

LIFE & WELLBEING HISTORY



The Siege Bell War Memorial, Valletta.



The former submarine base on Manoel Island, barely changed today.



Photo of my father's crew a few days before he joined it.

Echoes of another world



TREVOR KERRY

We had begun a journey that my father had made more than 70 years before. He had not returned.

From the air, Malta sits honey-coloured, stone-built, like a citrine in a sapphire sea. On the ground, heat and humidity thicken the sun-drenched air.

Coincidence is a strange bedfellow. Carole, my wife, had for some years been tracing the skeletal journeys of my father's wartime past through the Atlantic and into the Mediterranean as boy, able seaman and rating in the Royal Navy.

They had come to rest in Marsamxett Harbour, just below Valletta. She wanted now to view the submarine pens where the crew of Porpoise (my father's last vessel) took a leading role in Magic Carpet – the relief of the siege of Malta – in 1942.

By chance, I had been tutoring Maltese students of educational leadership through distance learning for an English University. With typical Maltese generosity, my many contacts wanted to facilitate Carole's quest as well as host our fact-finding vacation to their beloved island. Rarely do such fortuities meet.

Our trip was warm and comfortable, my father's (Lewis Lloyd Kerry) would not have been. The Porpoise surfaced in Malta on November 9, 1941, under the command of Lt Cdr Pizey, DSC, and stayed three days. It arrived in Alexandria on 18th, having completed its first run to bring supplies to the desperate islanders.

For submariners it was a dark journey, below the ocean; complicated by the poor air quality, desperate sanitation and unbelievably cramped conditions.

The supplies that were ferried – within, and sometimes lashed outside, the submarines – were of vital kerosene, coal, fodder and aircraft spares.

On the surface of the Mediterranean a parallel process was taking place. Losses were massive but success was vital. Axis forces were trying to starve out the islanders as well as bomb them into submission; but the spirit held, and supplies trickled through.

Malta is scarred even today by the marks of war; rebuilding continues. But the George Cross islanders are resilient; and the loyalty of the Maltese-in-the-street towards the British endures.

We transfer from the airport to our hotel room. The blinds are drawn against the intense afternoon sun.

We pull them open. Below our window, on Manoel Island, are the submarine pens my father would have seen in 1941 when he first berthed here. It is a revelatory moment: they appear unchanged.

Later, in the soft evening light, we amble down for a closer look. Facing the harbour there is a modest plaque – the 'double dolphin' emblem of the submariner in black on a white marble rectangle. For us, the spot it marks is personal. Malta has not forgotten its ties with Britain, nor its endurance.

Next day the memorial bell rings out over the city and island at noon. It is a 10-ton monster housed in a beautifully sculpted limestone tower that gleams in the brightness of the autumn sunshine, a cupola on almost classical pillars. Erected to mark 50 years since the award of the George Cross to the islanders, it commemorates the 7,000 who died in the siege in WWII.

I wonder what Lewis – the boy from Brockley, South London – would have made of it: the sunlight, the ancient stone fortifications, the azure sea with its dancing pinpoints of sunlight, the memorial, the enduring gratitude of the survivors, one of whom is sitting on a seat staring out over the entrance to Valletta's Grand Harbour.

We set out to explore the island. It is the microcosm of the world encapsulated within a miniature perimeter: villages, farmland, cliffs, beaches and city-scapes all evident.

From the memorial bell, the wide Republic Street runs uphill between the houses and shop fronts; iron-clad balconies collect cooler air and channel it into the properties, while tall, narrow side-streets cheat the heat, each side shading the other as the sun circles on its daily course. Honey-cakes and filigree silver vie for tourist attention, but it is architecture that captivates.

In the Roman Catholic Co-Cathedral of St John, every surface – walls, high ceilings, floors, banners – dizzy the eyes with images of saints and martyrs, and with the seemingly ever-present death's-heads whose grinning visages jolt us back to intimations of mortality.

Malta without its religion, its Catholicism, is almost unintelligible. Friends from the education world adopt us for the afternoon

and take us on a tour of the Three Cities and the maritime museum, ending in the local parish church where an effigy of the Virgin is being prepared for the following day's festival. She is being lovingly cleaned and set up to be carried by the men of the parish through the streets among adoring crowds, the bearers part of a chain of humanity that traces back to distant ancestors and will proceed to new generations.

In the evening, my payback is to give a talk to the great and the good of Maltese education at the Malta Society for Educational Administration and Management (MSEAM). It happens in the Archbishop's Palace just five minutes' walk from Manoel Island. The lecture room is long, with an arched ceiling, again relatively windowless, but adorned over every square centimetre with holy associations and artwork. I wonder: what would Lewis have made of it?

Malta is, of course, no stranger to tragedy. The Great Siege of 1565 saw the Knights of Malta in conflict with the Ottoman Turks led by Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent. Many of the battles were fought exactly where we have just visited. They were unedifying affairs – wars usually are – but nonetheless the settings for great courage.

Valletta itself was founded by and named after Grand Master Jean de Valette. It was destined, under the influence of the Knights, to be not merely the capital but the cultural home to some of the finest works of 16th, 17th and 18th century Europe.

Some of the artwork and tapestries are to be found in the Grandmaster's Palace, off Valletta's main street.

In an impressive corridor stand suits of armour belonging to the Knights' Armoury interspersed with fine portraits.

An Oriental tourist is so captivated by these that he walks along the corridor never once glancing at the real objects, simply peering through the viewfinder of his Nikon – his eye never leaves it, as if the camera

body were welded to his face. He clicks the shutter at each new revelation; and he will take home a set of images of items on which his human eye has never rested.

Lewis was a professional mariner; St Paul was not. He was a semi-reluctant missionary who travelled because the Spirit drove him. Half-hidden in a side-street is the church dedicated to his shipwreck on Malta in 60AD.

Paul was a master of ambiguity. Church historians love Paul or loathe him. Theories portray him as the great originator of Christian doctrine; or as a fifth columnist, ostensibly on the side of the Christians but actually informing under cover for Rome, the high priesthood of the Jews, or both. He was a dodgy travelling companion.

All the ships he travelled on seem to have foundered (that's the bad news); but always, everyone is rescued (which is the good – even miraculous – news). It was no different when Paul pitched up in Malta en route to Rome for potential execution as a political agitator. The little church even contains a part of the pillar on which he was beheaded.

Lewis, on the other hand, volunteered for the sea. The harsh life of HMS Ganges shore training establishment was his tutor. While on Ganges, he won a silver medal. A newspaper report says it was "for all-round distinction" and was presented by HM the King. There is ambiguity here. The medal that survived in the family archive was the National Rifle Association silver medal – an anomaly no one can explain.

Lewis served on HMS Dundedin until December 1940, then at Victory (shore establishment) until January 1, 1941. From there he joined HMS Dolphin, the submarine base at Gosport. He joined Porpoise in October 1941 and remained with the boat except for one night until his death.

In December 1941 he was part of the flotilla of Clyde, Olympus and Porpoise to bring the first supplies to the island for many weeks. Some of January 1942 was spent mine-laying; but February signalled a return to the Magic Carpet supply runs between the island and Alexandria – mostly with petrol and kerosene. In April some 'service personnel' were carried to Malta, too, before more unspecified supply runs.

May brought a narrow escape: on the 2nd, Cdr Pizey spotted a U-boat but could not engage for tactical reasons; however, the enemy proved to be the Italian submarine Nereide that mistakenly thought the British vessel was German and departed. In May, too, Lt (later Lt Cdr) Bennington, DSC, assumed command of Porpoise.



Lewis Lloyd Kerry, leading telegraphist, Royal Navy.



Firing of the noon-day gun from the Upper Barrakka Saluting Battery, Valletta.

Lewis contracted meningitis in July 1942 and died on the 9th. He was buried in Moascar Cemetery, Egypt. He was just 21, and a Leading Seaman Telegraphist.

The sea can be an engaging courtesan, but is a vicious harridan when roused. The battles of WWII around Malta illustrate this. But even in peace-time, complacency is not the order of the day. We head off to the often tranquil fishing village of Marsaxlokk. Brightly painted fishing boats, bob in reds, blues, greens and yellows on the cobalt sea; each luzzu (as the boats are called) with its all-seeing eyes painted on the bows to keep the crewmen safe. Nothing could be more tranquil.

But moments later, storm clouds sweep in; the wind picks up and hurtles around the harbour; rain deluges between the disco flashes and thunder-rolls. It is a mistake to assume the warm, idyllic Mediterranean does not have its capricious side. It is this unpredictability that makes islands such awesome places.

Adam Nicolson claims that islands have an "inherent sanctity"; he points out the connection between the concepts of 'holy' and 'haunted', and he describes an experience verging on the supernatural on his own islands, the Shiantis. His chapter slips easily into theological terminology such as 'the numen', sometimes even to the more speculative – that the boundaries between this world and some other are wafer thin on islands.

Malta, for us, echoed that view, albeit tinged with scepticism. It is a holy island –

an island full of saints, of the spirits of the Catholic world, of legend and religious narrative, of alleged miracles and certainly of martyrs and those who have died for a spiritual cause. It is a land of belief, where the image of the saint has its trans-substantial existence as the saint's own self, venerated by his or her worshippers.

On a more personal level, the barrier between our material, English Protestant milieu, rooted in the here-and-now, crossed over to my father's subaqueous world and the events of another time, another place, maybe another dimension.

Velvet night insinuates around the illuminated Tritons Fountain: Triton, son of Poseidon, messenger of the sea, whose conch calms or stirs the waves, whose human form swims with dolphin's tails – emblem of the submarine service. Shadows of lovers dally around the images of mythological figures; shadows of reality mingling with the shades of ancient faith. The ambiguities remain.

Both Malta (with its friends and colleagues, its scenery and architecture), and family history (which shed some increased if still tenuous light on a man I never knew), enriched both of us, and continues to do so.

Dr Trevor Kerry, emeritus professor of Lincoln University, UK, has taught many Maltese master's students in education, and with his wife continues to facilitate visits by Maltese primary pupils to Lincolnshire in most years.



Lewis Kerry's medals, including the 50th anniversary medal.



Plaque to submariners in WWII from opposite Manoel Island.

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