



The profuse decoration on the Ximenes Canon's barrel and its carriage includes the shield-of-arms of the Order of St John and of Grand Master Francisco Ximenez de Texado (1773-1775). PHOTO: COPYRIGHT OF THE BOARD OF TRUSTEES OF THE ROYAL ARMOURIES.



HMS Seahorse capturing La Sensible, by Thomas Buttersworth Sr. PHOTO: COURTESY OF PENOBSCOT MARINE MUSEUM, SEARSPORT, MAINE, US.



Chapter Hall, Museum of the Order of St John. PHOTO: COURTESY OF MUSEUM OF THE ORDER OF ST JOHN, LONDON.

The Ximenes Cannon: from plunder to prize of war



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some of the silver articles taken by the French were melted into ingots and placed into 30 large trunks. Half of these were despatched aboard L'Orient, the French flagship, the remaining 15 loaded onto the 36-gun frigate La Sensible. In addition to the silver were items looted from the Palace Armoury in Valletta, including a highly ornate cannon and some much-prized standards of the Order of St John which had hung above the cannon. These eight silk banners included those of the Maltese Regiment, the Grand Master's Bodyguard and the flag of Grand Master Ferdinand Hompesch.

On July 12, 1798, Admiral John Jervis, first Earl of St Vincent (1735-1823) and Commander-in-Chief of the Mediterranean Fleet, issued the following order to the relevant officers of His Majesty's Ordnance at Gibraltar from his flagship HMS Ville de Paris, riding at anchor off the port of Cadiz: "Gentlemen, having taken the French national frigate La Sensible into His Majesty's Service, I desire you will survey and value the Ordnance, Ordnance Stores & C., with all possible dispatch, and leave them in charge of the gunner."

During the Napoleonic Wars, ordnance (in the form of cannon and ammunition) captured from the enemy was generally surveyed, valued and registered at the convenience of the Ordnance Department. In this case there is no doubt of the urgency expressed by Admiral St Vincent. In fact, La Sensible sailed under its new name of HMS Sensible within two days of this order being issued.

The admiral's concerns give us an idea of the turmoil then swirling around the Mediterranean as the struggle for power was unfolding: the Order of St John, which held sway over Malta for over two-and-a-half centuries, was being usurped by the French invaders, and the British, eager to salvage what they could, circled hopefully for any scraps they could glean from the warring antagonists. The following account of La Sensible's activities focuses on a microcosm of the broader conflict.

The story of Napoleon's plunder of Malta's silver is a well-rehearsed tale which will not be retold here. In Carmel Testa's meticulously researched *The French in Malta*, he writes that

"No money was found on board La Sensible. Was there ever any silver on board? If there was, might it have been thrown overboard?"

The cannon, illustrated here, is truly impressive; both the barrel and its carriage are embellished with a profusion of decoration. A second image shows the shield-of-arms of the Order of St John and of Grand Master Francisco Ximenez de Texado (1773-1775). The barrel also featured a portrait bust surrounded by cherubs that most likely portrays the Grand Master himself.

If too ornate and delicate in itself to cause much destruction, the inscription *Scintilla Sufficient Vna Terreni Fulmina Martis* (a single spark suffices to unleash the thunderbolts of earthly war) certainly strives to strike terror in the viewer's mind.



The ornate cannon and its carriage can today be seen in Royal Armouries Museum at Fort Nelson, Portsmouth, UK (object XIX.79). PHOTOS: COPYRIGHT OF THE BOARD OF TRUSTEES OF THE ROYAL ARMOURIES.

Laden with this plunder, La Sensible sailed from Malta on June 20, under the command of Captain Guillaume-François-Joseph Bourd , headed for Toulon. La Sensible was first launched in 1786, and Captain Bourd  had been in command of the vessel since 1796. Apart from the precious cargo the ship carried a varied selection of personnel: General Baraguay d'Hilliers, the 33-year-old officer second in command to Napoleon (who was quitting Malta for health reasons), his staff and some Maltese sailors. There is little information about these sailors and I have not been able to establish whether they were volunteers trying their luck with the French or whether they were pressed unwillingly into service.

Bourd 's counterpart, Captain Edward James Foote, RN, had only taken command of HMS Seahorse a few months earlier; however, he was an experienced naval captain who had joined the Royal Navy Academy in 1779 and had subsequently seen a great deal of action. A near-contemporary account comments thus about his new term of service in the Mediterranean: "he was not long on this station without an opportunity to display his skill and intrepidity".

Foote had been sent to reinforce Nelson's squadron and was scouring the Mediterranean – thus far unable to find the admiral. It was at this time that he encountered La Sensible. Foote's frigate, although possessing superior fire power to Bourd 's, mounting 40 guns of 18lb calibre as opposed to La Sensible's 36 guns of 12lb, was outnumbered with the supplies she carried for Nelson: considerable money and stores, but most significantly a bulky new capstan for HMS Culloden, which was lashed down to the main deck, preventing two of the ship's cannon from being fired. This additional load meant that Seahorse rode seven inches lower in the water than usual, experiencing more drag and thus reducing her maximum speed.

The French ship, although eight years older than its opposite number, could boast better speed and seaworthiness. For one thing, the ship's hull had been newly coppered and had undergone a thorough repair just two months previously, which meant that its metal hull offered less resistance and allowed it to achieve greater speed than a rough, barnacle-encrusted wooden hull would allow.

Spotting sail on the horizon, the Seahorse gave chase. One account claims that the two ships were 70 kilometers apart at this point. Perceiving that he had been noticed, Bourd  at first attempted to head back to Malta, which may have been his undoing as he later changed his mind and altered course, in the process losing valuable time and allowing the slower ship to close the gap so that, after a tenacious 12-hour pursuit, the British ship caught up with the French frigate.

A close action ensued: when within pistol-shot, Seahorse opened with a fierce broadside which killed all but five of the Frenchmen on deck. Some cannon balls pierced the hull and went right through; others ricocheted around inside the stricken hull. In both cases, deadly splinters ripped across the decks, maiming the hapless crew.

The Maltese sailors were ordered to replace the fallen Frenchmen at the guns; however, terrified, they refused despite desperate threats from their commanding officers. Unsurprisingly, the Maltese preferred surrendering to the British rather than prolonging the carnage wrought around them.

Both Bourd  and Baraguay d'Hilliers attempted to lead by example and stood their ground. The former suffered several wounds. The general, receiving a blow to the chest from a sizeable splinter, was knocked over, a lieutenant falling dead by his side. The Parisian journals later claimed, in a flurry of hero worship, that General Baraguay d'Hilliers' clothes were shot full of holes like a sieve.

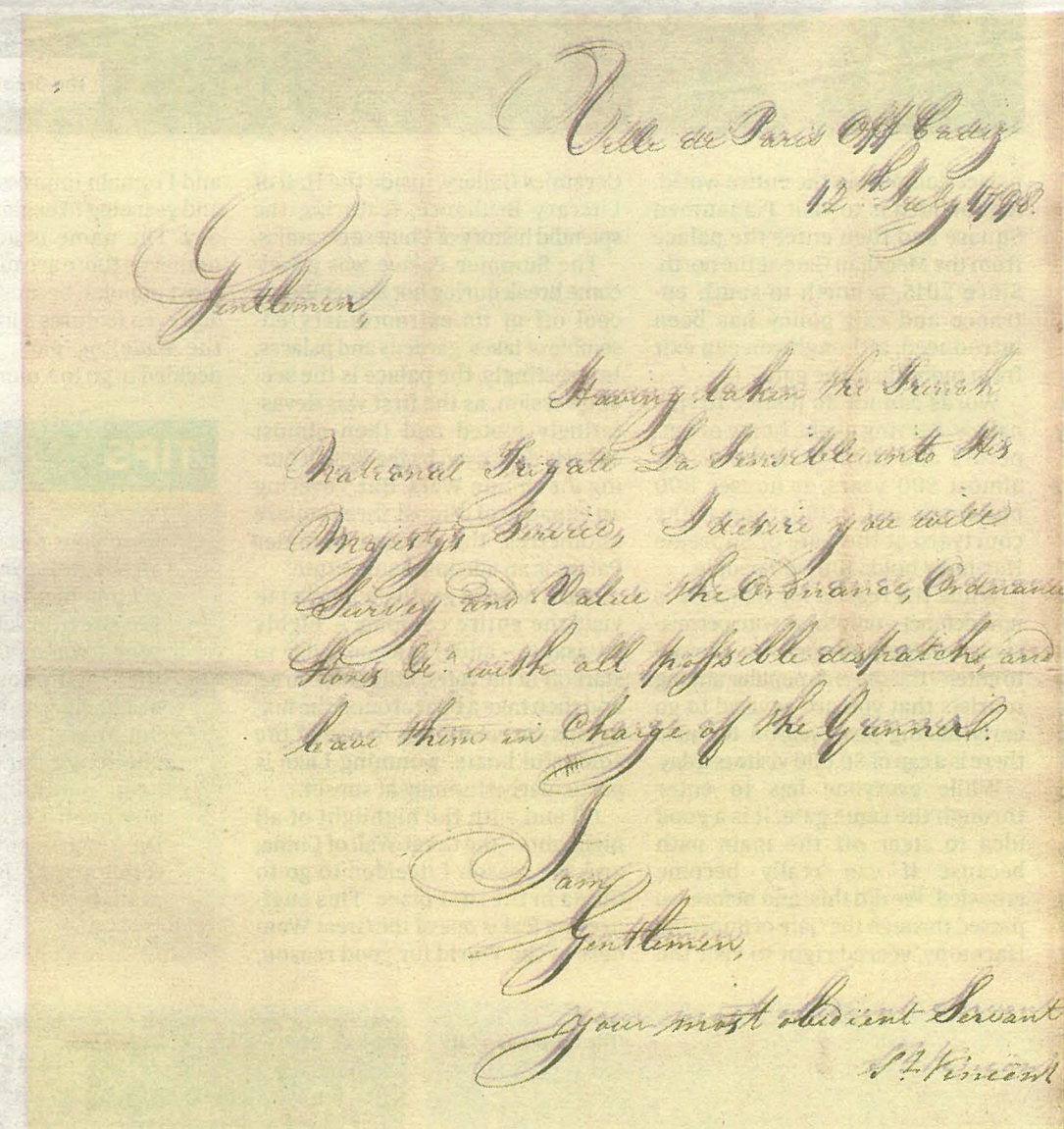
Undaunted, Captain Bourd  gave orders to board the British frigate at the very moment that the British were attempting to do the same. After just eight minutes of fierce fighting and on seeing so many of his countrymen killed or wounded, the French captain surrendered.

The accompanying image painted by James Buttersworth Sr, shows the Seahorse in the foreground as its sailors climb the rigging in readiness to board La Sensible. Buttersworth, enlisted in the Royal Navy in 1795; however, he was invalidated home from Menorca in 1800.

Before the tricolor was hauled down the French managed to throw overboard the despatches and the flags taken at Malta. The despatches, wrapped in packages weighed down by lead shot, sank immediately, whereas the fabric banners floated and were thankfully recovered.

It turns out that no money was found on board La Sensible. This fact begs a number of questions: was there ever any silver on board? If there was, might it have been thrown overboard in an effort to lighten the ship and outrun the British pursuer? We may never know the answers to these questions.

As was the case with most naval engagements during the Napoleonic Wars it was the superior British cannon fire that carried the day. The final tally was 86 Frenchmen killed and wounded and two killed and 16 wounded on the



The order given by Admiral Jervis, July 12, 1798. Author's collection.

British ship. From his interviews with the captured French officers, Foote learned that the French fleet had set sail for Egypt, and judging that Nelson must be in pursuit of them he set course for that coast. Unfortunately, he arrived ahead of Nelson, and turning back to Syracuse to take on supplies of fresh water, returned to Egypt too late to participate in the Battle of the Nile.

The Grand Master's ornate cannon, together with Hompesch's flag, can be seen today in the Royal Armouries in the UK. Some of the other banners are in the collection of the Museum of the Order of St John in London. They hung for many years in the Chapter Hall (see image); however, a few years ago they were considered too delicate for public display and are currently in storage.

The cannon and banners have seen their share of action. Taken as plunder by the French, they were then snatched as prizes of war by the British. Thus, they remain legitimately in the UK. Some of the banners have found their way back to the Order of St John, albeit the British Order more properly named the Most Venerable Order of the Hospital of St John of Jerusalem, a royal order of chivalry first constituted in 1888 by royal charter from Queen Victoria.

The case for the return of the cannon to Malta, even if only temporarily, may only have justification on grounds of sentimentality; however, if Jean de Valette's poignant can safely revisit the land where it lay in the possession of its original owner we may yet hope to see the Ximenes cannon on our native shores.