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Military life within Malta of the Knights: a brief analysis

George Cassar

Malta has had a long history of occupation. Much of the time the Island was garrisoned and thus civilian everyday life became an integral part of military life especially due to the undeniable fact that the strategic position of Malta required particular attention. Local forces supplemented foreign garrisons brought in by the occupiers and this was surely the case from at least medieval times when the Maltese adult male population was required to do militia duties in defence of their homeland.¹

With the coming of the Order of St. John in 1530² military life³ was intensified due to the particular nature of the new overlords and the specific military environment of the time. The Knights were as much military men as they were hospitallers. Their eternal enemy was the Muslim, especially represented in the conquest-prone Ottoman Turk. Such a foe was an opponent to reckon with, an enemy who had clashed with the Knights many a time. The Order had experienced not only victory, but also defeat, against this adversary and thus it knew that if the Maltese Islands were to be retained, military life had to be an integral part of everyday life. Such a life would consist of the building of fortifications, the upkeep of a military force of mercenaries, but also full-time and part-time local military personnel, and the grooming of a naval force which could hit back from a geographically isolated rock such as any island was. Moreover, on the Order also fell part of the responsibility for the monitoring of the Mediterranean east-west sea route and the control of the North African corsairs who would not hesitate to indulge in attacks on the Christian coast, Malta not being any exception to the rule.

Such an environment could not but cause a sense of apprehension among the holders of these Islands. This feeling of insecurity was also passed on to the



inhabitants of Malta and Gozo. Thus, as one apprehensive society, the islanders, both aristocratic foreigners and native commoners, realised what was expected of them. Their best defence, indeed, their basic safety, could only be upheld through an effective preparedness for anything and everything their enemies could unleash. And the threat was an undeniable reality as experience had already revealed both to the knights, along their existence such as in far away Palestine and Rhodes, and to the native Maltese, in their continuous grappling with marauders such as the North African corsairs along the Middle Ages.

The fortifications

It stands to reason that one of the first acts embarked upon by the newly arrived Order of St. John in Malta was the strengthening of whatever fortification Malta possessed in 1530. They occupied the old town of Birgu adopting it as their

¹ G. Wettinger, "The Militia Roster of Watch Duties of 1417", *Armed Forces of Malta Journal*, No.32 (1979), pp.25-42. Wettinger, G. "The Militia List of 1419-20", *Melita Historica*, V, No.2 (1969), pp.80-106.

² For a general idea of life along the Order's rule in Malta cf. for eg. I. Bosio, *Dell' Istoria della Sacra Religione Et Ill.sa Militia Di San Giovanni Gerosolimitano*, part three (Napoli, 1684). Abbé de Vertot, *The History of the Knights of Malta*, II (London, 1728). Besides these sources there are many others.

³ Q. Hughes, "The Military Life of a Fortress: Malta since the Sixteenth Century", *Fortress*, No.3 (1989), pp.11-23.

headquarters⁴. They strengthened the *castrum maris* and fortified the land front. Such work and the building of a star-shaped fort - St. Elmo⁵ - at the seaward tip of Mount Sciberras, were justified and expected as Malta was easy prey for pirate and corsair attacks such as that which took place in 1551. The *razzia* or hit-and-run attacks were a continuous preoccupation for the Order and in later times would be dissuaded to a large extent by the building of numerous coastal fortifications, which could largely look out for, and keep at a distance, any foe that hinted at molesting the Maltese coast.

Back in the first years of the Knights' stay, the mortar binding the early fortifications which had been built or strengthened had not yet dried when Malta experienced what came to be considered by many as the epic Siege of 1565. In these early years, military life in Malta was concentrated on the consolidation of the military fortifications. However, as the siege was won, the Knights decided to stay and thus a new citadel for Malta was built. Here, at this time, military architecture was at its peak in an island, which at the time could boast of nothing really modern. Valletta was to be the citadel housing the military and hospitaller aspirations of the Order of St. John. Its design was based on Laparelli's up-to-date perception of a modern fortified city.⁶ It created work for both local and foreign manual workers as such a major project of military engineering required the services of large numbers of labourers and generated work for a considerable amount of time. The local population could now experience at first hand the difference between this new era in their history of submission to foreign rule and the past, when Malta had been treated as an outpost, nearly forgotten by its very owners, who seemed to consider funds employed on developing this bare rock as money badly spent. To no avail were the continuous lamentations of the *Consiglio Popolare* on behalf of the people.

The building of Valletta may have been the first of such large-scale projects but it was surely not the last. Along the 268 years of the Order's stay, Malta and Gozo witnessed the building of various other fortifications, some quite ambitious, others much more modest.⁷ Of the larger, more important fortifications, the Knights and their Maltese subjects had to find the funds for the Margherita Lines, the Cottonera Lines, the Floriana Lines, and large forts such as Manoel,⁸ Ricasoli,⁹ Tigné and Chambray. There were also upgrades to the walls of the Gozo Citadel¹⁰ and to Malta's old city, Mdina.¹¹ The populace also assisted to the ongoing project of building smaller but quite essential coastal fortifications. These stretched from the relatively stronger towers such as St. Lucian, St. Thomas, St. Agatha and Wignacourt's tower at St. Paul's Bay, along with a lengthy coastal entrenchment, to lesser constructions including De Redin's thirteen modest coastal watch towers.¹² In additions to all this activity in the sector of military engineering, funded partly by the Order itself and partly by the taxes levied on the Maltese population, there were also a number of private defensive habitations paid for from the coffers of Maltese noble families. Such buildings included Gauci Tower and its neighbour Torri tal-Kaptan, both at Naxxar, Falca Tower at Mosta, Mamo Tower, in its quite unique unusual shape, and Gourgion Tower¹³ in Gozo.

Such military buildings, spread out over the whole rule of the Order in these islands,¹⁴ created work for the inhabitants who would be engaged on such sites for months on end. It thus utilised the competence and craftsmanship of the Maltese stone worker but also created jobs for the marginally skilled who yet still needed to earn their daily bread. In addition such works, though essential for the safety of Malta, yet created hardships for the inhabitants as the finances of the Order would not normally be sufficient to support the expenses needed especially for the more

⁴ V. Mallia-Milanes, "The Birgu Phase of Hospitaller History". In L. Bugeja, M. Buhagiar, & S. Fiorini, (eds.), *Birgu: A Maltese Maritime City*, Vol. I (Malta, 1993).

⁵ M. Ellul, *Fort St Elmo - Malta: A Brief History*, Progress Press (Malta, 1988). S.C. Spiteri, "Fort St. Elmo", *Fortress*, No.10 (1991), pp.16-23.

⁶ Cf. for eg. R. De Giorgio, *A City by an Order* (Malta, 1985). Q. Hughes, *Fortress Architecture & Military History in Malta* (London, 1969), Chs. 3 & 5.

⁷ A. Hoppen, *The Fortification of Malta by the Order of St. John* (Edinburgh, 1979). A. Samut-Tagliaferro, *The Fortifications of Gozo and Comino* (Malta, 1993).

⁸ R. Vella Bonavita, "A Sixteenth Century Proposal for a Fort on 'Manoel' Island", *Melita Historica*, VI, No.2 (1973), pp.141-52.

⁹ A. Quintano, *Ricasoli, Malta: A History of a Fort* (Malta, 1999).

¹⁰ D. De Lucca, "The built environment in Gozo: a historical review". In C. Cini, (ed.) *Gozo The Roots of an Island* (Malta, 1990), pp.138-45.

¹¹ M. Buhagiar, & S. Fiorini, *Mdina The Cathedral City of Malta* (Malta, 1996), Ch. 7.

¹² A. Samut-Tagliaferro, "De Redin's Thirteen Coast Watch-Towers", *Treasures of Malta*, Easter (1995), pp.52-7.

¹³ J. Calleja, & F. Zammit Haber, *The Gourgion Tower* (Malta, 1997).

¹⁴ V. Zammit, *Is-Swar u l-Fortifikazzjonijiet* (Malta, 1999), Sect. 3.

extensive and ambitious fortifications. This meant that taxes had to be obtained from a relatively poor population which many a time found it hard to make ends meet. One principal consolation for all this was the fact that such defences would create a more secure and safer Malta. Thus, a defensive network of such an assortment of military constructions stretched out along the greater part of the Maltese coast could at last ensure a safe haven for the populace, a fact that transcended any aspiration which the Maltese may have dreamt of up to the 1530s.

Such activity also brought to Malta quite able, mainly Italian and French¹⁵ military engineers. Names included those of Genga, Lanci, Laparelli, Serbelloni, Floriani, Grunenbergh, Firenzuola, Mondion¹⁶ and many others. These foreign military architects brought to Malta a tinge of continental life. They kept the Island in touch with mainland Europe and put it with the countries where modern things were taking place and being shaped. It is to the merit of the Order that Malta, possibly for the first time in its history, was not a forgotten backwater of continental Europe, but was in line with it. The local touch was present through the work of Maltese engineers who helped in such military projects such as Girolamo¹⁷ and Vittorio¹⁸ Cassar, father and son. The former helped in supervising the building of Valletta and some of its residential structures while the latter supervised the upgrading of the walls of the Gozo Citadel.

Malta could boast of a formidable fortified landscape.¹⁹ Social life could somehow be a little more tranquil as the locals knew that just a stone's throw away from their *casali* they could find refuge and protection from imminent danger of assault and invasion. Yet an island fortress is useless without a garrison and thus, complementary to forts, batteries and ramparts, was the armed force that manned them. The presence in the Island of the latter was never missing.

The land forces

No military Order can be worthy of the name without a contingent of fighting men under its command. The Knights were themselves soldiers and some were of reputable valour. Yet they were few in numbers and could never hope to succeed in winning over their avowed enemies without the support of a trained fighting-force behind them. The Order comprised a combined force of army and naval personnel, a practice that had been maintained from many years before 1530. With their coming to Malta, the Knights continued such a practice, fortifying their small warring numbers with a hired mercenary force and a locally enlisted Maltese component. The latter progressively became the main element in the defence of the Maltese Islands.

The first real test for the armed forces in Malta came with the Turkish assault of 1565. Such a situation was not a simple *razzia* or incursion. It was not a hit and run affair. On the contrary, this 1565 clash between Christian and Muslim was a premeditated, planned, large-scale siege with far-reaching objectives.²⁰ It thus followed that the fighting was bitter, prolonged and to the last drops of blood. The Order could not afford to lose yet another territory, as it had a bitter enough experience of this situation along its existence. The Maltese, as had been the case in other instances before and since, would help the present occupiers against the attacking pretenders and the Great Siege was no exception. The Maltese islands presented the Ottoman Turk with a mixed defensive contingent made up of Knights, and supplemented by Spanish, Italian, Greek, Sicilian, Sardinian and Maltese free men, along with a number of slaves. The garrison was a mixture of regular troops, private companies and slaves. It was composed of cavalry, infantry and naval personnel. But most important of all, as pointed out by Hipólito Sans in his *La Maltea*, such troops were of 'high spirited morale'.²¹

¹⁵ D. De Lucca "French Military Engineers in Malta during the 17th and 18th Centuries", *Melita Historica*, VIII, No.1 (1980), pp.23-33.

¹⁶ D. De Lucca, "The contribution of Francois de Mondion in the Architectural Development of 18th Century Malta". In M. Buhagiar (ed.), *Proceedings of History Week 1981*, (Malta, 1982), pp.76-81.

¹⁷ G. Mangion, "Girolamo Cassar Architetto Maltese del Cinquecento", *Melita Historica*, VI, No.2 (1973), pp.192-200 (with Errata Corrige in VI, No.3, p.306).

¹⁸ V. Mallia-Milanes, "In search of Vittorio Cassar – A documentary approach", *Melita Historica*, IX, No.3 (1986), pp.247-70. A. Samut-Tagliaferro, *op. cit.* (1993), Chs. 5-6.

¹⁹ S.C. Spiteri, *Fortresses of the Cross: Hospitaller Military Architecture (1136-1798)*, (Malta, 1994), Sect. III. S.C. Spiteri, *Discovering the Fortifications of the Order of St. John in Malta*, (Malta, 1988).

²⁰ A. Cassola, *The Great Siege of Malta (1565) and the Istanbul State Archives* (Malta, 1995). A.P. Vella, *Storja ta' Malta*, I (Malta, 1974), pp.182-98.

²¹ A. Cassola, *The 1565 Great Siege of Malta and Hipólito Sans's La Maltea*, (Malta, 1999).

No doubt such a small garrison fought well, and it had to, as it was a situation of life and death.²² One instance of laxity may have led to the loss of an island. Thus valour had to be the order of the day. Of all these soldiers, many are unanimous, faceless heroes. Others, from the ranks of the Knights, are known by name, but the deeds and hardships of the whole defending force are epitomised in the person and decisions of their leader Grand Master La Valette. Yet some Maltese names did transpire from the din of battle and the smoke of gunpowder which for three months filled the Maltese harbour area. Ganado and Agius Vadalà list 68 compatriots.²³ Others²⁴ focus on the Qormi parish priest Don Gioannello Cilia who fought the Turks from St. Elmo and refused evacuation to stay with the troops. He eventually ended up decapitated and his body was one of those which were sent floating in the Grand Harbour by the Turks along with those of the St. Elmo garrison when the fort finally fell. Sans gives prominence only to Toni Bajjada, yet Cassola argues that this does not mean that he thought the others less valorous, only that he concentrated more on the foreign troops in defence of Malta of which he may have been one.²⁵

The military presence in Malta did not end with the arrival of the *Gran Soccorso* and the withdrawal of the Turks²⁶ on 7 September 1565. Though many of the foreign troops left these islands in the days following the Siege, still Malta's armed forces were kept and organised further. Malta had eight military districts, each with its militia under the command of a knight chosen by the Grand Master. These eight divisions were Zejtun, Birmiftuh/Gudja, Zurrieq, Qormi, Birkirkara, Naxxar, Siggiewi and Zebbug. The captains of militia were resident in the respective villages, which were under their charge and, along with military duties, these captains progressively came to occupy also a political role. A practice that sapped the strength of the coastal defences was the exemptions that such captains could grant. For three *scudi* a militiaman could be excused guard duty along the coast. Four men were needed for each post at night and not even clerics were in theory exempt

from such duties. Yet, selling exemptions seems to have become an easy way to procure an income and consequently in 1647 it was felt that captains should be granted a salary to encourage them to refrain from selling exemptions.²⁷ It seems evident that the Maltese were not too keen on guard duties and its unpopularity is signalled by the harsh penalties meted on defaulters, such punishments being quite common.

Yet, after all, these were militia, that is, part-time, amateurish troops. As a reliable force they made up a questionable and doubtful component. Thus as time went by the Order decided that the coast should be manned by permanent regular guards, employed and paid by the authorities. Thus, for example, each of the thirteen De Redin towers had a garrison of one bombardier and three soldiers. While the former was paid 30 *scudi* yearly, his subordinates got 24.²⁸

This reorganisation still lacked real efficiency as there were divergences between the Order and the *Universitas* as to the sharing of responsibilities and this caused a deficiency in the maintenance of such important coastal towers erected for the security of Malta. Attempts were continuous to upgrade this militia force as is evidenced by the rolls kept for those liable to serve, the publication of regulations and the organisation of proper training. The attempt to raise a militia regiment 4000 strong in 1658 did not give the desired results as the standards never reached those aspired to. The Order thus, after toying with the idea for a long time, finally decided to raise a regiment with foreign troops in 1776. Disappointing was the resultant *Reggimento di Malta*. It was made up of deserters, beggars and other, quite unmilitary individuals, whose main occupation turned out to be the terrorisation of the country folk. When the worst troublemakers were weaned out, and discipline was re-established, Maltese recruits were allowed to join. Those enlisting were eager to do so as this offered a steady job for them and opened the chance of apprenticing their children to tradesmen attached to the barracks.²⁹ A second regiment raised at about the same time was that of the *Cacciatori*. This was a

²² Cf. for eg. C.S. Zabarella, *Lo Assedio di Malta 18 Maggio – 8 Settembre 1565*, (Torino, 1902). F. Balbi di Correggio, *The Siege of Malta 1565* (1565), transl. from Spanish by H.A. Balbi (Copenhagen, 1961). P. Gentile di Vendome, *Della Historia di Malta et successo della Guerra seguita tra quei Religiosissimi Cavallieri, & il potentissimo gran Turcho Sulthan Solimano, l'anno MDLXV* (no place of publ., n.d. [c.1566]).

²³ A. Ganado, & M. Agius-Vadalà, *A Study in depth of 143 Maps representing the Great Siege of Malta of 1565*, (Malta, 1995), pp. 13-24.

²⁴ Cf. for eg. J.F. Grima, "Eroj ta' l-Assedju l-Kbir tal-1565: Il-Kappillan Dun Gioannello Cilia", *Bejniema*, No.50 (1990), pp.10-11.

²⁵ A. Cassola, *op. cit.* (1999).

²⁶ A. Cassola, *The 1565 Ottoman Malta Campaign Register*, (Malta, 1998).

²⁷ A. Hoppen, "Military Priorities and Social Realities in the Early Modern Mediterranean: Malta and its Fortifications". In V. Mallia-Milanes (ed.), *Hospitaller Malta 1530-1798*, (Malta, 1993), pp.412-3.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.413-4.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp.414-5.

militia infantry unit made up of volunteers but who fell under military discipline. Though the number of soldiers within this Regiment fluctuated, by 1798 it could muster 1200 men.³⁰

The Maltese as soldiers had not yet been sufficiently exposed to the reality of warfare. Their warlike mentality was quite subdued if not completely absent from their nature. Except for the Great Siege, Malta had encountered only skirmishes on its land territory. No other fully-fledged conflict up till the uprising against the Republican French occupation of 1798-1800 had been experienced. Thus it is of small wonder that many Maltese felt so little inclined to take up arms and perform guard duties even if in the protection of their own land. Maybe these common town and village folk, striving to make ends meet in their everyday activity, felt that others could do it for them. In reality their compatriots at sea to a large extent could do this quite efficiently.

The sea forces

Besides the land troops, Malta also possessed a naval force to reckon with. Such a navy in Peter Earle's words was, 'The outward and visible sign of the Order's obligation to engage in constant warfare against the Infidel...'³¹ The navy, which in 1685 consisted of eight strong and well-equipped galleys and a number of smaller craft, was augmented in the 18th century with a squadron of ships-of-the-line. The ships had to be manned and the bulk of the crew could not come solely from the Order's ranks of knights. Though, for example, about 30 knights could be guaranteed for each galley as these would be serving their caravan duties, however, the crew consisted of a much larger number. There was a contingent of paid soldiers (180 for a 17th century galley) and a crew of sailors to man the ships. Though the crews and soldiers could come from any part of the Christian Mediterranean, the bulk was derived from the local Maltese male population who made up especially the complement of seamen, and gunners besides filling other posts.³²

Slaves rowed the oars on the galleys. These were mostly Moslem captives but one also found Christian convicts from Malta or abroad. A further group of rowers were the *buonavoglia* whose debts and other troubles ashore usually primed them to embark as 'volunteer' oarsmen. These latter rowers were generally regarded as a protective element against mutineers and thus were intermingled with the other rowers and usually left unchained. Furthermore they were armed if the galley was pressed for fighting men.³³

This was the Order's navy and although the difference is arguably subtle, it was not a corsair force. At the same time, corsairing in Malta was widespread and highly organised.³⁴ It endeavoured in raids and attacks on the coast, the islands and the shipping of the Mediterranean, taking slaves, cattle and property. This was a lucrative business and many Maltese corsairs earned their livelihood from such activities. It has been calculated that, for example, in the 17th century half the adult male population worked in the *corso*.³⁵ When such men were not sailing, a large number of them, including many of their sons, produced leaden and iron shot, swords and daggers, gunpowder and other war-related articles. Such a sea-oriented employment also caused a demographic development in the urban areas around the Grand Harbour, which saw an increase in population. The vicinity to the harbour was all-important as this facilitated access to the sea. Corsairing also generated the institution of a system of insurance, which assured that help was readily at hand if misfortune hit the ships. Not only did corsairing benefit those directly connected with it but also a number of others. Part of the wealth from the appropriated booty went to the *Tribunale degli Armamenti*, to the warder of the slave prison, and strangely but truly, to the cloistered nuns of the convent of St. Ursula of Valletta who prayed for the corsairs. Yet, besides such positive acquisitions, the Maltese population also suffered from the consequent difficulties brought about by the clashes with the enemy. Such mishaps included the death of members of the crew or their capture, which earned them

³⁰ S.C. Spiteri, *op. cit.* (1994), pp.615-22.

³¹ P. Earle, *Corsairs of Malta and Barbary*, (London, 1970), p.104.

³² A.P. Vella, *Storja ta' Malta*, II (Malta, 1979), pp.292-3.

³³ S. Bono, "Naval Exploits and Privateering". In V. Mallia-Milanes (ed.), *op. cit.* (1993), p.386. G. Wettinger, "The Galley-Convicts and Buonavoglia in Malta during the Rule of the Order", *Journal of the Faculty of Arts*, III, No.1, (1965), pp.29-37.

³⁴ S. Bono., *op. cit.*, Ch. 9. P. Earle, *op. cit.*, Chs. 5-9.

³⁵ For corsairing activities cf. for eg. R. Cavaliero, *The Last of the Crusaders*, (London, 1960), pp.81-5. A.P. Vella, *op. cit.* (1979), pp.327-37.

slavery even for life. And the men were not the only victims, as their families, wives and children ended up without a breadwinner, husband or father. Families were thus broken, women went into prostitution or destitution. Children grew up and matured more rapidly per necessity, as they had to become the new breadwinners and providers of the family. Moreover, as many a time husbands missing in battle could not be confirmed dead, this precluded their wives from obtaining permission to marry again. At times such missing husbands who had been declared dead and whose wives went their new way thinking themselves to be widowed, reappeared after months, or even years, alive and seeking what had been theirs. It was by no means an extraordinary thing that a returned seaman, found his wife married again with children from her new husband. Such were the hardships brought by corsairing.³⁶

Yet the fighting men on their sea craft were also that added security which Malta sought. They were the advanced guard that defended the Islands way out at sea. The naval and corsairing fleets kept the enemies away. They dissuaded would-be attackers from approaching as these were checked far away from the coasts. At the same time the men at sea brought in what booty they had plundered from the enemy of which many partook. The roving fleets also contributed towards a sense of security as it was felt that, 'out there' our men were keeping a vigilant eye on the Maltese coast.

Military activity in all the aspects described above offered employment to many a Maltese. A cursive glance at petitions to the Grand Master reveals many life histories and pretensions of men who had been engaged as sailors or soldiers. These pleaded for some form of recognition for their part in the defence of Malta as much as for the service they rendered to the Order. Many others sought employment with the military and naval forces. Such petitions showed the dependence of many families on the fighting forces.³⁷ Malta was a fortress and such revelations were not at all out of place. After all the garrison had to be derived mainly from its inhabitants, who, along with the built fortifications, made up the defence of the islands rendering military life an integral part of the everyday routine of Maltese society.

The author:

Dr. George Cassar is a historical sociologist. His special interests include the socio-historical study of Maltese life with particular focus on education. He is a Council member of the Sacra Militia Foundation and the editor of the *Sacra Militia Journal*. He also occupies the post of Vice-President of the History Teachers Association. Dr. Cassar is Area Co-ordinator of the Humanities and Subject Co-ordinator of Sociology at the Junior College of the University of Malta. Cassar has published a number of books and papers including: *Aspetti mill-Istorja ta' Malta fi Zmien l-Inglizi: Ktieb ta' Rizorsi, Ghaxar fuljetti Simulati ghall-Uzu fit-Tagħlim ta' l-Istorja* and *Grajja ta' Skola: L-Iskola Primarja tal-Mosta fis-Sekli Dsatax u Ghoxrin*.

³⁶ Cf. for eg. A. Bonnici, *Familji Mfarrkin f'Malta ta' l-Imghoddi*, (Malta, 1975), Ch. 4.

³⁷ V. Mallia-Milanes, *op. cit.* (1993), pp. 91-2.