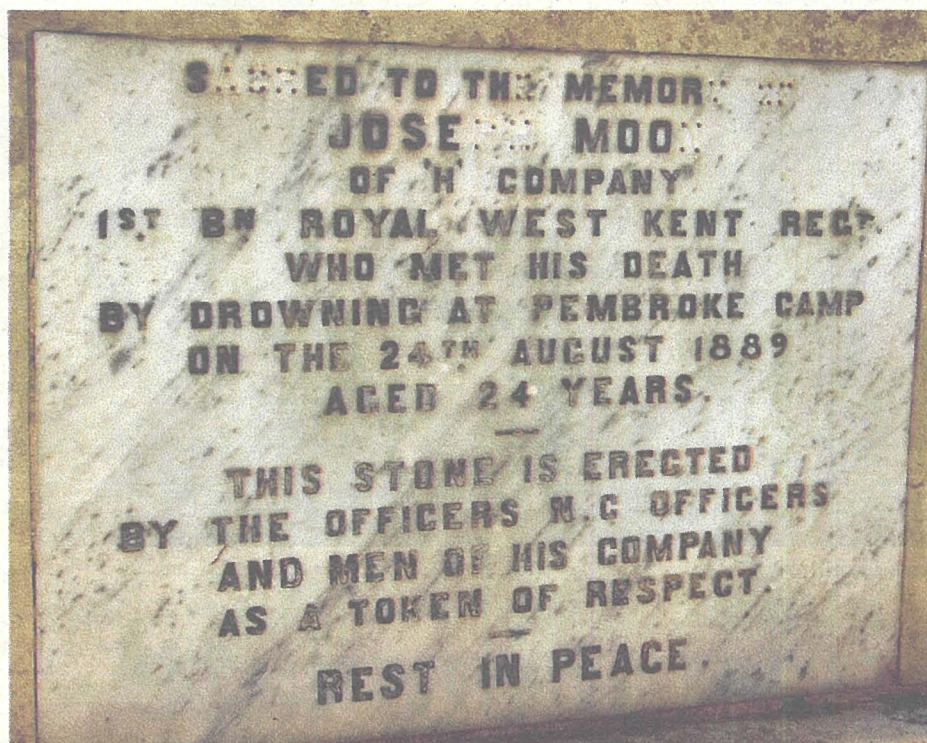
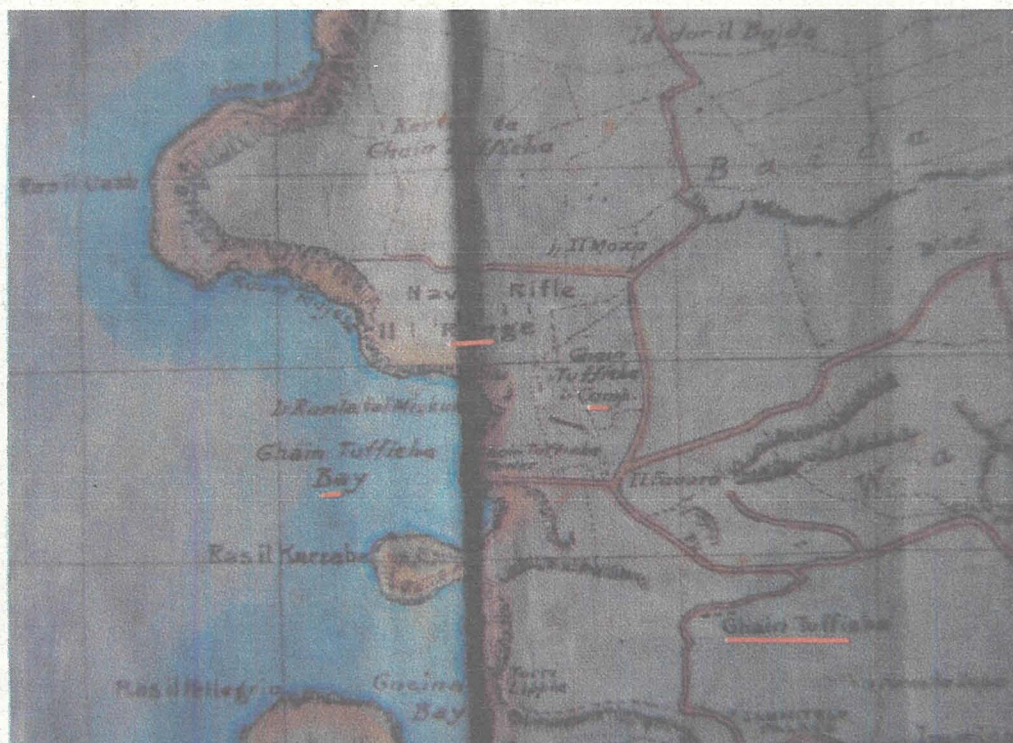


LIFE AND WELLBEING HISTORY



Swimming was a way for the troops to kill time but many ended up drowning.
PHOTO: [HTTPS://WWW.MALTARAMC.COM](https://www.maltaramc.com)



Map showing Ghajn Tuffieha Camp and its environs.
PHOTO: [HTTPS://WWW.MALTARAMC.COM](https://www.maltaramc.com)



Giuseppe Caruana, who found a pair of gazelles in his father's field at il-Wilga. PHOTO: FAMILY CARUANA

Angry farmers and missing gazelles – British soldiers in Mellieha, 1899-1906

JEFFREY SAMMUT

The presence of troops in Ghajn Tuffieha and Ghadira camps spelt trouble for the inhabitants of the nearby hamlets. These soldiers found themselves stationed in an isolated area, secluded from the rest of Malta. Entertainment, besides sports like football and cricket organised by the camps' authorities, could be found in Valletta, but as Mellieha was not connected to the railway system and the roads were in a bad state, the journey to and from was a nightmare.

Bored out of their wits, the soldiers looked forward to military manoeuvres. However, while training, they entered fields, demolished rubble walls, trampled the soil and stole crops, thus bringing on the wrath of the farmers whose livelihood they threatened. On many occasions, these manoeuvres were accompanied by an officer whose job was to listen to the farmers' complaints and issue compensation.

The following are a few examples of the damages suffered by farmers.

In August 1899, Giovanni Vella reported that soldiers from Ghadira Camp stole and trampled melons at Qammieh.

In 1900, soldiers from the Loyal North Lancashire and Warwickshire Regiments, again at

Qammieh, demolished a rural room, trampled tomato plants and stole fish from a reservoir.

In 1902, Salvatore Bonanno suffered the indignity of having mounted infantry cross his fields at Ghajn Tuffieha. The horses crushed cotton plants and smashed stone walls.

These reports are just the tip of the iceberg.

In 1900, farmers at Mellieha and Ghajn Tuffieha made around 90 claims for damages, while in 1906, there were circa 70 complaints.

“Many troopers craved for female company, so sometimes they tried their luck with the women of Mellieha”

Not all farmers were reimbursed.

Giuseppe Grech was told he would only be paid if he pointed out the soldiers responsible for stealing his grapes from Ghar Baqrat, while GioMaria Mifsud's claim was refused as the colonel in charge told him he had proof that it was some Maltese, not his troops, who pilfered his melons from his land close to Ghadira

Camp. Mifsud was later offered five shillings for his troubles. Both incidents happened in 1900.

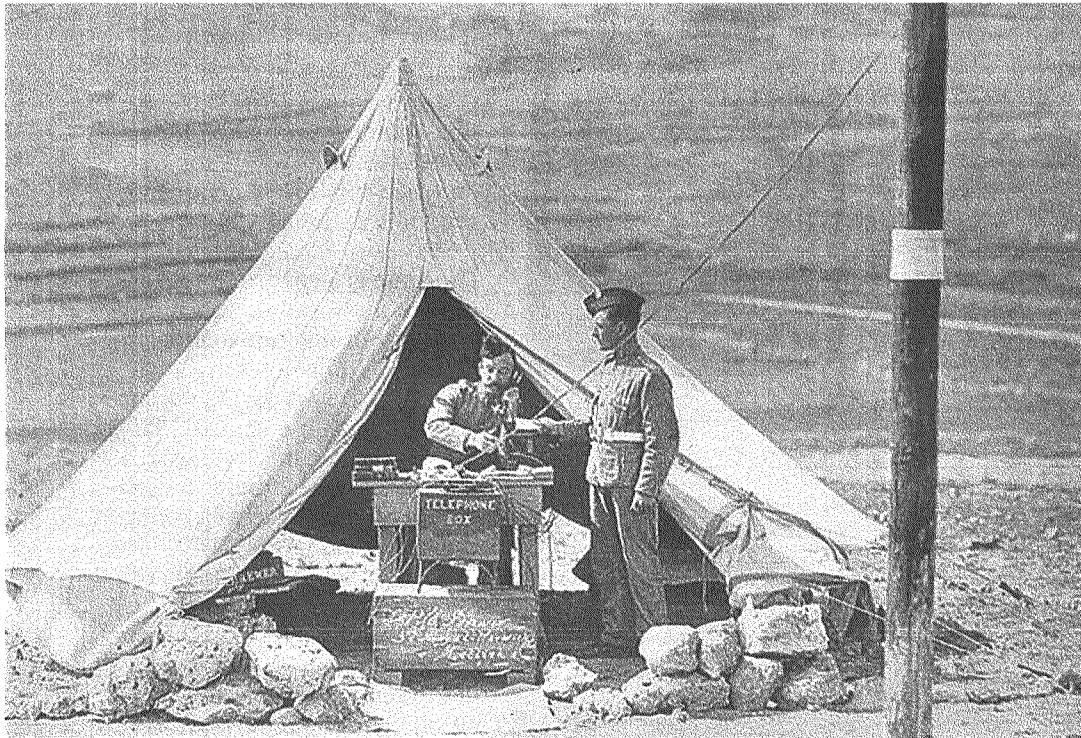
A serious case occurred in November 1904. Giuseppe Muscat and his two sons were in their fields at Dar il-Bajda when a section of Kings' Own Yorkshire Light Infantry trespassed on their land. Muscat, who had suffered damages on many occasions, started shouting at the soldiers, ordering them to leave.

The argument quickly escalated and the troops and the Maltese started throwing stones at each other. Giuseppe took out a revolver and fired shots at a soldier and the commanding officer. The shots were blank and did no harm. Meanwhile, Saverio, Giuseppe's son, was being held by a trooper so he called for help.

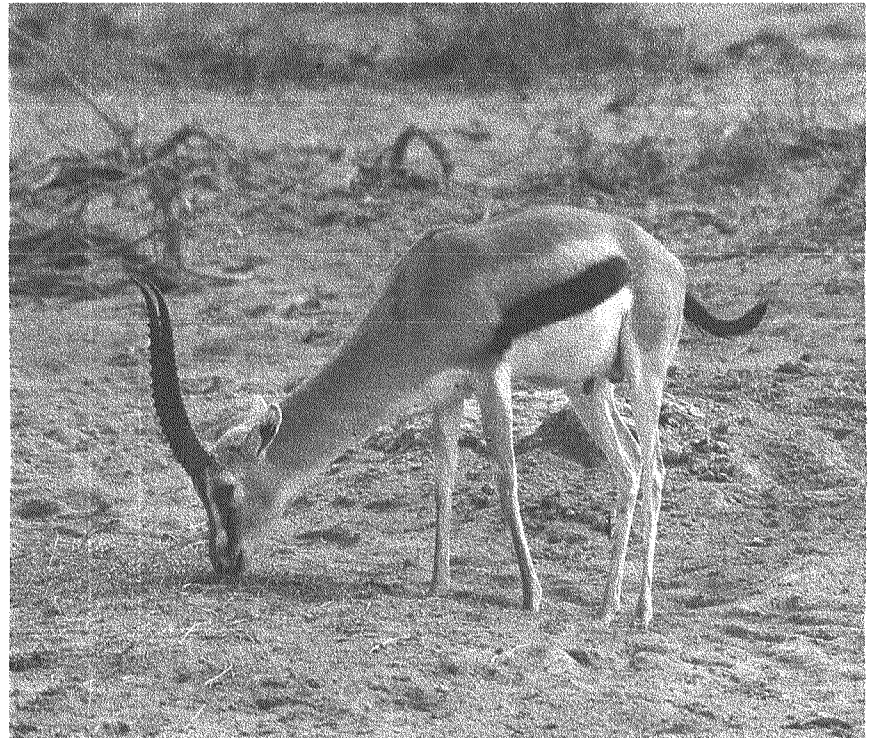
Soon the soldiers were surrounded by a dozen peasants, some brandishing knives and hoes. When they saw this, the soldiers fixed bayonets and one of them fired a shot in the air. The situation finally calmed down. Giuseppe and his sons were fined £4 for threatening the infantry section.

Many troopers craved for female company, so sometimes they tried their luck with the women of Mellieha.

In February 1902, Corporal Gray of the Derbyshire Regiment assaulted Maria Vella, a married woman. In June, Corporal



On several occasions, soldiers on musketry practice managed to cut the telephone lines, besides endangering civilians. PHOTO: THE NAVY AND ARMY ILLUSTRATED



The gazelles at Ghajn Tuffieħa Camp kept escaping and damaging crops. PHOTO: PIXABAY



Ghajn Tuffieħa Camp in the early 1900s. PHOTO: [HTTPS://WWW.MALTARAMC.COM](https://www.maltaramc.com)

Parkenson of the Lancashire Fusiliers entered the house of Paolino dei Baroni Attard Montaldo and scared the wits out of Grazia Bezzina, who was probably a servant. In July, Private Wilson, who was drunk, went in Vittorio Gauci's home and annoyed Ida Farrugia.

Drunkenness was common among soldiers.

For instance, in December 1900, two soldiers of the Loyal North Lancashire Regiment grabbed two chickens belonging to Carmela Muscat. The police arrived to find that the two men were inebriated. They were dragged to the police station where they were searched, a shilling found on one of them confiscated and then locked in. A few hours later, a military escort arrived to take them to Ghadira Camp.

On many occasions, the locals made things worse. Giuseppe Sammut was accused of selling wine to a soldier who was already intoxicated. He was ordered to close his wine and spirit shop at 9pm instead of at 10pm for three successive evenings.

Gaudenzio and Maria Vella, cited for accepting military medals as payment, were fined 10

shillings for their troubles. Swimming was one of the pastimes soldiers stationed near the coast could enjoy. Sometimes, these excursions to the beach ended in tragedy.

In June 1905, Private William Pickford went missing from Ghadira Camp. His clothes were found on some rocks close to the seashore. His floating corpse was spotted two days later at Mellieħa Bay.

Ghajn Tuffieħa Bay too claimed many lives. Private John Bradford was swimming with friends in rough seas when he disappeared. He was finally spotted by his comrades and taken to shore but it was too late to save his life.

Bathing could also spell trouble for the soldiers for other reasons. In April 1900, three soldiers of the Royal West Kent Regiment received a warning from the police for swimming "without a proper bathing dress".

In September 1906, Luigi Cilia and Giuseppe Zammit from Qormi went to the police station to report some naked troops bathing at St Paul's Bay. This was at a time when the women of Mellieħa had a designated swimming area, away from the men, in order to avoid any scandals!

Boat rides around the coast were another way to kill time. But to the annoyance of fishermen, some troops just boarded any boat moored close to shore and took off.

In June 1902, Francesco Borg found that his boat had been damaged. In it, he found army jacket no. 4736, belonging to Private Haushon of the Cameron Highlanders. It turned out Haushon and some of his friends went for a ride in Borg's boat.

On Christmas Day 1906, Giovanni Borg's boat at Irdum ix-Xquq was launched by some soldiers. They were spotted by some fisherman and their testimony was crucial for the culprits to be apprehended. They had to pay Borg £2.10.0 for the damages they caused.

Musketry practice had its dangers too. In January 1905, soldiers from the Rifle Brigade managed to cut the telephone line with a bullet.

A year later, Michele, Anna and Giuseppa Fenech were in their fields at L-Ahrax when all hell broke loose. Bullets whizzed by their heads, forcing them to take shelter in a rural room. One of the bullets struck the wall of the room. It turned out that some

soldiers were testing their shooting skills from the roof of the Red Tower.

Theft of military articles by the locals occurred frequently. The list is long: 34 iron stands, 34 wooden boards for beds, a silver decanter, a rifle, the flag pole of Ghadira Range, three brass wheels, 20 kettles, eight blankets and the brand new football goal posts of Ghajn Tuffieħa Camp.

When things went missing, the surrounding farmhouses were searched by the police but hardly anything was ever found.

Hatred towards soldiers sometimes resulted in violence. In the summer of 1900, Giovanni Debono, a farmer from Mellieħa, fired at Privates Clark and Ingham, but these asked the police not to take any action.

In March 1902, Private Turner of the Warwickshire Regiment was accompanying a fellow drunk trooper from Pwales to Ghajn Tuffieħa when they were assaulted by some Maltese men. The drunk soldier was punched several times.

In June 1903, Private Simpson was on his way to St Paul's Bay when a man who was driving a cart attacked him with a knife.

During the summer of 1904, Private John Sillers, stationed at Ghajn Tuffieħa Camp was near Lippija Tower when someone hit him with a stone while two soldiers from the same camp were shot at and wounded.

At Ghajn Tuffieħa Camp, the troops kept gazelles as pets. These gazelles many times ended up grazing in the fields of the farmers, causing great damage. Yet, no one dared touch them as retribution from the army would have been too great.

In April 1906, the officer in command of Ghajn Tuffieħa

reported a missing gazelle. This was found by Paolo Abela of Mgarr, munching away in his field at Mejjiesia. Abela took the animal to Mgarr police station and it was returned to Ghajn Tuffieħa Camp.

However, hardly 10 days had passed when the commandant of the camp again reported that two gazelles had disappeared. These were found by Giuseppe Caruana, chomping his vines at Il-Wilga. For Caruana, this was the last straw. His family had little to eat as it was, and these pests were making their life harder.

He let his hunting dogs loose and they chased the two animals as far as Ciantar Tower. There, Caruana shot both with his musket, hid their carcasses in a crevice and when things calmed down, returned to cut up their meat which his family then cooked.

Two years later, GioMaria Chetcuti complained that a gazelle from the camp killed one of his sheep...

One could not help but feel sorry for these soldiers stationed in the north of the Maltese islands, far away from their home country and surrounded by natives, who in their majority, could hardly pronounce a word of English.

On the other hand, they must have been considered as a sort of plague by the locals, who besides their day-to-day worries, had to also endure disruptions by these foreigners.

Acknowledgements

The author wishes to thank Rev. Joe Caruana, Ruben Vella and the staff of the National Archives, without whose assistance this article would not have been possible.