

Feature

HMS Dee and HMS Don: The ships which left a lasting mark



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Language is one of those things that is both constant and ever-changing. While it remains a key part of most countries, it has developed and changed over time – with linguistic additions sometimes coming from the unlikely of places.

Maltese is known for its expressions and synonyms, and perhaps one of the best known of these is the saying 'qishom id-di u d-do'. It is an expression which in reality has no direct translation, but which is used to refer to two people who are always seen together.

The origin of this expression is an unlikely source: two British gunboats built in the nineteenth century which spent much of their lives moored next to each other in Kalkara Creek.

HMS Dee and *HMS Don* were both Medina-class gunboats, being two out of 12 such ships which were built by the Palmers Shipbuilding & Iron Company between 1876 and 1877. The two ships were launched within 10 days of each other – the *Dee* was launched on 4 April 1877 and the *Don* on 14 April of the same year.

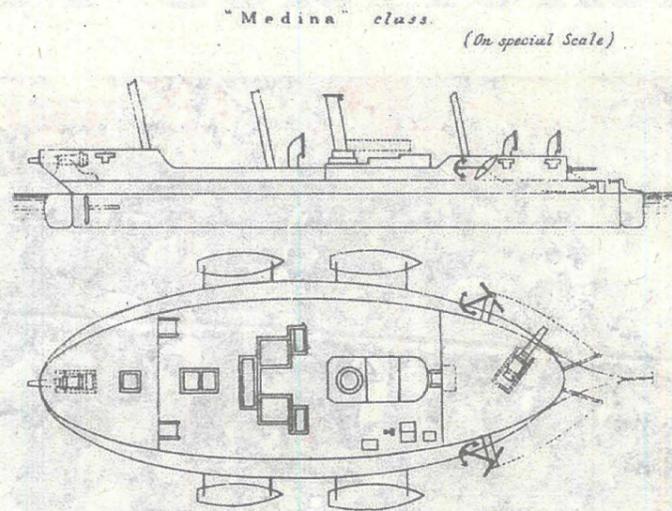
The Medina class itself was a development of the Rendel gunboat which was a series of small

vessels with low freeboards which mounted a small number of relatively large guns. All twelve of the gunboats were built by the Palmers Shipbuilding & Iron Company and each was subsequently named after a different river.

In Rif Winfield and David Lyon's 'The Sail and Steam Navy List: All the Ships of the Royal Navy 1815–1889', we can find further details on the class. It is explained that the boats were constructed entirely out of iron and were powered by a pair of R and W Hawthorn 2-cylinder horizontal single-expansion steam engines of 60 nominal horsepower. They developed 310 indicated horsepower (230 kW), giving a speed of about 9 1/2 knots (17.6 km/h). The ships were armed with three 6.3-inch (160-mm) 64-pdr 64-cwt muzzle-loading rifles.

A significant difference to their predecessors is that the Medina class ships were provided with masts which extended their range. Each vessel in fact had three masts and a barquentine rig of sails, but by the 1890s these were replaced by two pole masts.

All in all, the vessels were not particularly lauded for their looks: naval historian Antony Preston, for instance, described the class as "the most grotesque craft ever seen."



Some of the twelve Medina-class gunboats spent their life tendered to battleships, but others did see active service in various regions. Both the *Dee* and the *Don*, for instance, saw active service in the Mediterranean Sea.

Both played a part in the 1882 invasion of Egypt, where a British force invaded the North African country to restore the rule of Tewfik Pasha, who had lost his reign to a coup led by former army officer Ahmed Urabi. With the successful invasion, the British established a strong hold over Egypt, with the country remaining under British occupa-

tion until the Anglo-Egyptian Treaty of 1922 and Anglo-Egyptian treaty of 1936 give control gradually back to the government of Egypt until British troops finally withdrew in 1956.

The connection between these two ships and Malta in fact does not stop at just the much-loved expression. Three Maltese sailors in fact served on the two gunboats during the invasion of Egypt.

Paolo Bezzina, born in Floriana on 24 May 1859, served on the *Dee* while Edward Brincat, born in Valletta in 1860, and Emanuel Mallia, born in 'Marina' on 15

February 1866, both served on the *Don*.

All three of them were awarded the 1882 Egypt Medal along with the Khedive's Star which was established by Tewfik Pasha when he was reinstated as the Khedive of Egypt.

Teenagers at War

It is pertinent to note that out of the trio, Emanuel Mallia was only 16 years of age at the time of the invasion of Egypt.

It was in fact not at all uncommon for boys to be entered into the Royal Navy at the age of 15 to 16 years of age, although they generally would not see sea-going service until they were 16 to 17 years old. The practice continued even into the First World War, with the Navy having a rank simply entitled 'boy'.

Mallia was only one out of a number of cases where Maltese enrolled with the Navy or Army in spite of them being under-age.

Most startling is perhaps the enrolment of Paul Caruana, who, having been born in 1901, entered the Navy in 1915 before his 14th birthday. Caruana was later present at the Second Battle of Heligoland Bight in November 1917, where the British and German navies fought out a stalemate in the North Sea.

Caruana was also the nephew of Maurus Caruana who in the same year of Paul's enrolment had been ordained as Bishop for Malta and Titular Archbishop of Rhodes. He held the latter post till 1928, but remained Malta's Bishop till his death during the Second World War in 1943.

While Paul Caruana survived the war, other Maltese of a similarly young age were not so lucky.

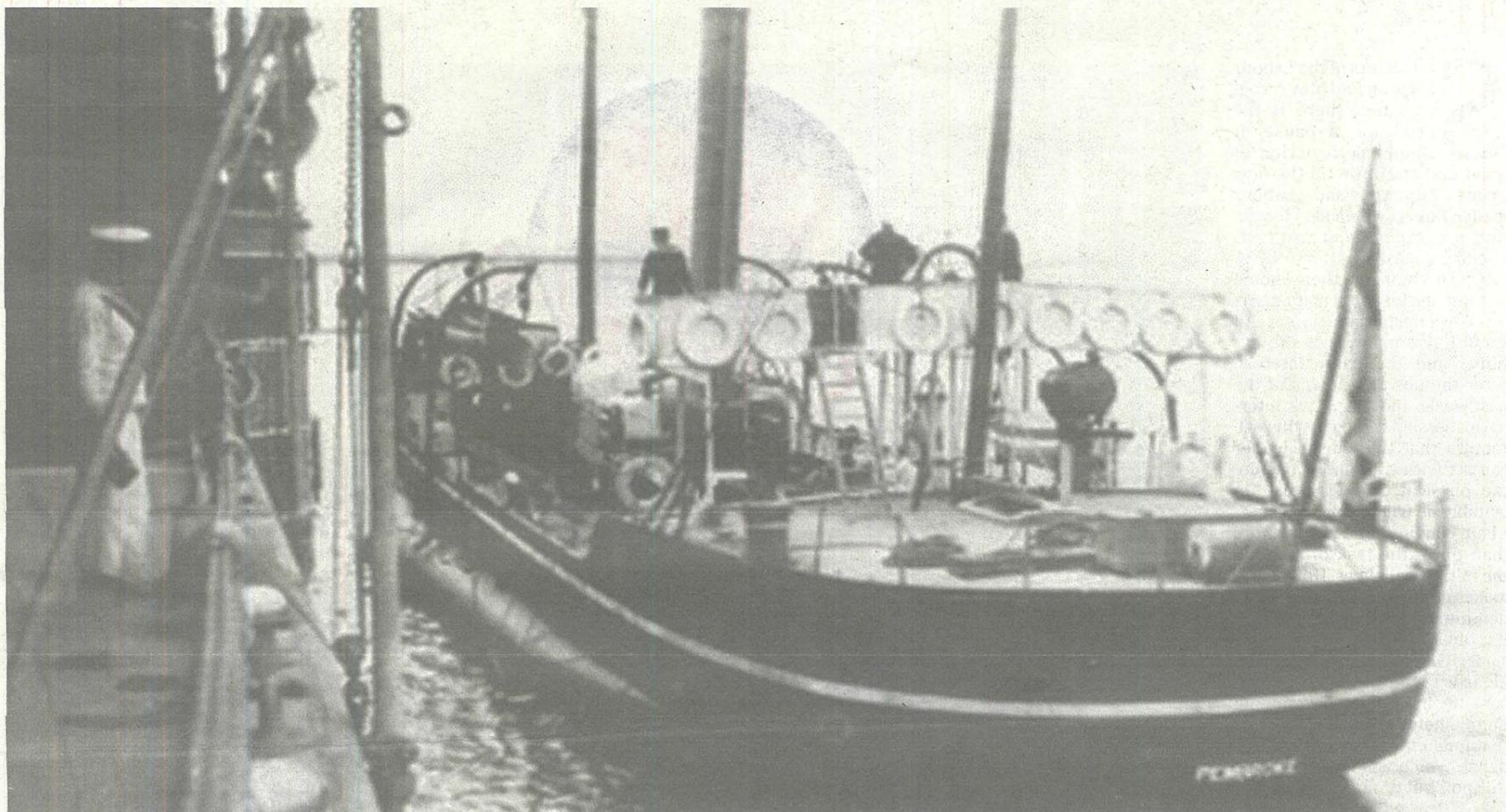
Andrea Cutajar was one of 210 people killed on the *SS Tuscania* a Cunard luxury liner when it was sunk by the German submarine UB-77 on 5 February 1918 while transporting American troops to Europe. The liner was carrying 2,013 American troops along with 384 troops when it was struck by two torpedoes while passing between Scotland's Islay and Northern Ireland's Rathlin Island, with the second one sending the ship to the bottom within four hours.

Most of the drowned servicemen washed up on the shores of Islay and were buried there, but Caruana's body was never recovered. He is commemorated at the Tower Hill Memorial in London, which commemorates all Merchant Navy seamen who died in the World Wars and have no known grave.

George Alfiero was also killed at the age of 17, meeting his demise



The two British gunboats on the Maltese language



on 11 November 1917 – a year to the day before the signing of the Armistice which ended the First World War. He was serving as Stewart 2nd Class onboard the HMS M15 when she was sunk off Gaza by UC-38, resulting in the loss of 26 men. His body was, like Cutajar's, never recovered and he is commemorated at the Plymouth Naval Memorial. He had joined the Navy on 6 August 1916 – a month before his 16th birthday.

Ramon Questa was another Maltese naval serviceman killed at the age of 17. He was a canteen assistant onboard the famous HMS Glorious, an aircraft carrier which was sunk by the *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau* on 8 June 1940, resulting in the loss of over 1,200 men.

Other Maltese of a young age also passed away during the wars, but it is more likely that they died from disease or accidents rather than being killed in action. Private Domenico Sultana, for instance, from Birkirkara, served in the Army Service Corps and died on 11 September 1918. Labourer Paolo Caruana, from Valletta, died on 1 February 1918 while serving with the Maltese Labour Corps, while Edgard Cassar – also a labourer – died on 15 September 1918 while serving with the

same Maltese Labour Corps.

One Maltese marked only as M. Zerafa in the Commonwealth War Graves Commission records and likely from Żebbuġ was also serving with the Maltese Labour Corps as a servant when he passed away on 11 November 1918 – the day that the armistice was signed.

All four of the aforementioned casualties are buried in Greece, where a significant number of Maltese served during the First World War, and all four were only 17 years old when they passed away.

It is difficult to really pin down the exact number of men who joined either the Army or the Navy in spite of being under 18 years of age. This is down to the fact that many would simply lie about their birthday.

Henry Casingena is an example of this. The first trace of Casingena in British records is his enlistment with the Royal Navy on 1 April 1882 to the battleship *HMS Invincible*, where he quotes his birthday as having been on 28 March 1864 – meaning that he had turned 18 only three days prior.

He was however discharged as 'unfit' from the Navy on 11 January 1883. This did not stop him from signing up for the Navy again though, something which

he did less than a month later on 7 February 1883. His new service record however now gives his birthday as being 1 October 1864 – indicating that he had probably simply lied on his first application. Casingena went on to serve on a number of British vessels even into the new century.

Also interesting to note is the variety of spelling imputed by the British for the surname Casingena: it is written as 'Casincena', 'Casencena', 'Caningena', and 'Cancencena' on different occasions. This befuddlement at how to spell Maltese surnames on the part of the British is not uncommon, and can be observed on war records from the time.

The enrolment of teenagers in the armed forces – particularly in World War One – was not a uniquely Maltese phenomenon. The BBC documentary 'Teenage Tommies', aired in 2014 on the occasion of the centenary of the start of the First World War, showed how the British had recruited some 250,000 boys under the age of 18 during the conflict.

Sidney George Lewis was the youngest to serve in the conflict. Born on 24 March 1903, he enlisted in the East Surrey Regiment in August 1915 at the age of twelve. While recruiters would generally turn a blind-eye to un-

derage recruits, Lewis' astonishingly mature appearance probably contributed to him being allowed into the army: he stood at an incredible 6 foot 2 inches (1.88m) tall when the minimum requirement was of only 5 foot 3 inches (1.60m).

He fought in the Battle of the Somme in 1916, then aged thirteen, in the 106th Machine Gun Company of the Machine Gun Corps and then fought in the Battle of Delville Wood which saw some of the worst casualties on the Somme. He was sent home after his mother sent his birth certificate to the War Office and demanded his return. He did re-enlist in 1918, serving with the army of occupation in Austria, and later served with the bomb-disposal unit in the Second World War. He eventually retired to run a pub, and passed away in 1969.

The Dee and the Don: Together in obsolescence, together in legacy

Historical legacy is a strange being to understand. It can draw connections between the most unassuming things and concepts or part of history which are widespread and, at times, even larger than life.

In Emanuel Mallia's service as a 16-year old onboard the *Don*, a

connection can be drawn with many more under-aged Maltese – and hundreds of thousands under-aged British – who served during the armed conflicts of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

Beyond that however, little is more larger than life than a country's language. As time caught up with the *Dee* and the *Don* and pushed them into becoming forgotten and obsolete, it also pushed them into holding an almost everlasting place in Malta's language.

Not much is really known about what became of the two ships. The *Dee* was used for torpedo instruction in Malta between 1892 and 1902 before being sold in Malta on 10 July 1902, while the *Don* was used in Malta as a concrete barge between 1906 and 1908 before being converted into a lighter – a traditionally unpowered type of flat-bottomed barge used to transfer goods and passengers to and from moored ships – in 1911, and then being sold in Malta in 1914.

It is not known what became of the two ships after they were sold, and there are no known pictures of them in existence, but their legacy is nonetheless preserved in the form of the much used Maltese expression, 'qishom *ial-di u a-do*'.