

A story...

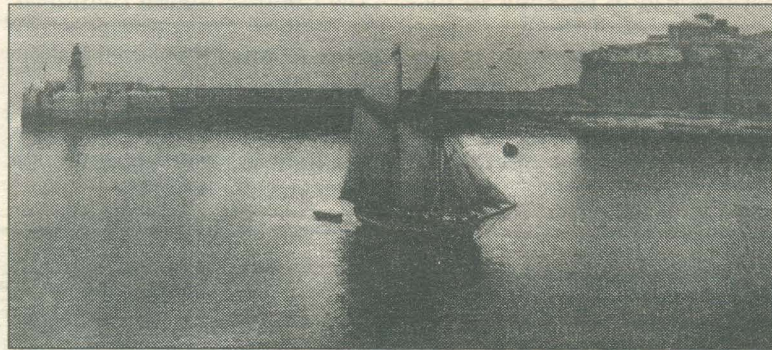
DENIS A. DARMANIN continues his account of the revolt of a regiment that took place nearly two centuries ago. As part of the article was inadvertently omitted last week, the relevant sections are being reprinted

The mutiny at Fort Ricasoli

In the period after the French surrender of Malta, following a long and eventful blockade, the fate of Malta was still uncertain. Although aided by Britain, the islands still belonged to the Kingdom of Naples. Tsar Paul I had his eyes on the islands and after he was proclaimed the new Grand Master of the Order of St John, Russian expansion into the Mediterranean seemed imminent. Nelson had always realised Malta's importance as an outwork to India but the Treaty of Amiens in March 1802 restored Malta to the Order, although it was much criticised in all of Europe. The Treaty of Paris of 1814 then declared "Malta and its dependencies" under the protection of His Britannic Majesty.

During this period of transition, on 4 April 1807, a very serious mutiny broke out in the force then occupying Fort Ricasoli. A certain M. de Montjoye, under the assumed name of Count de Froberg based in Constantinople, had received a commission to enlist a regiment of foreigners for services to the British Crown. He raised a regiment of infantry, about a thousand strong, consisting of Greeks, Albanians, Slavonians and some Turks for service in the Mediterranean. Enrolled under the title of Froberg's Regiment of Infantry, its mostly German officers were bound to use harsh discipline in order to maintain any form of order amongst these unruly men. Although not doubting their bad character, one must keep in mind the harsh conditions under which such men were expected to serve. A soldier's life did not belong to himself, he was severely punished for the slightest of offences, he had no rights whatsoever and was regarded as cannon fodder.

The immediate cause of the mutiny was due to an officer striking a drummer across the face with a cane when he turned out for



A ship sails into the Grand Harbour early this century, with Fort Ricasoli on the right. The scene a century before would have been very similar

inspection drunk and improperly dressed. A number of men rushed out of the barracks in his assistance carrying arms and in the scuffle which followed, the adjutant and another officer were killed. The other officers were made prisoners while the fort's gate was shut, the bridge raised and the Russian colours hoisted on the fort. In the fort at the time, apart from Froberg's Regiment, there was a detachment of the Royal Artillery, consisting of 19 gunners and under the command of Captain Fead. Gunner John Johnston was killed while endeavouring to prevent the mutineers from obtaining access to the magazine. The remainder were compelled to load several guns and mortars in the direction of Valletta.

General Villetes, the Commanding Officer of British troops in Malta, took the matter directly into his hands. He ordered troops to cordon the area around the Fort, hoping to starve the mutineers, who had since threatened to kill their prisoners unless the authorities agreed to have them returned to Corfu in either Greek or Russian vessels. Villetes was not prepared to listen and demanded immediate surrender and release of hostages.

On the morning of 8 April, 400 of the mutineers, disgusted with the situation, killed the sentries and

forced their way out of the fort, bringing with them all the officers, soldiers and women who had been held as hostages. They gave themselves up to the officer commanding the troops. During the days which followed, small numbers were reported leaving the fort and surrendering until only eight of the most desperate of the ring-leaders remained inside. Somehow, these managed to fire a mortar and the shell fell onto the Floriana parade ground, causing considerable consternation among the inhabitants of the area.

General Villetes found this occurrence to be going too far and decided on immediate action. His resolution was to scale the walls, which was planned for early Friday morning and to be executed by a party of Maltese Military Artificers. Since the beginning of this revolt, this unit had been deployed in filling sandbags and raising merlons and epaulments on the barbettes of the sea batteries opposite to Ricasoli. The scaling party consisted of a sergeant and 30 NCO's and men, accompanied by an officer from the Froberg's Regiment, six Gunners of the R.A. and 30 other selected men. At 2 am, they embarked in boats from Valletta to land on the rocks below the fort. The Artificers selected the re-entering angle on the right of

the main gateway, scaled the wall and reached the *parapett* before they could be noticed by the remaining mutineers. Finding their position forced, the mutineers hurried to the magazine and secured themselves in the lobby.

The gates were thrown open and the besieging troops entered and took possession of the fort. During these actions, the mutineers succeeded in firing off three more mortars against Valletta. Two shells fell on the Valletta ramparts while the other burst over the Grand Harbour. Two mutineers were unable to reach the lobby in time and were captured, while those who had made it began to fire volleys from the windows and threatened to blow the magazine if attacked. No attempt was made to rush the magazine as it was known that those inside did not possess any food or water.

On the evening of the 11th, three mutineers escaped over the sea-line wall by means of ropes. The sentries' position could not detect the small side-door of the lobby. The remainder also planned to escape but first lit and inserted a piece of slow match into a barrel of powder. They then crawled out of the same door unperceived. The explosion which followed shook the fort and instantly killed three of the sentries. The outcome of this daring escape is not clearly known, but records show that three of the remaining mutineers were captured. The other three escapees were still at large.

One evening, a priest or friar mounted on a mule and passing through an unfrequented path in the vicinity of the fort was assailed by a man dressed in the Froberg's uniform who pointed a musket at him. The cleric managed to escape and reported the incident to the nearest military outpost.

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The mutiny

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A large search discovered the three men in a state of near starvation, hidden amongst the rocks at Wied Ghammieg. These three mutineers and 27 of the ringleaders were subsequently executed at the Floriana parade ground. Fifteen were hanged and 15 faced the firing-squad. The first group of five were hung by the next group, who in turn were hung by the next, until only those to face the firing-squad remained.

To commemorate this mutiny and the death of Gunner Johnson, a monument was erected on his grave at the then Ricasoli cemetery. A marble tablet having near similar text to the one erected in 1898 on the wall inside the fort's gateway was presented to the National War Museum by Brigadier Maurice Calleja. It is ironic that both monument and tablets commemorate only the Gunner and not the two Froberg's officers, the three sentries who were probably men of the Maltese Military Artificers, or the whole incident itself!

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