

# Malta's other 'unsung heroes'

On 24 October, 1993, ex-886028 Lance Bombardier Philip E. Barber, of the Sixth Maritime Regiment, Royal Artillery, was awarded the Malta George Cross 50th Anniversary Medal by the Maltese High Commissioner in London. The ceremony was not one of great pomp, but to Philip and many others who had risked their lives in the defence of Malta during World War Two, it meant the appreciation of the Maltese people for all they endured during those turbulent years. Only few of us know of this branch of the Royal Artillery (RA) and its role in the defence of Malta.

The Maritime Royal Artillery knows its origins in March of 1940, when the Royal Navy was short of gunners to man the defensive armament on merchant ships engaged in the coastal trade on the south and east coasts of England. The deficit was met when 940 men volunteered from the Army and were armed with Bren Guns.

After Dunkirk, the Luftwaffe and flotillas of E-Boats intensified their attacks on the coastal shipping and more trained soldiers were required. With the introduction of the Focke Wulf Condor in the attacks on merchant shipping in the Western Approaches, the soldiers were assigned to deep sea vessels armed with 40MM Bofor guns and light machine guns.

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



Maritime gunners, or "Churchill's Pirates", at action stations

As the war progressed and the increase of U-Boat attacks were taking their toll, 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 1 November 1942, the organisation was renamed the Maritime Royal Artillery and its main role was the protection of defensively equipped merchant ships. Known as "Churchill's Pirates", this was due to the common belief that it was Winston Churchill himself who had conceived the idea of sending gunners to sea. By this time it consisted of some 13,600 sea-going personnel and 600 shore staff formed in six regiments. These regiments were each based at Southport, Shoeburyness, Loch Wennock, North Shields, Bristol and Liverpool. Other independent bat-

teries were stationed in places like New York, Port Said, Bombay, Capetown, Sydney and wherever the demands of war required. They had served in every theatre of war from the North Sea Convoys to running supplies and troops to the 14th Army in Burma, the invasion of North Africa in November 1942, Murmansk, the Pacific, Indian and Atlantic Oceans, the Mediterranean and D-Day.

Over 1,300 maritime gunners gave their lives during World War Two. The majority of them have the oceans of the world as their grave. They are commemorated on the Naval War Memorials at Plymouth, Portsmouth and Chatham.

Philip Ernest Barber was enlisted in the Royal Artillery as a "boy" on 20 September 1938, when he was only 14 years old. After training at Woolwich, London, he was posted to the 45th Battery,

20th Anti-Tank Regiment, Royal Artillery, at Catterick in Yorkshire. On the outbreak of the war on 3 September, 1939, he was posted to the 52nd Anti-Tank Regiment at Bishop Auckland in County Durham. It was during this posting that Philip first met his wife Vera, in October 1939.

From Bishop Auckland he was transferred to Barnard Castle and to Whitby, where he volunteered to join the Maritime RA in late 1941 and assigned to the 11th Battery, Sixth Regiment in Bristol. Training consisted in aircraft recognition, small arms ankp gun training on Hotchkiss, Marlin, .303 Lewis, 20MM Oerlikon, five Browning, 40MM Bofor and Pillar Box rockets, as well as the Naval four-inch Breach Loader and 12-pounder guns.

On completing his training, Philip was posted to a detachment at Milford Haven in Wales and later to Cardiff, where he joined his first ship, the SS *Empire Eve*, captained by L.Z. Weatherill, a merchant ship chartered by the Admiralty. She carried a crew of 45 and 25 gunners. Philip recalls that there were three gunners apart from himself, a Lance Bombardier, belonging to the RA and three naval gunners, with a Leading Seaman in charge. There were also two Royal Air Force pilots, an aircraft fitter and an engineer as the *Empire Eve* was a 'Camship', having a Hurricane on the forward deck.

The *Empire Eve* joined the slow convoy, KMS 14, which assembled at Greenock on the west coast of Scotland in early May 1943. Her cargo was 6,500 tons of coal and 250 tons of lubricating oil.

Next week: Philip's brush with death as his ship is attacked