


Unsung heroes – the Maritime Royal Artillery and armed merchant ships

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Entertainment

18 September 2011 | Denis Darmanin |  1

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Typical Allied armed merchantman with guns on fo'c's'le, amidships and aft.

Volumes have been written on Malta's role during World War II, of its gallant defenders and brave people, the Royal Navy's vital role, the Royal Air Force and the three famous biplane fighters, the Gloster Gladiators Faith, Hope and Charity, the numerous army regiments stationed in Malta, and especially the gunners of the Royal Artillery, the Royal Marines and the Royal Malta Artillery.

“ Maritime Royal Artillery gunners are not given due recognition in Malta

- Denis Darmanin

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We have commemorated various events connected with the war in the past two decades, including the 50th anniversary of the award of the George Cross to Malta, the end of hostilities over Malta, VE-Day, VJ-Day, Operation Pedestal, Merlins Over Malta and the 60th anniversary of the end of the war.

Merchant ships were the essential part of convoys which risked all to carry vital supplies to the troops, and especially to Malta.

Besides the protection offered by the Royal Navy escorts, these merchantmen had guns placed on board to ward off any airborne attacks. They were known as Defensively Equipped Merchant Ships, or DEMS.

The gunners were not naval personnel as many would have thought but raised from a branch of the Royal Regiment of Artillery or the Maritime Royal Artillery, as it was officially known.

I have attended or followed most of the commemorations held in Malta but as far as I know these gunners were not given due recognition for protecting the ships and their vital supplies that saved Malta.

The Maritime Royal Artillery came into being in March 1940, when the Royal Navy was short of gunners to man the defensive armament on merchant ships engaged along the coastal routes of the south and east coasts of England. This deficit was quickly met when 940 men volunteered from the army and were armed with Bren guns.

E-boat and air attacks on British coastal shipping intensified after Dunkirk and more trained soldiers were required. The Luftwaffe was supplied with the new Focke-Wulf Condor in its attacks on merchant ships in the Western Approaches and soldiers were assigned to deep sea vessels armed with Bofors 40 mm/56 (1.57") Mark 1 and Mark 2 guns, 20 mm Oerlikon guns and light machine-guns.

By May 1941, over 9,000 soldiers were serving aboard merchant ships and it was decided to create a regular unit, styled the Maritime Anti-Aircraft Regiment of the Royal Artillery, from the existing serving soldiers. Apart from those already manning the Bofors, these infantrymen soon became very good gunners.

Training consisted of aircraft recognition, small arms and gun training on Hotchkiss, Marlin. .303 Lewis, 20 mm Oerlikon, .5-inch Browning, 40 mm Bofors and pillar box rockets, as well as the naval 4-inch breech loader and 12-pounder guns.

As the war progressed and shipping losses to U-Boat attacks mounted, the maritime gunners were trained in all aspects of naval gunnery and attended Admiralty gunnery courses, with NCOs qualifying as naval gunlayers and wearing the appropriate naval badge.

On November 1, 1942, the organisation was renamed the Maritime Royal Artillery and its main role was to protect armed merchant ships.

Some sources erroneously refer to them as “Churchill’s Pirates”, due to the common belief that it was Winston Churchill himself who had conceived the idea of sending gunners to sea, but the nickname really belonged to the Royal Naval Patrol Service.

By now, there were some 13,600 sea-going personnel and 600 shore staff formed into six regiments, based at Southport, Shoeburyness, Lock Wennock, North Shields, Bristol and Liverpool.

Other independent batteries were stationed outside Britain in New York, Port Said, Bombay, Cape Town, Sydney and wherever the demands of war required. The maritime gunners served in every theatre of war from the North Sea convoys to running supplies and troops to the 24th Army in Burma, the invasion of North Africa in November 1942, Murmansk, the Pacific, Indian and Atlantic Oceans, the Mediterranean and D-Day.

Due to a strict Allied interpretation of the articles of war, DEMS personnel were designated “deck hands” or “supernumeraries”, because had they been classified as military, the vessel would have been classed as a warship.

Over 1,300 members of the Maritime Regiments, Royal Artillery died aboard merchant ships during the war, of whom 1,222 had been serving at sea. Most of them have the oceans as their grave and are commemorated on the naval war memorials in Plymouth, Portsmouth and Chatham.

Every convoy that set out to Malta, including MB6 (October 1940), Operation Substance (July 1941), Operation MG 1 (March 1942), the famous Operation Pedestal (August 1942), the last convoy, Operation Portcullis (December 1942) and any other convoy that included cargo ships or tankers, were mainly manned by maritime gunners.

In Part Two of Operation Pedestal, extract from the autobiography of Lieut. Leslie Winstone David Rees by Jacqui Rees, reference is made to one of the Maritime RA casualties on the tanker Ohio: “She had been fitted with a 5-inch gun aft, a 3-inch anti-aircraft gun in the bows, a 40-millimetre Bofors gun amidships and a number of Oerlikon guns around the ship.

“Gunnery of the Royal Artillery Maritime Regiment manned the Bofors gun. The explosion of this last bomb sent a large steel ventilator into the air and it landed on the Bofors gun. It critically injured Gunner Brown of the Royal Artillery. He was still alive when the ventilator was removed but died later that day in the Penn. The tanker was abandoned while we waited for darkness to fall when we would try to tow her again.”

In Lloyd’s War Losses, Vol. I under “Tanker Ohio O.N. 168296 – Operation Pedestal”, Lloyd’s lists “one crew and one gunner killed during the operation to relieve Malta” on August 13, 1942. I traced the gunner through the ‘Deaths at Sea Register’ as being Peter Brown, 1823820, 7/4 Maritime Regt, Royal Artillery, aged 38, son of Ellen Brown of St Helens, Lancashire.

Nine of the 14 merchant ships in the convoy were lost. The largest number of gunners lost were on the S.S. Waimarama, which was carrying ammunition and octane spirit.

Early on the morning of August 13, 1942, a dive-bomber suddenly came out of the sun and a stick of bombs fell on and around the Waimarama, one of them scoring a direct hit which blew her up with a terrific explosion that engulfed the entire ship in flames and thick smoke, to disappear in a few seconds.

The soldiers who manned the guns and defended the merchant ships came from the 7th Battery 4th Maritime Regiment RA, 3rd Battery 2nd Maritime Regiment RA, 1st Battery 1st Maritime Regiment RA, 6th Battery 3rd Maritime Regiment RA, and 4th Battery 2nd Maritime Regiment RA.

Deaths suffered by the Maritime Royal Artillery regiments on ships of Operation Pedestal were:

Waimarama – ten gunners and one 2nd Lieutenant; Melbourne Star – three gunners and one 2nd Lieutenant; Santa Elisa – two gunners; Deucalion – one gunner; Glenorchy – one gunner; and Ohio – one gunner

The six maritime regiments of the Royal Artillery remained active until the end of the war in 1945, when they were disbanded. The DEMS memorial is a Bofors gun at the National Memorial Arboretum in Staffordshire, UK.