

# An invasion of Malta: military manoeuvres on an island garrison



**CHRISTOPHER GRECH**

On April 7, 1899, an invading naval fleet approached the northern shores of Malta, and having carried out a reconnaissance to select the most suitable landing places, effected a successful invasion of our islands. At 8am that day, two battalions of Blue Jackets and one of Marines landed successfully together with their stores and equipment at Mellieħa Bay.

As the guns of the fleet provided cover for the invading force, the seamen hauled their wheeled machine guns over the rough terrain and dusty rubble tracks up the steep slopes on the far side of Mellieħa Bay towards Marfa where they commanded a fine view of the valley and bay below. On the second day, after some heavy fighting, the invading force was ordered to retrace their steps and re-embark onto the ships that brought them there, together with all the equipment that had been landed.

This was, of course, a military and naval manoeuvre planned to keep the forces based in Garrison Malta in a state of readiness for military and naval action.

This manoeuvre was specifically designed to test the ability of the Royal Navy to carry out an effective landing of men and stores where no wharfage facilities existed while at the same time providing practice for the naval gunners to provide suitable ordnance cover from the accompanying ships of the fleet riding at anchor both in Mellieħa Bay

and the Comino Channel. What was considered most remarkable about this invasion by contemporary commentators was it was regarded as having been the first manoeuvre in which a combined force of naval and military components were involved in Malta; this being the brainchild of the newly arrived Governor of Malta, Sir Francis Grenfell. Sir Francis had just relinquished his post of Commander of the Egyptian Army to take up the governorship of Malta.

Grenfell had joined the army 40 years earlier in 1859, and on his first visit to Malta in 1866 suffered an alarming experience that nearly cost him his life. Being tall and well-built he was a good swimmer and was thus selected to represent his unit in swimming competitions.

Training at night, to avoid other teams timing him as he swam the length of the course, he started his training one evening when midway through he was seized by an enormous octopus which dragged him beneath the surface; thrashing wildly and tearing chunks of flesh off the octopus he managed to make it back to the surface and call for help.

As a boat with its lantern ablaze approached the octopus released him from its grip, leaving a number of torn tentacles still attached to his body. It took Grenfell three days to regain his strength after this attack. Maybe it was no coincidence that Grenfell introduced a nautical component to these manoeuvres.

The 1899, exercises were under the general direction of Lieutenant-General Sir Francis Grenfell. The invading force was commanded by Colonel Smith-Dorrien, DSO, and the Naval Brigade by Commander Madden of HMS Caesar. The defending force was under the command of Major-General Lord Congleton, CB, Commanding Infantry Brigade, Malta.



Military manoeuvres, Mellieħa Bay, April 1899. PHOTO: RICHARD ELLIS

All three of these officers were highly experienced officers, the first two would go on to play significant roles in the First World War. I. Smith-Dorrien was one of the few British survivors of the disastrous Battle of Isandlwana during the Zulu Wars (1879) and held senior commands in the British Expeditionary Force during World War I. Madden, later Admiral of the Fleet Sir Charles Madden, served during World War I as Chief of Staff to Sir John Jellicoe in the Grand Fleet from 1914 to 1916, taking part in the Battle of Jutland.

hands of Colonel Conner (Gloucestershire Regiment) and Colonel Money (Cameron Highlanders) with Captains Maxse and Munro as their staff officers.

Unfortunately the operations were somewhat marred by the high winds that prevailed, and the troops in their various camps suffered considerable inconveniences, although the officers of the Connaught Rangers must have slept snugly in Selmun Palace!

**“Manoeuvres provided a welcome opportunity for troops holed up on a small island garrison to vent their pent-up anxiety”**

According to the Daily Malta Chronicle the field manoeuvres conducted from March 12 to 16, 1894, involved the entire garrison, so much so that even the Connaught Rangers, who were stationed in Gozo, were brought over to Malta and encamped at Selmun Palace – the officers being fortunate in occupying the palace itself, which was placed at their disposal by the Governor.

Since the manoeuvres involved practically the whole of the Governor’s staff, the group photo taken by Richard Ellis on the occasion of the Queen’s Birthday Parade on May 26, 1894 gives us a good idea of the senior officers who participated.

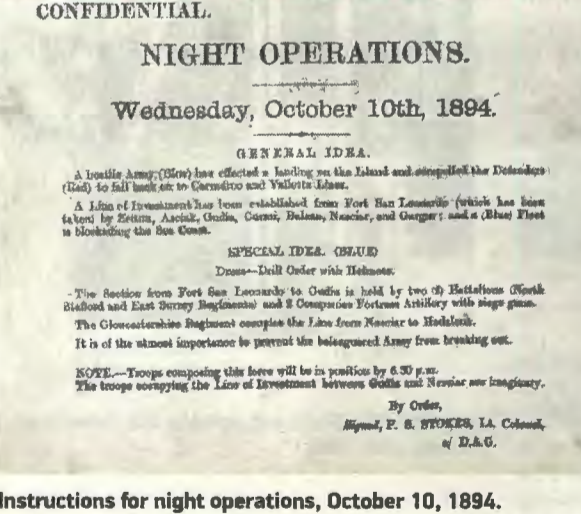
The direction of the manoeuvres was placed under the personal supervision of Governor Fremantle assisted by Major General Nicholson, commanding the Royal Artillery Brigade with Colonel Bayly as Chief Staff Officer. The opposing forces were in the

Another insight into military manoeuvres in Malta is given through an album kept by the then Captain (later Sir) John Spencer Ewart. Ewart was an aide-de-camp and Assistant Military Secretary (AMS) to the Governor Commanding-in-Chief, Malta from January 5, 1894, until April 22, 1898. The AMS was referred to as such since his superior, the Military Secretary, was usually a general officer based at British Army headquarters in London.

It is interesting to note the connection between military secretaries and Malta; a brief examination shows that Malta proved a good stepping-stone to Army headquarters. Major-General Sir Alfred Hastings Horsford, who served on the staff at Malta from 1870 to 1872, occupied the post of Military Secretary from 1874 to 1880; Major-General Sir Ronald Lane, Commanding Infantry Brigade Malta, 1901-1903, was appointed Military Secretary from 1903 to 1904, and Colonel John Spencer Ewart served from 1904 to 1906.

John Spencer Ewart, born in 1861, came from a family with strong military connections. He chose to be known as J. Spencer Ewart to avoid confusion within his family; both his father John Alexander and his grandfather John Frederick were generals in the British army. Spencer and his brother Walter were commissioned into the 79th Regiment or the Queen’s Own Cameron Highlanders, and their time in Malta overlapped: John arrived in Malta with Governor Fremantle and Walter accompanied his regiment to Malta from 1893-1895. Another brother, Arthur, joined the Royal Navy and achieved the rank of Rear Admiral.

Throughout his career Spencer Ewart’s commanding officers made note of his organisational ability and efficiency which



no doubt led to his appointment as Military Secretary. His Malta album shows that he was involved in matters both menial and significant. Among other things he was responsible for the organisation of the military manoeuvres of October 1894. By this date he had already gained experience in such exercises: in April 1893 he devised the scheme for Field Day (a mock battle equivalent to a military manoeuvre) at Blackfield Hill, Edinburgh, so it should come as no surprise to learn that when he arrived in Malta, Ewart would devise the operations for the military manoeuvres.

The brief instructions for the actions that took place on October 10, 1894, are headed



In the front row (seated, from left) are Colonel Money, DSO, Colonel Hogg, Commanding Royal Engineer, Major General Nicholson, Commanding Royal Artillery, Governor Sir Arthur Lyon Fremantle, KCMG, Colonel Bayly, CB, Colonel Hughes, CB, CMG, and Surgeon Major General Inkson, FMD. Standing (from left) are Captain Egerton, ADC, Captain Biancardi, ADC, Captain Cockburn, Captain Monro, Captain F.I. Maxse, Major Graham Thomson, Rev. Riddell Morrison, Captain Woodward, Captain Baker, Col. H.F. Luke, Captain J.S. Ewart, AMS, and Major W.G. Collingwood. PHOTO: RICHARD ELLIS

Colour Sergeant Hodder, 1898 manoeuvres. Photographer unknown.



Sergeant Archer, 1898 manoeuvres. Photographer unknown.



Mellieħa camp, 1898 manoeuvres. Photographer unknown.

rendezvous with the Cameron Highlanders at Paola for the attack on the Żejtun battery held by the 1st North Staffordshire and 2nd East Surrey regiments. In the western district, the 2nd battalion Royal Irish Regiment were to face the 1st battalion Gloucester Regiment in their attempt to overwhelm the attacking battery located at Gharghur. Both attacks were due to start at 7pm. The forces in the central section between Naxxar and Gudja were inaction.

The scene was set for a battle royal. The newspapers recorded that operations were conducted most successfully on all sides; the most important fact being that the exercises achieved their aim of giving the troops

“Confidential”. The instructions for the hostile forces are printed in blue and those of the defenders in red (see illustration). The general idea was that the attackers had invaded Malta and driven the defenders back to the Corradino and Valletta Lines.

The attacking force had invested a line running from Madliena in the west through Gharghur, to Naxxar, Balzan, Qormi and Gudja to Fort San Leonardo near Żejtun in the southeast. The idea was that the defending forces were to effect a night-time attack on the invaders with the aim of destroying the batteries set up at Gharghur and Żejtun. Mobilisation was to start at 6.15pm when the 1st Royal West Surrey Regiment were to

important battle experience. Military and naval manoeuvres in Malta were probably more effective from a psychological than practical value. Manoeuvres provided a welcome opportunity for troops holed up on a small island garrison to vent their pent-up anxiety. The following poem, taken from the Daily Malta Chronicle of May 1899, gives a good example of the morale-boosting value of the manoeuvres:

*Last time of the manoeuvres, / We nobly cleared the way; / The ships we sank, the men we killed, / Are more than I can say, / Go out now to Binjemma, or Marfa if you will, / And if the batteries are not back, / You'll find them out there still.*