

CHECK CAREFULLY
AGAINST BROADCAST

22.9.42. - No. 23.

THE SIEGE OF MALTA
by GENERAL SIR WILLIAM DOBBIE

Following is the text of the broadcast by the former Governor of Malta, to be delivered after the B.B.C. Home News at 9 p.m. -

The story of the siege of Malta is not yet complete. Other glorious pages still remain to be written. But even so, it is permissible to examine the story so far as it goes, and draw lessons from it which may help us in the days of siege which still lie ahead.

Wars and battles are not won only by material means, important as these things are. In the end it is, under God, the man and the spirit of man which count.

The story of Malta is a notable example of this truth. It is a story of human endurance and determination triumphing often over a lack of material resources. It is in this that its value lies.

A word first about the people and the place. Malta is the most densely populated country in the world; with a population of well over 250,000, it carries 2,700 persons for each square mile.

The country therefore obviously cannot support itself in essential foodstuffs, although every square yard of suitable ground is cultivated. Most of its food and all its manufactured goods have to be brought in from outside.

Thus the sea plays a decisive part in the well being of Malta. For this reasons Malta has always had a specially intimate connection with the Royal Navy, and Maltese men are to be found serving in most of His Majesty's Ships and in many merchant vessels. Malta well understands the significance of the phrase "Command of the Sea".

Malta is some 60 miles from Sicily and about 1,000 miles from the nearest British territory. It is in fact the most exposed part of the British Empire.

For this reason many persons, especially among our enemies thought that Malta could not be held. The Italians openly boasted that it would be over run and captured by them within the first few days of war. At that time, June 1940, when the resources of the British Empire were strained almost to breaking point, the defensive strength of Malta was far less powerful than it is today. The Italians might surely have seized what must have seemed to them a favourable opportunity to implement their boasts.

But though they talked big, they acted small, and could never screw themselves up to taking the plunge and testing the defences of the island which has remained in our hands and has been a veritable thorn in their side.

Malta was the first place in the British Empire to experience serious aerial bombing. The people therefore had to face the unknown, which always has peculiar terrors of its own.

In spite of the instructions and advice (largely based on theory) issued by the Government Malta, like other places, had to win its knowledge of how best to cope with these new perils in the hard school of experience.

In this Malta had to lead the way, and right well did they face the issue. They say that familiarity breeds contempt, and a tendency soon showed itself (which persists to the present day) to treat the enemy with real contempt - especially if he was Italian.

Men and women, and even children, were frequently heard to say of a raider "He is only Italian", while they went on with their business. This tendency of course has to be checked, since even an Italian bomb can hurt if it hits one.

Malta is blessed with a rock which is soft enough to work, but hard enough to stand up to the severest blows. This has meant much to the Island, since it has enabled shelters to be built which really do give first rate protection. If it were not for this the casualty list would have been infinitely higher.

But though it might protect the people it could not protect their houses, and they would often emerge from their shelters only to find their homes a heap of ruins. It was a pathetic sight to see these people probing the debris, trying to extricate some of their furniture and household treasures.

But I was immensely struck by the courage of these very people and their grim determination to see this thing through. More than once I have met such women by their ruined homes and they have said to me: "We have lost all but it does not matter so long as we win this war".

One often wondered what would be the effect on children of the continuous alerts and raids.

Generally speaking, they seemed to stand the strain remarkably well. The small boys especially appeared to derive actual enjoyment from the raids, a feeling which was not always shared by their elders and betters. They took the liveliest interest in what was happening. Their unbelievably keen eyes would spot the Messerschmitts or Junkers or Italian Cants at distances beyond the powers of ordinary mortals, and follow the happenings in detail when our Spitfires came on the scene.

When peace comes I am afraid they will find life rather dull.

The education of these youngsters presented a difficult problem. But it had to be faced, to give these citizens of tomorrow as good a start in life as possible. Many of the schools were destroyed by bombs -- others had to be used as hospitals -- but by the exercise of ingenuity and by distributing classes, in different buildings, a good degree of education has been maintained.

Malta's isolation from the outside world of course deprived many persons of their livelihood. Importers, exporters and businesses of all kinds were affected, as were also retail shops which could not adequately replenish their stocks.

Thus many persons had to seek other means of livelihood, and many were absorbed in the Armed Forces or the various Government Departments.

The conscription of man-power for essential services reduced unemployment to a minimum. All these upheavals were generally accepted with good humour and a fine realism. And the people tried to help each other, and the community.

I remember once getting a letter from the boys of a village offering their services. Could they not make themselves useful in some way -- carrying messages, roof spotting, as guides or in any other way? They would like to wear some uniform, but if that were not possible, it did not matter, so long as they could be useful.

It was the right spirit, and I believe the motive was not only a boyish love of adventure, but a genuine desire to help.

The people of Malta are proud, and rightly so, of their buildings, many of which are of great historic interest and architectural beauty. Many of these have, alas, been destroyed, and many more seriously damaged, much to the distress of the people.

Some buildings have had remarkable escapes. I remember watching a raid one afternoon and I saw a bomb hit the dome of a church in a neighbouring village. The dome was a remarkably large one and the church was thought much of by the people of the village who had built it. I immediately went to the village, expecting to see a scene of great desolation. I entered the church and I was glad to find that the people in the crypt were quite safe and that the church was not in fact demolished. The people regarded the episode as a miracle, as indeed it was.

I have said very little about the garrison, but the fighting services have of course played a great part in this epic struggle. Their co-operation with each other and with the civil population has been first rate, and has contributed largely to the successful defence of the island. We used to say that Malta stood squarely on four legs, the Navy, the Army, the Air Force and the civil population. The importance of a good understanding and mutual confidence between these four cannot be overestimated.

The anti-aircraft guns of Malta have gained a world-wide reputation. These were manned by both English and Maltese personnel. In certain periods, when we were short of fighter aircraft, they largely bore the burden of defence, and well did they respond. The amount of practice they had should have made them good - and they certainly were good. I remember in one month the guns alone destroyed over 100 enemy aircraft for certain.

The work of the fighter aircraft was also magnificent. Starting from nothing they have until recently always been fighting against odds - and sometimes very heavy odds. Between them and the guns a remarkable toll has been levied on the Axis air forces which has caused a continual drain on their resources which they can ill afford.

Life in Malta has been and still is serious and strenuous and many of the amenities of life have had to be discarded. But while all concerned have kept up their courage and their spirits, they are glad when they see that their efforts and their contribution to the common cause are appreciated and understood.

It was therefore with the greatest pleasure that they learnt of the delightful gesture of His Majesty the King, when he conferred the George Cross on the Island. This delight was all the greater because the King's action was unexpected and without precedent. The appreciation of the people was enormous, and it gave them great encouragement. I venture to think that no honour has been better earned by any community. The most pleasant task which fell to my lot during my two years as Governor was to tell the people of the King's most gracious action.

One word more. I have purposely left to the last the point which really overshadows all others in importance. During these two years of the siege, I was very conscious of the good hand of God upon us, and I am sure that the continued safety of Malta was ultimately due to his Divine protection.

I am not alone in this conviction. May others share it with me, and are glad to acknowledge it humbly and thankfully. I am convinced that God for Christ's sake does still answer prayer, and I believe that the recognition of this fact was the secret of the spirit, endurance and fortitude shown by so many persons in Malta.

I think we may summarize the lessons which we can draw from this epic story. They seem to me as follows :

Firstly, a stout heart still produces great results.

Secondly, co-operation in efforts and a determination to help each other is vitally important, especially in times of stress.

Thirdly, acknowledgement of God through Christ, and trust in Him is now as ever the thing which matters most.