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Call the Hands

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Malta Revisited: Wartime Memories of HMAS Vendetta's Malta Sojourn in World War II

We are indebted to ex Supply Assistant Gordon Hill for this wonderfully illuminating description of his wartime service in the destroyer HMAS Vendetta when based at Malta. His story was first published in the June 2010 edition of the Naval Historical Review, available on the Society [website](#).

The George Cross Island Association Reunion in 2004 gave me the opportunity to revisit Malta. I knew that if I put off visiting the Island again after 64 years it was doubtful I would ever do so. Visiting Grand Harbour, the Docks, the infamous 'Gut', Valetta, Sliema, the country towns and villages evoked memories of both happy and sad days of Malta at war.

HMAS *Vendetta* and the four other destroyers of the V and W squadron from Australia were assigned to the 10th destroyer squadron of Admiral Cunningham's Mediterranean fleet at Malta. We arrived in December 1939 and were soon exercising at sea. The war had not reached the Med' and with the French fleet as allies we sailed supreme in Mare Nostrum, as the Romans called it. Two battle fleets were a magnificent sight and we five little Australian destroyers were proud to be a part of it; destroyer escort to this mighty armada.

We escorted convoys taking troops to Marseilles, exercised in the Atlantic and visited Gibraltar.

On 5 March 1940 I had my 21st birthday in Marseilles, visiting the cabarets and dancing the night away. The French and British armies in the north would defeat the Germans, Poland would be liberated and the war would be over in no time. How quickly things changed. We evacuated troops from Marseilles to Palestine, the French fleet became our enemies and we returned to Malta.

Vendetta was feeling her age after months at sea and it was decided to put her in dock at Malta for a refit. Grand Harbour was full of ships, plenty of sailors went ashore enjoying themselves. One favourite place in Valetta was 'The Gut' a street full of bars. I had a memorable evening with two shipmates and two English squaddies (soldiers) in a room over 'Dirty Harry's' Bar. We sang and danced and one girl did the 'Dance of the Seven Veils'. One soldier who had a magnificent voice and sang 'My Prayer' and 'Indian Summer', two songs I will never forget.

The ship's company was divided in two. One half went to live and work with the British army RA 4th Coast Regiment and the other half, which I was unfortunate enough to be in, left to work on the ship during the day and to live in the NAAFI canteen. The canteen had facilities for showers and meals but we had to sleep on mess tables or benches, which at the time we thought nothing could be worse.

In dock Vendetta had one set of torpedo tubes removed and a high angle AA gun fitted, a 0.5 multiple machine gun replaced the small gun between the funnels, the mainmast lowered and sundry other work done by the dockyard workers. We carried out general maintenance and cleaned up the mess the dockyard workers invariably left behind each day. The upper deck soon had a new look. The boilers had been cleaned and the work on the engine refit commenced.



HMAS Vendetta wearing camouflage and new pennant no D69 which was changed in May 1940

On the 10 June I left the ship and was walking to the canteen to shower and spend the evening ashore when two army officers excitedly told me 'the balloon has gone up' That expression took a while to sink in but I soon realised that Italy had come into the war. The immediate fear was an Italian invasion by sea and air.

Italy had a menacing naval potential. Her fleet boasted 5 battleships, 25 cruisers, 90 destroyers and nearly 100 submarines. Admiral Cunningham decided to move the units of his fleet in Malta to Alexandria leaving just a few destroyers and other small ships. Vendetta's refit crew now became dockyard defence and we carried a 0.303 rifle or if lucky a 0.45 revolver with us at all times to guard against a parachute invasion.

Living in the NAAFI canteen was bad enough but we were now to be quartered in a tunnel alongside the ship in the graving dock. Fifty men took their hammocks and laid them on the damp tunnel floor and turned in. Next morning we were covered by bites from fleas that infested the walls of the tunnel. The only relief was to dive into the harbour. That tunnel was our home for four weeks while we worked on the ship.

The bombing started early on 11 June. Valetta, the harbour and surrounding towns were bombed eighty times, sometimes up to eight air raids a day up to the time when we left on 8 July with the engine refit not completed. The siege of Malta had begun. Many people left their homes to live in the catacombs, ancient tunnels and caves and to cut air raid shelters in the soft limestone cliffs.

The only air defence was four Gloster Gladiators left behind by the navy. The Maltese people watched these planes gallantly take off each day to fight the Italian bombers. One of the navy planes was shot down and the people named the remaining three Faith, Hope and Charity. They gave a good account of themselves and shot down or disabled a number of bombers before they too met their fate. The plane christened 'Faith' was not badly damaged and after the war was restored and is now in the museum in Valetta.

Frantic efforts to supply the Island with troops, supplies and equipment for the army and air force through Gibraltar in the west and Alexandria in the east meant Malta Grand Harbour was

once again full of ships and a target for the bombers. On one occasion one ammunition ship was on fire and another was sunk by navy divers attaching limpet mines to avoid it blowing up. Even though some supply ships were sunk, navy divers recovered stores from some sunken vessels. The harbour became a graveyard for a number of sailors, soldiers and dockyard workers unloading ships.



Italian bombing of Grand Harbour Malta, June 1941

On one occasion I was assigned to a working party to load depth charges on to a truck and take them to Ranella wireless station. This was the main WT station on the Island. We set up the depth charges as demolition charges in a number of the tunnels that made up this vast underground complex. I don't think I was much help in handling 350 pound depth charges I only weighed 8 ½ stone and was sacked from a 6 inch guns crew at the training depot in Victoria because I could not lift a 112 pound shell off the loading tray

Soon after Italy came into the war an Italian passenger ship the El Nil was close to Sicily and trying to get to its home port when one of our aircraft spotted it and made it heave to. Vendetta was duty boat for the day and even in dry dock had to provide a boat crew if required. We were given the job of providing a boarding party to take over the passenger ship and I with others were roused from our tunnel quarters, armed and dispatched by a fast patrol boat to sea. We boarded El Nil which was two days sailing out of Malta. My job was to guard the engine room crew. Others took over the wheel house, bridge and other positions. The crew and passengers did not appear to resent our presence or resist. In fact, that night when relieved of my watch I slept comfortably in a cabin and next day ate my meals in the dining room with the passengers. A real contrast from our flea infested tunnel and NAFFI meals.

The Italian air force decided to have an air raid just as we were entering harbour. Pandemonium broke out among the passengers and crew. They tried to lower the life boats, and really panicked. Fortunately we had only a short distance to go to secure the ship alongside a wharf. When the air raid was over we managed to get everyone ashore and the army took them away as POW's

After several attempts to leave Malta with a convoy, including our captured ship El Nil we finally dodged the lurking submarines and newly laid mines and proceeded to Alexandria which we reached on 13 July 1940. Upon our departure from Malta our C.O. LCDR Rhoades received a message from the Vice Admiral Malta praising the work he and his crew had done in improving the Island's defences. The message spoke of the astonishing results produced by Vendetta's crew who, in true Australian fashion, turned their hands to everything. The El Nil was turned into

a hospital ship some time later. We spent the next two months escorting convoys of troop ships to Malta and screening ships of the covering cruisers and battleships.

We once again entered Grand Harbour Malta on 11 October 1940 and proceeded to our old place in the graving dock and our tunnel accommodation to complete our engine refit. Some German dive bombers had joined the Italians and inflicted heavy damage on ships in the harbour. The AA defence had been strengthened and now 4.5 AA guns, Bofors and multiple pom poms managed to shoot down a number of bombers. The RAF had some Spitfires and other aircraft and it looked less likely that Italy could take the Island.

One of our sailors had a portable gramophone and a few records which he played in our tunnel to entertain us. One record was Gracie Fields singing Gounod's 'Ave Maria'. The memory of the constant playing of that record later evoked such strong emotions in me that for many years I would become profoundly upset when I heard it played.

On the 13 September the long expected Italian invasion of Egypt from Libya began and their forces occupied Sidi Barini . On 28 October the Italian army invaded Greece. Vendetta, still in dock in Malta was like a greyhound straining at the leash to get the refit completed . We had missed a naval battle before by being in dock.

With the arrival of the Luftwaffe in Sicily only 60 miles from Malta bombing intensified. Life in the underground shelters, with food and fuel running short people were getting desperate. No pets were allowed to be kept. Babies were born and people died in their air raid shelters. We finally sailed from Grand Harbour on 10 November escorting the monitor HMS Terror to Suda Bay, Crete which was being set up as naval support base for the military reinforcement of Greece.

Our last visit to Malta was when we escorted a convoy from Alexandria arriving on 26 November 1940. This was a particularly hazardous trip. Several troop and supply ships were sunk by submarines and bombers. There was to be no further attempt to get supplies to Malta from both the east and west Mediterranean for some time. The navy even resorted to delivering aviation fuel to the RAF in Malta by submarine, carried in 4 gallon tins. In harbour, our 'gashman' was accused of selling our food scraps to people at the dockyard gate for a penny a plate, instead of feeding them to his goats. Goats were the only supply of milk as the Island land was too poor to support grazing cattle. The milkman came to your door or air raid shelter and milked the goats into any container you had.

In April 1942 HM King George VI awarded the George Cross to the Islanders of Malta and Gozo as a tribute to their gallantry. The siege went on and the people were at the point of giving up the struggle when in August the 'Pedestal' convoy, after the loss of many ships (including the aircraft carrier Eagle) got through from Gibraltar. The tanker Ohio made history by delivering vital fuel, though badly damaged and finally sinking at the wharf. While this was considered the end of the siege, it was some time before other convoys got through to supply food to the starving people.

HMAS Vendetta went on in 1942 to make a name for herself in other parts of the Mediterranean, North Africa, Tobruk, Greece and Crete. Malta was in the past. The feather bed in the Emirates Airways hotel in Dubai on my return to Brisbane was a vast contrast to a hammock on the dirt floor of our tunnel dockside in Malta. All just a part of history.

A little about the author:

Gordon Hill was a member of the Society for 25 years and passed away in August 2018. Gordon joined the RAN as a Supply Assistant in 1938.. After initial training at Flinders Naval Base he was posted to HMAS Vendetta. In December 1939 the RAN destroyer squadron was sent overseas to join the Royal Navy East Mediterranean Fleet in Malta. He served in the Mediterranean in Vendetta until the middle of 1941 when transferred to HMAS Perth. After suffering bomb damage in the evacuation from Crete, Perth returned to Australia for repairs.

Gordon next joined HMAS Colac in 1942 and after a few trips to Milne Bay was posted to HMAS Magnetic at Townsville, to start up and run a supply base. His next posting was to the Combined Operations training base HMAS Assault at Port Stephens. He then returned to Milne Bay becoming Australian Liaison Officer with the American Supply Base. After the end of the war in 1945 he was involved with the disposal of surplus naval assets in North Queensland until discharged from the RAN in 1950.

Gordon later joined the Commonwealth Immigration Department as a Supply Officer and helped run migrant camps for displaced persons from Europe at Brisbane and Townsville, and set up another in Cairns. He became an accountant in Cairns and later Brisbane where he retired in 1980.