

Missing in action

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On Easter Sunday, April 5, 1942, many British and Maltese seamen died when the British cruiser HMS *Cornwall* sank in the Indian Ocean after a Japanese air attack. This is the story of one who unfortunately didn't make it.

Carmelo Bonnici was born in Valletta to Carmelo Bonnici and Concetta née Vella both from Valletta, on July 23, 1896. The young Carmelo attended the city's elementary school and later on took up the hairdressing trade.

After World War I, demobilised servicemen returned home but work was very hard to come by. As Carmelo was struggling to make ends meet, he enlisted in the Royal Navy as an officer's steward at HMS *St Angelo* on March 25, 1919. Carmelo was posted in various Royal Navy stations/ships, including HMS *Egmont* in 1926 and later *Pembroke*, *Concorde*, *Iron Duke*, *Marlborough* and *Greenwich*.

On March 6, 1931, he was transferred to the heavy cruiser HMS *London* and was promoted to leading steward. This would be the vessel on which he was to serve longest, leaving the ship reluctantly on November 8, 1935, and posted onshore at HMS *St Angelo*. On September 29, 1936, he was transferred to one of the

most popular heavy cruisers among Maltese seamen, HMS *Sussex*, up to December 25, 1939.

Britain was ill-prepared for hostilities but as Phoney War set in, the country and its dominions – Australia, Canada, New Zealand, South Africa, India and Pakistan – braced for war. Carmelo was due to return home to be pensioned off, and on December 27, 1939, together with other Maltese seamen he was transferred to the heavy cruiser HMS *Cornwall*, which was sail for Malta sometime. Carmelo was 41 at the time and was looking forward to see his family; however fate dictated otherwise.

“Carmelo hesitated to jump... He did not know how to swim. He preferred to stay on board and retreated into the ship”

During 1940, HMS *Cornwall* was deployed on convoy escort and patrol duties in the South Atlantic and, on one occasion, escorted a large and important convoy from the UK to the Middle East and India. During wartime, all hands, whatever their trade, profession or grade, would either be training for battle or be on standby ready for action.

On September 19, 1940, while on patrol off Cape Three Points,

Ghana, the *Cornwall* intercepted the Vichy French cruiser *Primaguet* and the *Leninger* on their way to Libreville, central Africa. The French ships were stopped and, after some haggling, their captain was prevailed upon to return to Casablanca, Morocco.

On September 28, *Cornwall* left Freetown, Sierra Leone, for Douala in Cameroun to prevent any interference by the Vichy French with the expedition of the Free French troops under General Charles de Gaulle which had attempted to land at Dakar, west Africa. It continued with convoy escort duties from the UK until the end of the year when she arrived at Simonstown, South Africa, for a refit.

It sailed again on February 28, 1941, for the South Atlantic, intercepting the Vichy French vessel *Ville de Majunga* with 600 troops on board, about 450 miles west of Cape Town, South Africa. An armed guard was placed on board and the ship was taken to Simonstown. Carmelo was one of the seamen ordered to watch over the enemy personnel. This was quite a different job from hairdressing.

On May 7, 1941, following a distress message from the tanker *British Emperor* in the south Atlantic, *Cornwall* was detailed to search for a German raider. At 2am the next day, the raider was sighted by the cruiser's aircraft some 65 miles away, north of the Seychelles islands. *Cornwall* eventually came within range and challenged the

ship. The raider signalled that it was the *Tamerlane* but when its disguise was exposed, it disclosed itself as the *Pinguin* and opened fire.

After being hit by a salvo of eight shells in the mine-laying magazine, the German ship blew up and sank. Carmelo helped rescue 58 German and 25 British prisoner-of-war survivors from the *Pinguin*, some of whom died later due to their injuries. A total of 341 German seamen died including the captain and about 200 were held as prisoners-of-war.

After minor repairs in Simonstown, *Cornwall* returned as an escort for troop convoys until March 1942 when it was attached to the Fourth Cruiser Squadron of the newly formed Eastern Fleet, which also included the cruiser HMS *Dorsetshire*. At the beginning of April, two strong Japanese forces began operating in the Indian Ocean off the south coast of Ceylon (Sri Lanka) with plans to attack Colombo.

On Easter Sunday, April 5, 1942, *Cornwall* and *Dorsetshire* were steaming at 27.5 knots, when they sighted the first Japanese aircraft at 11am from right astern low down on the horizon. The plane disappeared after a few minutes. At noon another one turned up, an unmistakable 'shadower'.

Captain A.W.S. Agar of HMS *Dorsetshire* recalled the last few dramatic moments of this unforgettable episode: Shortly before 1pm, Japanese dive-bombers appeared in the sky directly overhead and attacked down sun. The force included a considerable 50+ planes, and HMS *Cornwall* and *Dorsetshire* were their targets.

All the Maltese crew, including Carmelo, helped load the anti-aircraft guns on the *Cornwall*. Both ships, lacking air cover, took up defensive positions, turning under full helm to confuse the aim of the Japanese dive-bombers. The cruisers tried to keep the dive-bombers high with their anti-aircraft fire, but down they came, plummeting in groups of three, releasing their black and shiny bombs when they were only a few hundred feet above the ships. Some enemy bombers were shot down but the cruisers were repeatedly hit and disabled almost immediately.

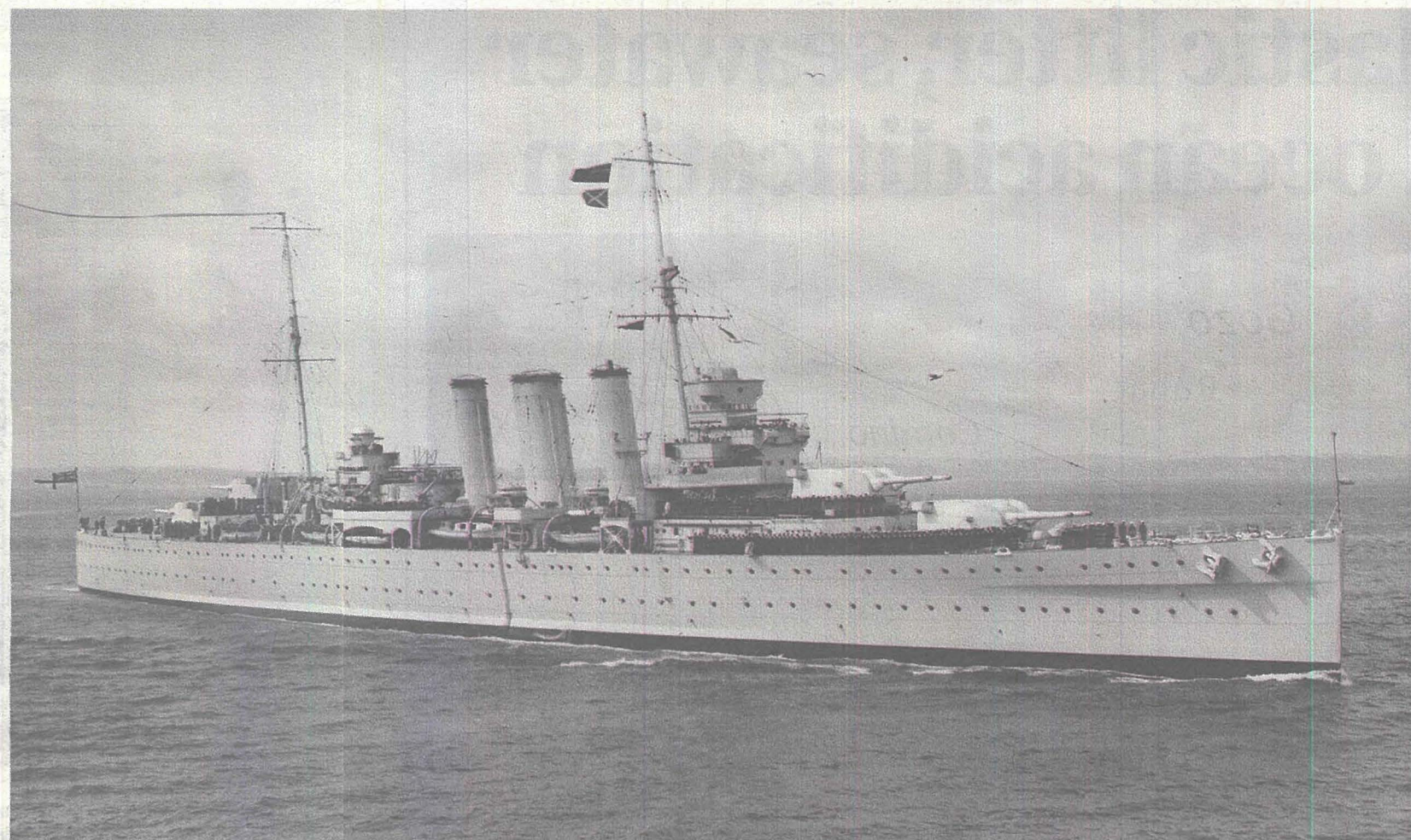
HMS *Cornwall* began listing to port and the crew were ordered to abandon ship. Carmelo and a few other Maltese seamen,

including Antonio Fenech Conti and a certain Buhagiar, scrambled for the railings to jump overboard. They plunged into the sea, surfaced and grabbed some flotsam floating by. Carmelo hesitated to jump though he was encouraged by his colleagues yelling at the top of their voice. But his reply was that he did not know how to swim. He preferred to stay on board and retreated into the ship.

A survivor named Mr Fuller testified that the seamen in the sea were subjected to machine-gun fire from the many Japanese planes flying around. Bearing in mind the need to avoid the suction of the sinking ship, they swam or paddled quickly to get away as far as possible from the doomed vessel.

Only about eight minutes after the first bomber dived on it, *Dorsetshire* disappeared, taking with it over 200 of the ship's crew. Eyewitnesses related a story about a seaman in the *Dorsetshire* who would not leave the mess deck because he could not swim. He had a lifebelt but, instead of going up top and jumping into the water, he calmly said cheerio to his shipmates, lit a cigarette and sat on a mess table, waiting for the ship to go down.

The skipper of HMS *Cornwall*, Captain Mainwaring was on his way to the bridge from the remote control office when a bomb exploded. He was wounded in the right shoulder



The County Class cruiser HMS *Cornwall*.



Carmelo Bonnici as a young officer's steward (standing, first from left) and Eliseo Borg from Hamrun (standing, right) with unidentified colleagues on HMS *Iron Duke* in 1920-21.

but continued to direct operations. In true naval tradition he was leaving the ship just before the end. By that time the ship's list was acute. As the captain let go of the starboard guard-rail, he slid and rolled down the ship's side amid encouragement from the men. It was rather a cruel touch of fate that he had to abandon the ship only a few days before his 50th birthday.

Twelve minutes after the attack, the cruiser, with its colours still flying, went down head-first and its stern came right out of the water, tilting at about 30 degrees as it took its final plunge into the Indian Ocean, which was about a mile deep in that area. It is hard to believe but he heard a faint cheer as the survivors, spread along a line about a mile long, watched it all happen.

It must have been terrifying chaos with the inside of the huge ship in a turmoil as her stern lifted and it went down into the depths of the ocean. The agonising suffering, both mental and physical, endured by the men who are listed as 'missing, presumed killed' is a nightmare that even the passing of time fails to obliterate.

The survivors found themselves adrift in a shark-infested ocean, 300 miles from land and with the scantiest of boat accommodation. Soon after sunrise on April 6, the heat became so intense that head coverings were fashioned from pieces cut from battle dress as a protection from the rays of the equatorial sun.

Sharks were numerous but these seemed content to wait for the corpses which from time to time were committed to the sea and the predators made no attempt to molest anyone living.

Among the survivors were Eddie Buhagiar from Valletta, leading steward Antonio Fenech Conti and a certain Schembri, both from Sliema. They remained in the water for 32 hours before being rescued. Then a plane appeared. Friend or foe? There was great excitement and apprehension, and at about 6pm, just as light was starting to fail, three ships were seen; they were British. The survivors were picked up by boats from the cruiser *Enterprise* and destroyers *Paladin* and *Panther*.

The surviving Maltese are depicted in a painting by Guido Lanfranco, hanging for dear life on some broken wood from the ship. This painting hangs in the sacristy of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart Church (Sacro Cuor) in Sliema, to whom Antonio Fenech Conti and Schembri were greatly devoted; they had spent nearly all the 28 hours in the sea praying to her. Buhagiar's wife is still alive and resides in the UK.

Of the *Cornwall*'s 730 crew, 10 officers and 180 seamen, including six Maltese out of a complement of 10, were lost. These were petty officer Steward Bonnici, 44, of Valletta, leading cook Antonio Cioffi, leading steward Joseph Mary Ellul, 22, of Valletta,



A Japanese torpedo bomber veers to port prior to attacking Allied ships in the South Pacific.



This last photo of Carmelo Bonnici on HMS *Cornwall* was taken on Easter Sunday, April 5, 1942.

steward Paul Portanier, 28, of Hamrun, leading steward Giuseppe Sammut, 39, and leading cook Louis Valletta.

The six Maltese seamen who lost their lives on the *Cornwall* are remembered on an obelisk memorial in Plymouth. The Commonwealth War Graves Commission monument permanently commemorates over 7,000 sailors of World War I and almost 16,000 from World War II.

Carmelo was married to Emanuela née Gatt and they had seven children: Virginia, Fr Giulio OSA, Paul, Romeo, Laurence, Alfred and Mary.

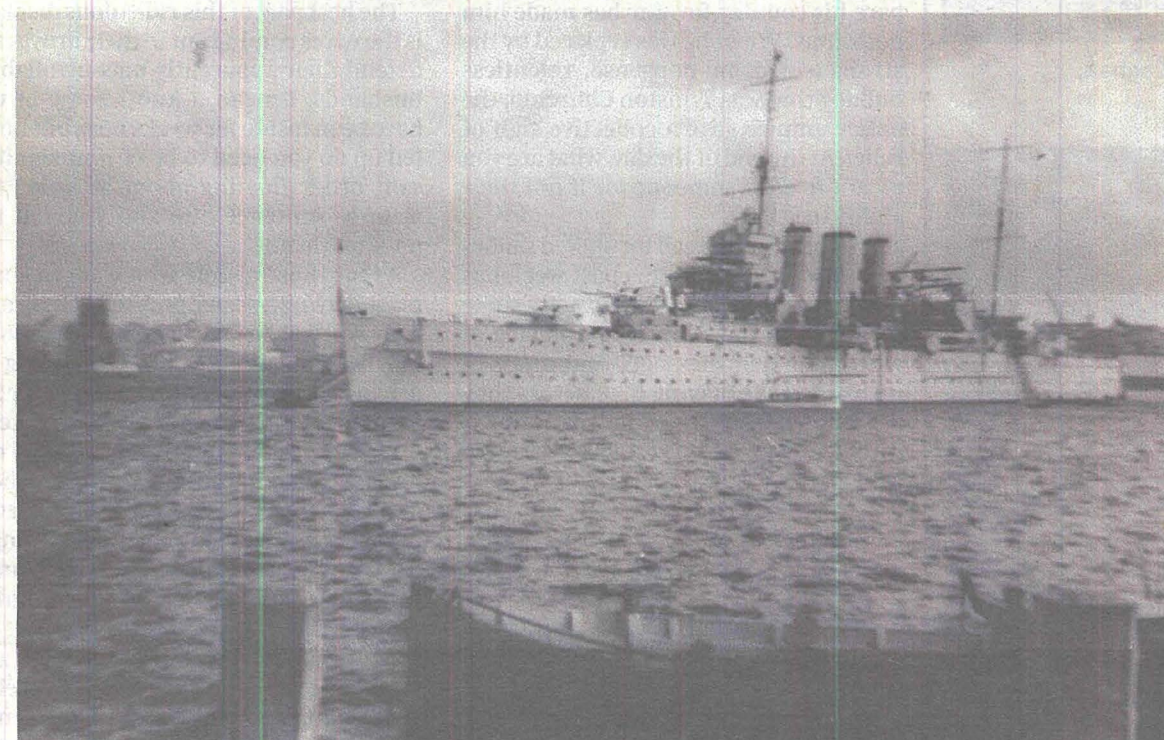
Postscript

Following the recent publication of my war books, Martha (or Sophie) Valletta informed me that her father, Dominic Borg, from the city, was also a surviving seaman in the sinking of HMS *Cornwall*. Borg was in the oily water for 32 hours before being saved by HM ships, and was at first listed as 'missing in action, presumed dead'. But later he was taken to Durban, South Africa, to convalesce on the hospital ship HMS *Maine* and finally made it to Blighty. However, due to the atrocious conditions he had endured,

which included swallowing contaminated seawater, stress and the anxiety of the tragedy, he became a diabetic, followed by severe jaundice. He died in 1948, aged 57.

Acknowledgements

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HMS *Sussex*, the most popular cruiser among Maltese seamen, anchored at port in 1938.