



Commonwealth War Graves Commission

Malta at War

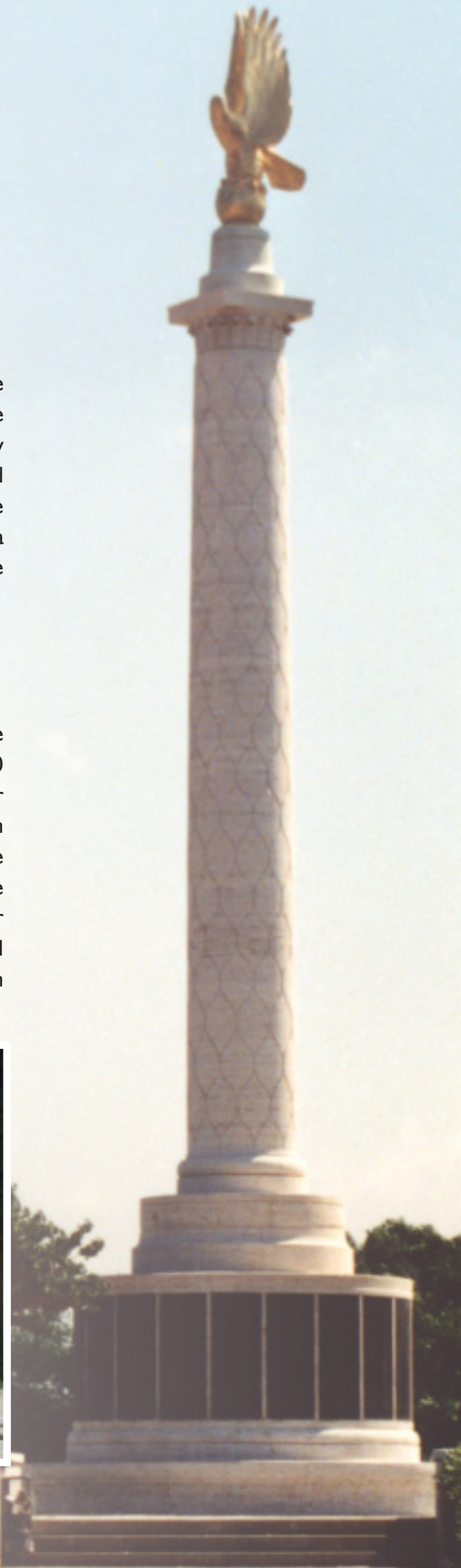
With its strategic position at the crossroads of the Mediterranean, Malta has played a central role in many of the events that have shaped Europe's history. Situated in the narrow channel that separates southern Europe from North Africa and overlooking the shipping lanes to the Near and Middle East, the island's many colonisers have long recognised that to hold Malta was to hold the key to the Mediterranean; never was this more so than in the early years of the Second World War.

From Nurse to Combatant

A British colony from 1814 to 1964, Malta had been the 'Nurse of the Mediterranean' during the First World War for 135,000 Commonwealth sick and wounded who were brought to her many hospitals and convalescent depots from the campaigns in Gallipoli and Salonika. Fortified and garrisoned during the Second World War, Malta was of vital strategic importance to the Allies, both as the only British-held harbour between Gibraltar and Alexandria and, perhaps more crucially, as a base for air and submarine operations against Axis convoys supplying North Africa.



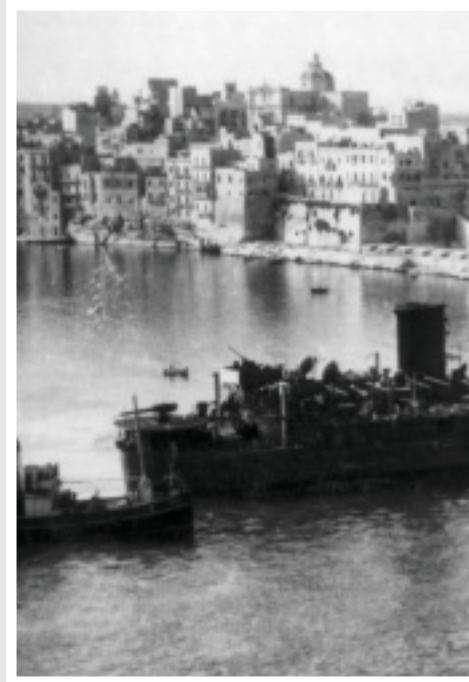
above: *Pieta Military Cemetery, Malta and background: Malta Memorial*





Valletta Opera House, Malta, destroyed

IWM GM566



The Siege

The Axis response to the Malta threat was to lay siege to the island by blockade, starving its military and civilian population of essential supplies and crushing its resistance with a merciless bombing campaign that reached a climax early in 1942 with 154 days of continuous raids. Malta became the most heavily bombed place on earth: in March and April more bombs were dropped on the island than fell on London during the entire Blitz, the anti-aircraft gunners responding with more than 160,000 rounds in April alone, bringing down more than 100 Axis aircraft.



Anti aircraft gunners defending Valletta harbour

The island's three airfields were repeatedly targeted. Alarming numbers of aircraft were destroyed on the ground and the RAF struggled desperately to keep operational those that remained. The industrial areas and harbours were also badly hit and more than 30,000 of Malta's buildings were destroyed. Much of the 250,000 strong civilian population were evacuated to the centre of the island where they were forced to live an underground existence. Almost 1,500 civilians died in the bombing and more suffered from hunger and sickness in the unsanitary living conditions. On 15 April 1942, at the height of its people's suffering, King George VI made the unique gesture of acknowledging their bravery by awarding the George Cross to the Maltese nation.

The island's defence relied upon a combined operation in which the contributions made by the three branches of the armed forces and



IWM GM944



IWM GM1480

above and below: Secured between the two Royal Navy destroyers PENN and LEDBURY, the tanker OHIO limps into Grand Harbour, Valletta, with its precious cargo of fuel intact, having survived repeated attacks on the convoy to Malta

Merchant Navy were equally crucial. Though heavily pressed in defence, offensive raids on Axis lines of communication were still launched from the island by air and sea, but Malta's proximity to Italy and North Africa meant her own vital supply convoys were themselves suffering with many ships - 31 between 1940 and 1942 - lost to mine or submarine. Some, having run the gauntlet from Gibraltar or Alexandria, were sunk by air raids in the comparative safety of the Grand Harbour at Valletta.

By the early summer of 1942 the situation was critical. Though individual ships and aircraft had trickled in a lifeline of supplies, no substantial convoy had got through since the previous September and stocks of food, maintenance equipment and spares, fuel and anti-aircraft ammunition were very low. Believing that Malta was essentially finished, the Axis powers turned their attention elsewhere; for a while the raids eased allowing defences to be improved and on the night of 9/10 August *Operation Pedestal*, the largest relief convoy ever planned for Malta, left Gibraltar.



IWM GM1505

Relief

Under almost constant attack by sea and air, only five of the convoy's 14 vessels made it to Valletta, the last, the fuel tanker *Ohio*, crippled and supported between two Royal Navy destroyers, limping into the Grand Harbour on 15 August. The convoy brought 55,000 tons of desperately needed supplies. Malta had been on the verge of collapse and capitulation, but now had enough to carry on, resisting a new wave of air raids that October and holding out until the final relief came the following summer with the Axis powers' defeat in North Africa.



Capuccini Naval Cemetery, Malta

The Commonwealth War Graves Commission in Malta

Almost 6,000 Commonwealth servicemen and women lie buried in Malta's cemeteries or are commemorated by name on memorials to the missing. The Commission also cares for more than 200 war graves of other nationalities in Malta and almost 4,000 non-war graves, mostly those of servicemen, their dependants and civilian workers attached to military establishments.

The Commonwealth war burials in Malta are unlike those found anywhere else. Many joint and collective burials were made as graves had to be cut into the rock underlying the island's shallow earth crust - particularly hazardous work during the air-raids of the Second World War. These graves are usually marked by flat tablets that could take several inscriptions and, for the sake of uniformity, the same type of marker was used for single graves.

Most of the Commonwealth war burials were made in existing military cemeteries, sometimes in distinct plots, but also scattered among the non-war graves. A few will be found in civil burial grounds. All of the cemeteries mentioned below contain graves from both wars and others in the Commission's care.



The Dead, the Cemeteries



Imtarfa Military Cemetery, Malta

The Commission's biggest commitment on Malta is at **Malta (Capuccini) Naval Cemetery** with almost 700 Second World War burials (mainly Naval and Air Force) and more than 350 from the First World War. Most are in plots in the Protestant section.

Imtarfa Military Cemetery (almost 250 Second World War burials) and **Pembroke Military Cemetery** (more than 300) were situated near barracks and camps and mostly contains graves from the garrison land force which included locally raised territorial units. Anti-aircraft artillery batteries suffered particularly heavily. Pembroke Military

Cemetery also contains the **Pembroke Memorial** which commemorates more than 50 Second World War casualties buried elsewhere on Malta where their graves could not be maintained.



Capuccini Naval Cemetery, Malta

Pieta Military Cemetery was, historically, the island's principal garrison cemetery. It contains more than 150 Second World War burials, but these are vastly outnumbered by the 1,300 graves from the First World War. **Addolorata Cemetery** is another significant First World War cemetery with 250 Commonwealth graves from the period.

The Malta Memorial

With its pivotal contribution to the air war in the Mediterranean, Malta was chosen after the Second World War as the location for one of the Commission's memorials to commemorate members of the Commonwealth air forces who gave their lives and who have no known grave. The Malta Memorial remembers 2,300 such airmen who were lost flying from bases in Austria, Italy, Sicily, islands of the Adriatic and Mediterranean, Malta, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, West Africa, Yugoslavia and Gibraltar.



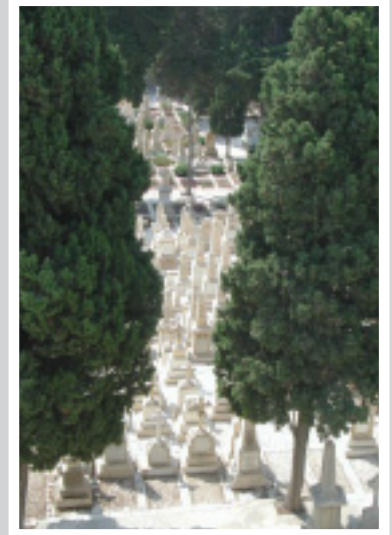
Capuccini Naval Cemetery, Malta

The Civilian Roll

At the end of the Second World War the Commission was given the task of compiling a register of all Commonwealth civilians who had lost their lives as a result of enemy action. The Malta roll lists almost 1,500 civilians, practically all of whom died during the critical years of 1940-42.



Pembroke Military Cemetery, Malta



The Commonwealth War Graves Commission

The Commonwealth War Graves Commission is responsible for marking and maintaining the graves of those members of the Commonwealth forces who died during the two world wars, for building and maintaining memorials to the dead whose graves are unknown and for providing records and registers of these 1.7 million burials and commemorations.

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