lovers of the sea. The sketches will include many of both local and historical interest, in particular a painting of the Allied Fleet passing through the Dardanelles."

The Daily Malta Chronicle reportage, which correctly publicised the artist's reputation as an established naval artist erroneously reported that Mason "was also in charge of the camouflage designing". Mason, although involved in the wartime dazzle or camouflage scheme, was not the artist-originator of this initiative. It was, in fact, Norman Wilkinson, another illustrious marine artist with a long-standing Malta connection, who had come up with the original idea.

The newspaper followed up on its initial piece with another article entitled 'To Coincide with Their Farewell'. This suggests that Mason's exhibition served to mark Governor and Lady Methuen's departure from Malta.

"The exhibition of watercolour sketches by Lt Frank H. Mason RNVr, of which notice was recently given will be held at the Palace, Valletta, on Monday and Tuesday, April 7th and 8th by kind permission of His Excellency the Governor.

"Over 100 sketches of both historical and local interest will be shown and it can safely be said that no such collection has ever been seen in Malta. The marine subjects will appeal to all lovers of the sea and ships will be admired not only on account of their technique and accuracy in detail and drawing but even more for their beautiful colour effects, which make the pictures almost alive and move.

"Many will regret that these drawings are not for sale, but, as they are to form the base of paintings for the Imperial War Museum which Lt Mason is to execute, this is not possible.

"The exhibition is open from 3pm to 6pm on each day, and a

small charge of one shilling for admission will be made, the proceeds of which will be devoted to the Lady Methuen Fund. If only on this account it is hoped that there will be a large attendance, but in any event this event should not be missed as there are probably few who will be able to see him in London and the finished results of this well-known artist's stay in Malta."

Mason made the many naval vessels still present in Grand Harbour the focus of his painterly skills, and his canvases capture maritime activity as expected. A couple of Mason's paintings and their subject also indicate that the war had come to an end. *The End of a French Transport: Lazaretto Creek, Malta, 1919*, portrays a French vessel being deliberately destroyed by a torpedo explosion in Sliema Creek and scuttled, having outlived its useful existence. A submarine can be seen to the left, and the torpedo's track is

indicated in the water. Three other vessels, including a paddle boat, are seen in the foreground.

The Last of a Torpedoed French Transport: in Lazaretto Creek, Malta, 1919, shows the remains of a half-submerged French ship in the foreground while the rusting remains of a submarine hull is given prominence in *Special Submarine S.1 and a Decoy in Calcara [sic] Creek*.

Mason also painted American, French and Japanese vessels present in Grand Harbour, and this suggests that Mason's brief, although essentially a propagandistic one, also insisted upon memorialisation: *The Japanese Cruiser Nishin with U Boats, Malta* portrays the sizeable warship with four submarines flanking her sides and bearing the Japanese flag.

Mason also painted the *Isonzo*, described by author Vera Brittain as a Japanese destroyer, in her memoir *The Testament of Youth*. Brittain mentions leaving Malta on

May 22, 1917, in the company of Lady Methuen aboard the *Isonzo* as it was escorting VAD nurses as well as the Governor's wife and her party to Syracuse on that occasion.

Frank Mason's 1919 exhibition at the Governor's Palace indicates that art and fundraising had worked to the advantage of all the interested parties. It promoted the quality of the artist's work (and procured him future local commissions) while also raising awareness for the Lady Methuen Fund for Distressed Families. The Admiralty sub-committee of the IWM successfully acquired the images they had commissioned from Mason to visually document the later phase of British Naval operations in the Mediterranean.

Caroline Miggiani's research interests include art produced during the first and second World Wars and 20th century British artists who have a connection with Malta.



The end of a French Transport: Lazaretto Creek, Malta, 1919. PHOTO: ART. IWM 3103



The last of a torpedoed French Transport: in Lazaretto Creek, Malta. The Kite Balloon Station and Trawlers, 1919, PHOTO: ART. IWM 3134



Lieutenant Frank H. Mason. Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve. June 1918. PHOTO: IWM HU11803