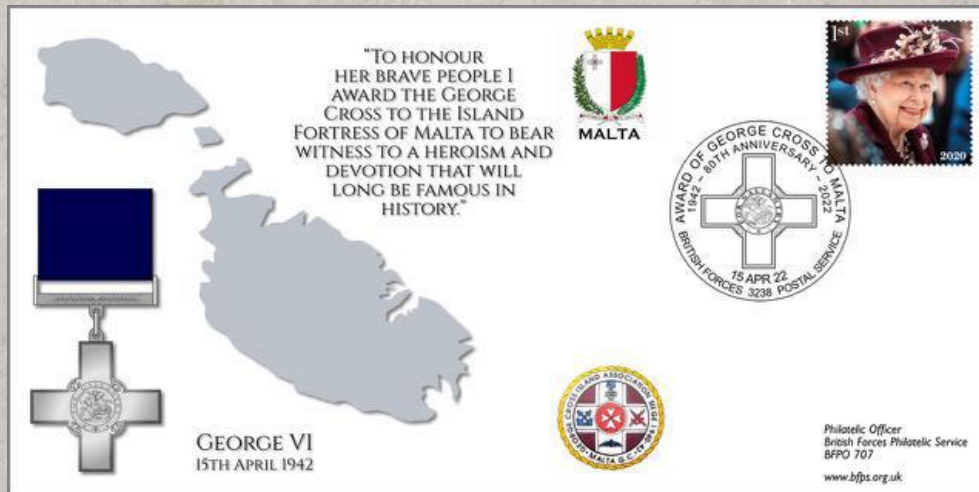


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Military and Medical History in Malta

David Vassallo's recommended Malta Books and Websites



Setting the scene: St Paul's Shipwreck

'Once we had come safely through, we discovered that the island was called Malta. The inhabitants treated us with unusual kindness ...'



The most important event in Malta's last 6,000 years was St Paul's shipwreck on the island in AD 60, which resulted - after St Paul cured the Roman governor's father of dysentery - in the conversion of the Maltese to Christianity. Appreciating this background is the key to understanding the context of almost all of Malta's subsequent history.



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***Recommended Read:** Start by reading St Luke's compelling eyewitness account of this Shipwreck, in: Acts of the Apostles, Chapter 27: 1-44, and follow with the account of healing in Chapter 28: 1-10.*

Setting the scene: Malta's strategic position

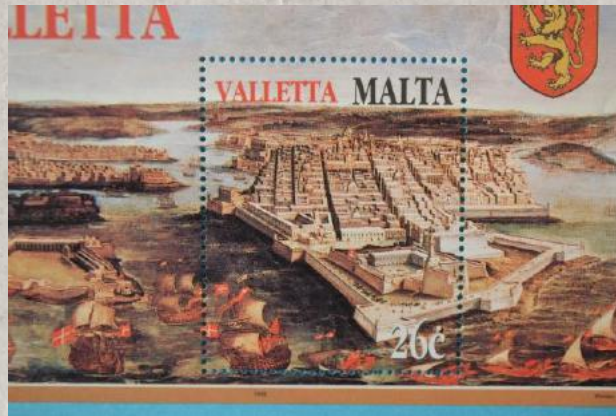


From a military perspective, Malta's strategic position in the centre of the Mediterranean has led to it being repeatedly fought over by the Middle Sea's dominant powers for many centuries. The Romans captured it from the Carthaginians in the Second Punic War of 218 BC, the Arabs took it from the Byzantines in AD 810, and they in turn were ousted by Count Roger the Norman (first cousin to William the Conqueror) in 1090. The Knights of St John, having lost Rhodes to Suleiman the Magnificent in 1521, were granted Malta by Emperor Charles V in 1530, and had to defend it against marauding Turks and Barbary Corsairs on frequent occasions. The 1551 razzia by Dragut's corsairs almost captured the Knights' stronghold of Birgu - its Governor, Sir Nicholas Upton, an English Knight, lost his life defending the city. His sacrifice is commemorated on a plaque on the parish church of St Lawrence. Dragut then enslaved the entire population of Gozo.

There are four main episodes of note after this. The first is the Great Siege of 1565, the epic defence of Malta by the Knights of St John ably led by 71-year-old Grandmaster Jean Pierre de la Valette, against a massive force of Ottoman Turks, at the height of their prowess under Suleiman the Magnificent. La Valette's successful defence of this frontier of Christendom led to the foundation of the city that bears his name, and that in 1998 and again in 2018 celebrated in the role of European Capital of Culture.



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The second episode is Napoleon Bonaparte's June 1798 whirlwind capture of Malta from the Knights of St John, followed in September by an uprising of the Maltese, incensed by the sacrilegious behaviour of the occupying French forces. Admiral Nelson sent his First Lieutenant, Alexander Ball, with reinforcements to the help of the Maltese. The French retreated behind the fortifications of the Knights in Valletta and around the Grand Harbour, only surrendering after two years of siege. This ushered in the British period in Maltese history (1800 - 1979), during much of which Malta served as headquarters of the Mediterranean Fleet with a huge military garrison.



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Thirdly, the First World War saw Malta play a vital medical role, as 'Nurse of the Mediterranean', with 27 military hospitals caring for over 135,000 wounded and sick evacuated from Gallipoli and Salonika, as well as the victims of unrestricted submarine warfare, in 1915 - 1917. Four thousand casualties arrived in May 1915 alone at the start of the Gallipoli campaign. Most of the casualties were Australians and New Zealanders, and 202 members of the Australian Imperial Force and 72 members of the New Zealand Expeditionary Force are buried on the island. ANZAC day has been commemorated in Malta since 1916, and an ANZAC memorial (unique outside of Gallipoli) was inaugurated at Argotti Botanical Gardens Floriana on 25 May 2013.



Finally, there is the Second Siege of Malta, 1940 - 1943, when Malta again had to fight for her life, this time against the Axis powers of Italy and Germany, while playing a strategic role in their ultimate defeat. Malta, whose striking forces (particularly the submarines of the 10th Submarine



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Flotilla and the bomber squadrons of the RAF) were a thorn in Rommel's side, was nearly starved into submission. However, Churchill was determined that Malta would remain free and be enabled to take the fight to the enemy, so she was sustained against tremendous odds by the Royal Navy, Merchant Navy, Army, and Royal Air Force. Thousands of British and Commonwealth servicemen lost their lives in this epic and valiant struggle, and their sacrifice is commemorated on the Island to this day.



Malta was saved by the epic Santa Marija convoy of Operation PEDESTAL, in August 1942, though the siege was not effectively lifted until early 1943, after which the island became the headquarters for the launch of Operation HUSKY, the invasion of Sicily, in July 1943. Thus did the tide of war turn.



Malta Books - Top Read:

- **Nicholas Monsarrat: *The Kappellan of Malta*** (London: Cassell & Co, 1973) (Cassell Military Paperback edition widely available in Malta's bookshops, approx. 15 euro). *The Kappellan of Malta*, from the



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bestselling author of *The Cruel Sea*, is a beautifully written classic novel set in the siege of Malta 1940-1943. It covers the main events while highlighting relevant key periods of Malta's past and it features one of the most endearing characters in modern fiction. Monsarrat settled in Gozo in 1968 and lived there until his death in 1979.

Highly recommended reads (military history, in four parts):

The Great Siege, 1565

'I will not withdraw so long as those flags still wave in the wind. I am seventy-one years old; how could a man of my age die more gloriously than among my friends and brothers, in the service of God?'

Thus roared La Valette, heroically leading the counter assault into the great breach at the Post of Castille after a mine destroyed it on 18 August 1565 - the critical moment of the siege.



- **Bruce Ware Allen:** *The Great Siege of Malta* (ForeEdge, 2015). This thoroughly researched, comprehensive and very readable book, by a Mediterranean history expert, is my first choice, jointly with:
- **Ernle Bradford:** *The Great Siege* (Penguin Books, 1961; Open Road Integrated Media, 2014). An excellent overview of the siege, by a noted naval historian and author.
- **Charles Cini:** *The Siege of Malta 1565 - Matteo Perez d'Aleccio's frescoes in the Grand Masters' Palace, Valletta* (Malta: Miller Distributors, 2009) (collaborative work by the Salesians of Don Bosco and Heritage Malta; photography by renowned photographer Daniel Cilia - any book featuring his work is of the highest possible standard).



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The highly detailed d'Aleccio frescoes are effectively graphic campaign maps, commissioned shortly after the siege to document for posterity the heroic events of that year. This publication explains the background to each fresco.

- **Francisco Balbi di Correggio: *The Siege of Malta*** (translated by Ernle Bradford). (London: Folio Society, 1965; Penguin edition, 2003).
A riveting and unique first-hand account by a Spanish arquebusier present throughout the Siege, first published in 1567. A key reference.
- **Tim Pickles: *Malta 1565 - Last battle of the Crusades*** (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 1998). *If you cannot get hold of Charles Cini's book, Tim Pickles' graphic maps will help you understand the siege.*

The French Occupation

- **Carmel Testa: *The French in Malta, 1798-1800***. (Valletta: Midsea Books, 1997). *This magnum opus of a book tells you all you need to know, and more, about the French occupation of Malta between Napoleon's invasion on 10 June 1798 and the surrender by General Vaubois on 5 September 1800. For the specialist. Monsarrat's 'The Kappillan of Malta' provides a flavour of this period for the amateur historian.*
- See also <https://vassallohistory.wordpress.com/french-blockade/>

First World War



- **Anthony Zarb-Dimech: *Malta during the First World War 1914-1918*** (Malta: Veritas Press, 2004; centenary edition 2014). *A very handy overview, with a comprehensive section on medical facilities.*
- **John A Mizzi: *Gallipoli - The Malta Connection*** (Malta: Tecnografica Publications, 1991, copies from BDL, San Gwann). *This is the story of the many thousands of wounded and sick casualties from Gallipoli who were treated in Malta. Well worth obtaining.*



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- **Albert G Mackinnon: Malta - The Nurse of the Mediterranean** (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1916). By the senior Presbyterian chaplain on the Island, an excellent account. Available online, see: <http://ia600408.us.archive.org/25/items/maltanurseofmedioomackuoft/maltanurseofmedioomackuoft.pdf>. Paperback reprint by BDL Books, Malta (18 euro): <https://bdlbooks.com/product/malta-the-nurse-of-the-mediterranean/>
- **ANZAC Experience in Malta** - Walking tours, download four pdfs free from <https://nzconsulate.wixsite.com/malta/anzac-experience>



Second World War



- **Overviews:**
 - **James Holland. Fortress Malta - An Island Under Siege 1940-1943** (London: Orion, 2003; paperback by Phoenix, 2004) My first choice, from an author with a pedigree of excellent books.
 - **Ernie Bradford. Siege: Malta 1940-1943** (Penguin Books, 1987)



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- o **Philip Vella. Malta: Blitzed but not Beaten** (Valletta, Malta: Progress Press, 1985) Produced for the newly formed (1974) National War Museum Association. Includes Rolls of Honour for Civilians, Royal Navy (Malta Port Division only), Army Regiments (including Royal Army Medical Corps), and Royal Air Force, compiled by John A. Agius MBE (historian).



- **The Sea War and Malta Convoys: a select choice**
 - o **Shankland and Hunter: Malta Convoy** (1961, still in print, widely available in Malta). A classic and very readable sea saga, and the first published about the August 1942 convoy that saved Malta. The star is the American tanker SS Ohio. Start by reading this book.
 - o **Peter C Smith: Pedestal - The Malta Convoy of August 1942.** (London: William Kimber, 1970; readily available in Malta). An ideal complement to Shankland and Hunter's book.
 - o **Brian James Crabb: Operation PEDESTAL - The Story of Convoy WS21S in August 1942.** (Donington: Shaun Tyas, 2014) The author of this recent richly illustrated hardback has uncovered much fresh detail, not least from Axis archives. Highly recommended for the specialist reader.
 - o **David A Thomas: Malta Convoys** (Barnsley: Leo Cooper, 1999). This handy paperback gives an excellent overview of each of the 24 convoys to Malta, and the progress of the war, in 1940 - 42.
 - o **Max Hastings: Operation Pedestal** (May 2021). An excellent new account, in this bestselling author's inimitable style.
- **Submarine Warfare**



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- o *John Wingate: The Fighting Tenth (The Tenth Submarine Flotilla and the Siege of Malta)* (London: Leo Cooper, 1991). This is the best overview of submarine exploits from Malta. It is a worthy tribute to the men who risked and often lost their lives beneath the waves. The 10th Flotilla fought the most concentrated submarine campaign of the war, losing 26 boats (the odds of survival for some time being one in two), but sinking a million tons of shipping in the process.
- o *Submarine Museum and Memorial Chapel, Gosport.* Supplement your reading by a visit to the Submarine Museum at Gosport (nearest train station: Portsmouth). And if possible add in a visit to the nearby Submariners Memorial Chapel at Fort Blockhouse (which closed as a military establishment in December 2021). This Chapel, previously open 24 hours daily, has many poignant memorabilia, particularly the Book of Remembrance and a memorial window to the 10th Flotilla in Malta, featuring St Paul.



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- **Two for the Army**
 - **Joseph Bonnici and Michael Cassar: Malta and British Army Infantry Regiments 1800 - 1979.** (Malta: BDL Publishing, 2009) Hardback, 70 euro; covers the whole of the British period in Malta - almost every British Army Regiment served there.
 - **Christopher Jary. Yells, Bells and Smells: The Story of the Devons, Hampshires and Dorsets in the Siege of Malta 1940-43.** (Malta: Semper Fidelis Publications, 2017) Available for £12 from the Keep Museum, Dorchester. These three regiments were brigaded together during the defence of Malta and became known as 231 Malta Brigade, taking as their badge the red and white cross of Malta. This Brigade participated in the invasion of Sicily, fought in Italy, landed in Normandy, and advanced through France, Belgium and the Netherlands to Germany.
- **The Air War - a selection:**



- **Ryan K Noppen: Malta 1940-42 The Axis' air battle for Mediterranean supremacy** (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2018). This recently published paperback in Osprey's Air Campaign series provides an excellent and graphically illustrated analysis of the Air War in the central Mediterranean. Highly recommended.
- **Kenneth Poolman: Faith, Hope and Charity** (William Kimber & Co, 1954. Republished by Crecy Publishing, 2009, c. 11 euro). This popular account, published soon after the War, and my personal favourite since childhood, describes the first few months of the Air War over Malta, June - October 1940, when the only air defence against Italy's Regia Aeronautica consisted of a few Gloster Sea Gladiators, left behind and assembled from



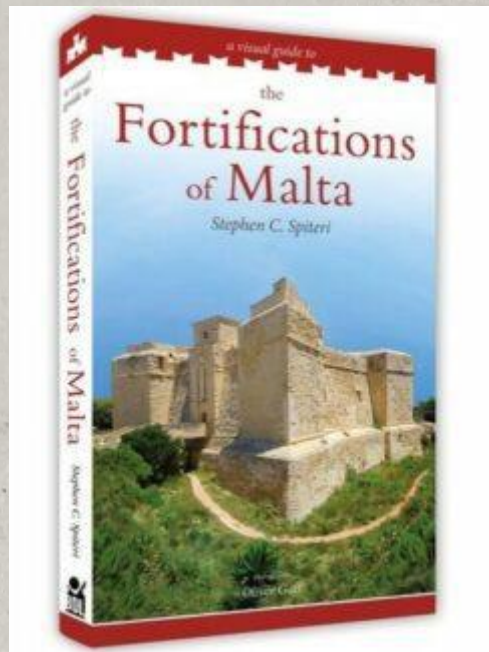
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packing crates when the Mediterranean Fleet's aircraft carrier HMS Glorious hurriedly left Malta to defend Norway.

- o **Brian Cull and Frederick Galea: Gladiators over Malta - The Story of Faith, Hope and Charity.** (Malta: Wise Owl Publications, approx. 2004; available from Malta's Aviation Museum) This paperback, filling many of the gaps in Kenneth Poolman's book, is one of some 17 books on the Air War by Frederick Galea (co-founder of Malta's Aviation Museum) and sometime co-author Brian Cull. For the specialist.
- o **John A Agius and Frederick Galea: Lest We Forget - Royal Air Force and Commonwealth Air Forces Servicemen Lost in the Defence of Malta** (Malta: Malta Aviation Museum Foundation, 1999). Roll of Honour compiled by John A Agius MBE.
- o **Anthony Rogers: Air Battle of Malta - Aircraft Losses and Crash Sites 1940-42** (Barnsley: Greenhill Books, 2017; available for under £6 from Naval & Military Press, <https://www.naval-military-press.com/product/air-battle-of-malta-aircraft-losses-and-crash-sites-1940-1942/>). This book draws extensively on both Allied and Axis war records and eyewitness accounts, giving the personal stories and circumstances behind each crash.

Military Architecture



- **Stephen Spiteri: The Fortifications of Malta** (Malta: BDL Publishing, 2017)(paperback, 20 euro). A must-buy. This handy paperback is a profusely illustrated and detailed visual guide to Malta's wealth of



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military architecture, covering all the Knights Hospitaller and British fortifications. Stephen Spiteri is THE expert on Maltese fortifications, and this book will whet your appetite for his major hardback publications on British and Hospitaller Military Architecture in Malta. Do also explore his marvellous website and free online publications at <http://www.militaryarchitecture.com/>.

Medical History - Top Reads:

- **Paul Cassar: Medical History of Malta** (London: Wellcome, 1964). By Malta's foremost medical historian. Highly recommended. Now available free online at <https://archive.org/details/b32248040>
- **Roger Ellul - Micallef: Zammit of Malta (Volumes 1 & 2)** (Valletta: Allied Publications Ltd, 2013). By the emeritus Rector of the University of Malta, also a medical historian. Sir Themistocles (Temí) Zammit, perhaps Malta's most distinguished scholar, made the seminal discovery, in collaboration with Sir David Bruce and others in the Mediterranean Fever Commission, that Mediterranean or Undulant Fever (Brucellosis) is transmitted by goats' milk. The six opening chapters of Volume 2 elegantly document this saga. Zammit also dominated Malta's archaeological scene in the early decades of the 20th century, as well as becoming Rector of the University of Malta.



- **John Rizzo Naudi: Brucellosis - The Malta Experience, A Celebration 1905 - 2005** (Malta: Publishers Enterprise Group, 2005). An up-to-date



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history by a renowned physician of the saga of brucellosis and its eradication in Malta.

- **Charles Savona-Ventura: Outlines of Maltese Medical History** (Valletta: Midsea Books, 1997). By Malta's Professor of Obstetrics, who has written passionately and extensively on Malta's medical history. For instance, see his online histories of Malta's Civil, Military and Naval Hospitals, at <https://vassallohistory.wordpress.com/>

Three articles combining Medical and Military History:

- **David Vassallo. *The Corps Disease: Brucellosis and its historical association with the Royal Army Medical Corps*. J Roy Army Med Corps 1992; 138: 140-150**
- **David Vassallo. *The Centenary of the sinking of the Mediterranean Fleet flagship, HMS Victoria. What was the role of Malta Fever?* J Roy Nav Med Serv 1993; 79: 91-99**
- **David Vassallo. *The saga of brucellosis: controversy over credit for linking Malta fever with goats' milk*. Lancet 1996; 348:804-808**

Main Websites:

- **British Army Medical Services and the Malta Garrison 1799 - 1979** www.maltaramc.com (author: Col (ret'd) Walter Bonnici L/RAMC). The product of over 40 years of archival research by a Maltese military doctor, this is a real treasure trove. Highly recommended.
- **Fondazzjoni Wirt Artna** (Malta Heritage Trust) - preserving Malta's British Military History sites <http://www.wirtartna.org/>
- **Military Architecture** (Stephen Spiteri's website, see above) <http://www.militaryarchitecture.com/>.
- **Maltese History and Heritage** <https://vassallohistory.wordpress.com/> (no relationship to me, so I can unequivocally recommend this site)
- **Malta Online Bookshop:** <https://maltaonlinebookshop.com>

A Little Bit of Naughtiness and Light Relief

It will come as no surprise that in a garrison island hosting thousands of Royal Navy, Army and RAF personnel there was a flourishing red-light district in Strait Street, Valletta, known as 'The Gut'. Several publications have sought to capture its stories before time erases memories. One such is:

- **John Schofield and Emily Morrissey. *Strait Street - Malta's 'Red-Light District' Revealed***. (Valletta: Midsea Books, 2013)



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***A Top Tip:** do visit the Military History Bookshop next to the Upper Barrakka, and the 'Melitensia' sections in Malta's bookshops*

A different way of using my Recommended List

If space for books is a limiting factor, read on below

If the Great Siege is your main interest:

If you limit yourself to one book, choose Bruce Ware Allen's account.

Two books: add in Francesco Balbi di Correggio's eyewitness epic tale.

Three books: add in Ernle Bradford.

If it's WW1:

One book, go for John Mizzi.

(And read MacKinnon and ANZAC Experience in Malta for free online).

Two books, add in Anthony Zarb Dimech

Three books, buy the reprint of Albert MacKinnon's eyewitness account.

And if it's WW2 that mainly interests you:

One book, you will enjoy Nicholas Monsarrat's 'The Kappillan of Malta'.

If only two, then add in James Holland's 'Fortress Malta'.

If only three, then add in a book about Operation Pedestal: take your pick from my recommendations. You could opt for the most recent, such as the very readable one by Max Hastings; or the earliest, to whet your appetite (Shankland & Hunter); or the most comprehensive (that by Brian Crabb).

Enjoy Malta!

David Vassallo

Chairman, Friends of Millbank



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Readers' personal recommendations.

- *Second World War. Judge Joseph Galea Debono, President of the George Cross Island Association <http://www.georgecrossisland.org.uk> , highly recommends 'Raiders Passed. Wartime Recollections of a Maltese Youngster' by Charles Grech, which he has personally translated from the Maltese edition. (Midsea Books, Malta: 1998)*



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