Major Denis Rollo
1929 – 2016
author of
“The Guns & Gunners of Malta”

Denis Rollo joined the Royal Regiment of Artillery in 1950 and served in the coast, anti-aircraft and field branches of the Regiment in the Middle East, Germany and the United Kingdom.

In 1969 he was in Libya on exercise when in September a military coup took place, at the head of which Muhammar Gaddafi subsequently emerged, and the Battle Group he was in was detailed off for operations. Denis and Lt Michael Phillips (later Historical Secretary of the RAI) hauled down the last Gunner regimental flag to fly in Libya and were the last of the Battle Group to leave.
He went onto retired pay on 31 December 1979. He then became an RO (Retired Officer) at RA Records, MoD Establishments and finally in HQ Director Royal Artillery, which was then in Woolwich. Increasingly involved in Gunner history, he succeeded Lt Col M E S Laws, the authority on the descent and provenance of batteries and regiments, continuing his work in recording and indexing this important information.

Since his second retirement in 1994, he was able to give even more time to military history which was a great interest of his since an early age. Considering his long service in the Royal Artillery, it is not surprising that this interest centred on the Gunners.

He was involved in the research work which resulted in the award of Honour Titles to two Batteries and soon after that was made a member of the Royal Artillery Historical Affairs Committee, which advises the Master Gunner and the Regiment on historical matters. He was also a Trustee of the Royal Artillery Historical Trust which is the governing body of the Regimental Collections. He was the Honorary Archivist of the National Artillery Association (TA affairs) and has done a great deal of work on the history of the Royal Artillery Territorial Army.

He has written short histories of the Orkney and Shetland Volunteers and Territorials and of the National Artillery Association and worked on the unit records of the Royal Regiment of Artillery. He became an authority on Coast Artillery of Great Britain and the Colonial Fortresses. This interest has resulted in published works on the Royal Artillery in Gibraltar and in Hong Kong (The Guns and Gunners of Hong Kong) and his book on Malta, The Guns and Gunners of Malta. His book on Singapore Gunners is held in the Archives, as yet unpublished and another book, a successor to `Laws lists' on the descent of regiments and batteries, still awaits publication.
His work was based solidly on official records and diaries and visits to locations, which took him to Malta a few times to further his research and then returned on a number of occasions on holiday with his family. On one of his earlier visits a meeting was set up with Brig A Samut-Tagliaferro, who at the time did not know Denis and after a slow start he was soon won over and a very warm and interesting exchange took place. He got on famously with Mario Farrugia of Fondazzjoni Wirt Artna (then Din l’Art Helwa). The Foreword for the Guns and Gunners of Malta was written by Dr Vincent Tabone, President of Malta who received him in his house to discuss the book and very readily agreed to write the Foreword. It was a double Foreword with General Sir Martin Farndale, a great military historian in his own right, and who held Denis in very high regard. The launch of the book took place in Malta in November 1999 at Tigne Fort, the one-time Officers’ Mess of 11 Regt RMA(T).

The Royal Regiment of Artillery has recognised his endeavours with the Napier Award in 1973, the Alfred Burne Memorial Award in 1978, 1990, 1992 and 1999, the Lefroy Gold Medal in 1984 and the Royal Artillery Medal in 1994 for outstanding service to the Regiment.

He served the Regiment over some 65 years, and his legacy in the recording and accuracy of Gunner history is immeasurable. He was arguably the best, most prolific historian the Royal Regiment has produced, and we have been fortunate to have him.

Denis's sense of humour and personal charm made him great company.

He is survived by his wife, Nancy, son Bernhard and daughter Brenda, thirteen grand-children and twenty great-grandchildren. He was a much-loved family man and is greatly missed by them all.
At the launch of The Guns and Gunners of Malta, at Tigne Fort; 26 November 1999. From left Lt Col Herbert Abela, President Dr Vincent Tabone, Nancy Rollo and Major Denis Rollo
At the launch of The Guns and Gunners of Malta, at Tigne Fort; 26 November 1999 with Maj. Ronnie Abela (left) and Martin Scicluna (middle)
Examining 9.2 inch gun in the garden of the Vice-Chancellor of the University. No trace of emplacement was found but gun was close to its original location. Hong Kong 18 July 1991.

Experiencing Emplacement Lyemun Barracks, Hong Kong. 18 July 1991
FOREWORD

By

Dr. Vincent Tabbone
President of Malta

The “Guns of Malta” is an important chapter in the history of the Royal Artillery and of the Regiments associated with it. During the British colonial administration of Malta, the Royal Artillery was very closely associated with the Royal Malta Artillery. I was a member of this Regiment between 1939 and 1946, holding an emergency commission as a medical officer. I am not a military expert, and far less one versed in the art of war, but I was in a position to follow closely and to appreciate the day to day work of our gunners, their difficulties, their family problems, but also their little triumphs, their disappointments and their failures. Both in the field and in the hospitals, I shared all this with them.

The men of the Royal Malta Artillery, shared the values and the War objectives of their brothers in arms of the Royal Artillery, and this is why they worked so closely and so well together.

I was stationed at Fort St. Elmo, when it experienced its first bombardment from the air by the Italian Air Force on the 11th June 1940, the day after Mussolini declared war. These were the first bombs of the second World War that fell on Malta, causing the first casualties. We lost five gunners and Boy Busuttil, who were guarding the Harbour Fire Command. Of course, I knew them all, and we felt deeply our baptism of fire. I was also the Fort’s medical officer when our gunners successfully repulsed the famous E. Boat attack on the Grand Harbour. There are many other specific incidents deeply impressed in my memory, during the long and fierce air raids, during the visit of the “Illustrious”, and during the dive-bombing spree by the German Air Force. I particularly remember the widespread and indiscriminate bombing during the last three days before the Luftwaffe withdrew from Sicily to transfer to the Russian front. During one of these raids, I was buried in a slit trench together with others, at the 39 General Hospital in Pembroke; the hospital was put out of action and we had many dead and injured. I was lucky to be brought alive together with all those in my trench. The hospital had to be transferred to Mellieha.

As is well recorded in history, H.M. King George VI became Colonel-in-chief of the Royal Malta Artillery on the 3rd April 1942, “in recognition of the skill and resolution of the Maltese Gunners in their active defence of the Island from the air and from the sea.”

The Royal Malta Artillery served also in Egypt, in Libya and with the British Army of the Rhine before it was disbanded.

The post-War period brought to Malta important changes and important events. First came Independence in 1964, followed by the establishment of the Republic in 1974, and the departure of the British Forces in 1979. The links with the Royal Artillery were continued through the Malta Defence Forces, and such links have been enhanced by the excellent relations that exist between the Governments and the Peoples of Malta and the United Kingdom. It was a moving moment for me when, as President of Malta in 1991, I inaugurated a monument to the war dead of the Royal Malta Artillery outside Valletta. May this book of Denis Rollo contribute to keep alive the history and traditions of the Royal Malta Artillery.
FOREWORD

By

General Sir Martin Farndale KCB

Colonel Commandant Royal Horse Artillery and Colonel Commandant
Royal Artillery

I am delighted to write a Foreword to Denis Rollo’s latest addition to the Annals of the Royal Regiment of Artillery. So far he has provided a professional and detailed analysis of the Guns at Gibraltar and Hong Kong which contain very gallant and important episodes of the History of the Royal Regiment of Artillery. He has now added to this splendid series by writing about the Guns of Malta and hopes to publish a book on the Guns at Singapore in due course.

Once again his detailed analytical research has produced a vitally important addition to our history as Gunners. For the history Malta also contains many gallant and important episodes of the evolution and development of artillery. He traces the story from the arrival of Captain Vivion’s Troop in 1798 to the time of the departure of all British forces from the island in 1977, a hundred and seventy nine years of history and dramatic it is too. A very major part of the story is also that of the Royal Malta Artillery.

Much of the story is also that of the guns themselves and the organisation of the defence of the island in the 18th, 19th and 20th Centuries. The creation of the many forts, the use of artillery against armoured ships and the evolution from muzzle to breech loaders, the disappearing guns, and the early attempts at command and control. Then come the two great World Wars of the 20th Century and the preparations for defence in 1914 which were never tested. But it was the great battles for Malta in World War 2 that will stand in history for ever as an example of the courage and fortitude of the gallant people of those islands. The ferocity of the air attacks were unequalled in war and they lasted for almost a year. The splendid action of the anti-aircraft Gunners of the Royal Artillery and the Royal Malta Artillery will also go down in history as one of their finest hours. The magnificent victory of the coast Gunners against the Italian E Boats when they attacked Grand Harbour set up a record of accurate artillery action seldom exceeded in battle anywhere. And of course the award of the George Cross for the magnificent gallantry by the people of the Islands of Malta.

The story goes on to cover the way the Royal Malta Artillery served in the post war days. The Suez operation training in Libya. The RMA with the British Army of the Rhine and finally the moving and impressive parade which marked the departure of the Royal Artillery from Malta for ever. But the links were never lost, even in difficult political times, and now they are again cemented by alliances between the two Regiments.

The book contains much vital data both in the text and in annexes and many unique photographs which will be of the greatest importance to future students. The story of the Gunners of Malta, both British and Maltese is a splendid story and the great gallantry of those who served and the many who gave their lives must never be forgotten and this book will ensure that this is so. Denis Rollo is again to be congratulated on another great addition to our Regimental archives.