

## THE NATIONAL WAR MUSEUM, MALTA G.C.

by the late PHILIP VELLA\*

A letter by Dr. E. Agius in the 'Times of Malta' of 29 October, 1943, when the streets of Malta were still littered with debris, seemed to have fallen on deaf ears, except for one or two other correspondents who supported the setting-up of a War Museum to house the many relics relating to Malta's role during the Second World War.

It took over 30 years for those correspondents to see their dream materialise when, on 29 July 1974, a group of volunteers formed the National War Museum Association. Although it soon transpired that many important and historic relics had by then been sold for scrap, co-operation and assistance were forthcoming from the Ministry responsible for Culture, the Department of Museums, the Armed Forces of Malta, the British Services and various individuals who helped the Association to open, on 30 May 1975, a War Relics Exhibition housed at Lower Fort St Elmo in Valletta, itself a historic site which had lived the days that the Exhibition meant to record. It was on the ramparts of this old Fort that six Maltese artillery men died in the defence of their homeland on the very first day of the war on 11 June 1940, while 13 months later, on 26 July, 1941, their comrades foiled a daring attempt by the Italian Navy to penetrate into the Island's two main harbours.

The Exhibition soon out-grew itself into a virtual War Museum which on 5 November 1979 came to be officially recognised as the National War Museum.

The principal exhibits are the George Cross, awarded to Malta on 15 April 1942, and the fuselage of the legendary Gladiator N5520 *FAITH*, which was restored by the Royal Air Force soon after the Association was set up. These and all the other items evoke memories of Malta's struggle for survival as the most bombed spot on earth till the time when the Island became a springboard for the invasion of Sicily.

Other important exhibits include the front section of the fuselage, including the Merlin engine, of a Spitfire Mk. VC, which ditched in Marsalforn Bay at Gozo; a Junkers Jumbo 211 engine hauled up from the seabed off Zonqor Point; the starboard wing, bearing the original markings, of a Bf 109 recovered from the Gozo Channel; the helm and name-board of the tanker *OHIO*; the Ship's Bell of *PORT CHALMERS*, one of the five merchant ships which succeeded in making harbour during Operation *PEDESTAL* in August 1942; an Italian Vickers Terni 75 mm field gun, the first captured by the 51st Highland Division during the Sicilian campaign; Willys jeep *HUSKY*, used by General Eisenhower during his short stay in Malta preparatory to the invasion of Sicily as well as the uniform jackets of the last British Flag Officer, General Officer Commanding Troops and Air Commander to serve in Malta.

Numerous photographic panels depict conditions prevailing in Malta during the crucial years from 1940 to 1943. They tell the story of a gallant people who withstood the long strain of bombing and siege to preserve their freedom.

Several important acquisitions have been made on the Association's initiative; the Earl Mountbatten of Burma presented one of his war-time uniforms worn in Malta in 1941 when commanding *H.M.S. KELLY*; Air Chief Marshal Sir Hugh Pughe Lloyd, Malta's Air Officer Commanding during the height of the blitz, donated his battledress tunic; the uniform jacket of Flight Lieutenant George F. Beurling,

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Malta's top fighter ace, was donated by his family in Canada; the Trustees of the National Maritime Museum at Greenwich presented a replica of the battle-scarred Ship's Bell of *H.M.S. ILLUSTRIOUS*, while several British Regimental Museums sent items of militia.

The part played by the Royal Navy, Army and Civilian Organisations is also recorded in the Museum.

The Association has also set up a Library and an Archive, besides a Photographic Collection. Although considerable progress has been achieved in this respect, the Association welcomes more material throwing light on Malta's role as a Fortress.

The National War Museum of Malta G.C. is instrumental in recording an important chapter in the History of the Island. It aims at perpetuating the heroic stand made by all Malta, civilians and servicemen alike, whose determination to stand up against a threat to their democratic way of life was heavily paid for in terms of lives.

Besides, it immortalizes the valorous effort made by British and Commonwealth airmen, soldiers, sailors and merchant seamen, whose dedication and devotion to duty, often paid at the supreme sacrifice, helped Malta to emerge from the war deeply scratched but unbeaten.

Let it be recorded that from 11 June 1940 to 28 August 1944, Malta experienced 3,340 alerts, totalling 2,357 hours and 6 minutes, claiming 1,581 civilian victims; their memory is recorded in Malta's National War Museum in a special section containing a Roll of Honour besides the original model of the War Memorial at Floriana, on the outskirts of Valletta.

A further 554 Maltese lost their life while serving with the Forces and in the Merchant Navy. This brings a total of 2,135, representing 1:126 of the population of Malta and Gozo, besides the much higher number of people injured through enemy action.