



The French Battleship *Verite* when it came to Malta in 1914 together with its sister ship, *Republique*. The two ships combined their football teams to present a better challenge to Hamrun Spartans. The Maltese champions however were still too good for them winning a keen game 5-2. Right: The French battleship, *Danton* in harbour shortly before coming to Malta in 1912. The crew of the *Danton* had a very good football team and they lost no time in fixing a couple of games against local opposition.

The first visits of foreign teams to Malta

Carmel Baldacchino recalls hotly contested games between Maltese and visiting teams.

In January 1912, the French battleship *Danton* paid a visit to Malta. Europe at the time was in a turmoil. Rumours of war were ripe and the British authorities, usually so jealous of their naval facilities in Malta gave their allies permission to berth in Grand Harbour as their guests.

The *Danton*, a battleship of the pre-dreadnought class was the pride of the French Navy. A week after it was completed in 1911, it was sent to the United Kingdom in honour of the Coronation of George V.

Danton served with distinction in World War I as part of the French Mediterranean Fleet, helping to protect French troops and supply ships from attack by the Austro-Hungarian Navy. It also helped to keep the Turkish battlecruiser TCG *Yavuz Sultan Selim* bottled up in the Black Sea.

The French were given a warm welcome by the Maltese and as soon as they arrived in Malta they made it known in no uncertain way that they had a very good football team and that they would like to play against local opposition.

Hamrun Spartans lost no time to grasp this golden opportunity to test their team against foreign opposition. A match was therefore arranged to be played at the Athletic Ground in Marsa on January 20, 1912.

The match was originally scheduled to be held on



A very rare photograph taken before the game played between Hamrun Spartans (in dark shirts) and *Danton* F.T played at the Athletic ground, Marsa on January 20, 1912. The Spartans won a very keen game by two goals to nil.

Wednesday, January 24, at the Mile End Sports Ground but since the French sailors had to take part in a parade in honour of His Highness, King George V of England who was on an official visit of the island, the match had to be brought forward by four days and transferred to the Athletic Ground.

The proceeds of the match went in aid of the Society of St Vincent de Paul and the *League Martini Francais*. Thousands of Maltese attended for this game which could be described as the first-ever played by a foreign team on Maltese soil.

It seems from the reports of the match which were published in the newspapers that

the game was very evenly balanced. For the first quarter of an hour both teams held their own until Gejtu Psaila playing in the unusual role for him of centre-forward, scored the first goal for the Spartans. No further goals were scored in the first half but 10 minutes into the second period, Psaila scored again to increase the Spartans' lead.

The partizan Maltese crowd was really enjoying itself but unfortunately, midway through this half a heavy hail-storm caused the players and the spectators to bolt to the nearest shelter and the game was abandoned. Hamrun were declared winners and were

presented with the handsome silver cup which was provided by the organisers for the occasion. After the game the French sailors were invited to Hamrun where they were treated to refreshments and souvenirs were exchanged. Mons. Dulas, the captain of the *Danton* football team led forth the inspiring strains of the *Marsellaise* which was heartily sung by the visitors while the Maltese in the absence of a national anthem replied with the 'God Save the King'.

At the end of the evening, the Spartans' committee presented Mons. Dulas with the ball of the match. The French then left Hamrun delighted with the

hospitality of the Maltese. Before leaving the island the crew of the *Danton* were given another opportunity to show their skills with a ball. On January 26, 1912 they played against the RGA Brigade Football Team. The game was played at Marsa in the very best of spirit and the thousands of enthusiasts who attended were treated to one of the most exciting games played during that memorable season. At the end, the British soldiers narrowly beat the French sailors by four goals to three.

Soon after this game, the French left the island well pleased by the warm reception that they were given in Malta. They also left behind them memories of a very good football team and fine sportsmanship which showed that football was picking up all over the continent.

Unfortunately however, our story does not have a happy ending. *Danton* was torpedoed by Lt. Cdr. Robert Moraht of U-64 at midday March 19, 1917 in the Tyrrhenian Sea 30 miles south of Sardinia. The battleship was returning to duty from a refit in Toulon and was bound for Corfu off Western Greece to join the blockade of the Strait of Otranto.

Danton was carrying a greater number of men than normal and had been zig-zagging to foil enemy submarines.