THE BIRTH AND DEMISE OF A REGIMENT

Captain George Pace Balzan, recalls his memories of his army service in the 3rd LAA Regiment Royal Malta Artillery from 1941 to 1946.
When the Allies (England and France) declared war on Germany on September 3, 1939, Malta was not involved, since the theatres of war were the Franco-German and Belgium-German borders. But when Italy entered the war on the German side on the evening of June 10, 1940, matters changed drastically. In fact, Italy started bombing Malta, a British colony, the very next morning.

For its air defence, Malta had three Gloucester Gladiator bi-plane fighter aircraft nicknamed Faith, Hope and Charity, and two Maltese-manned heavy anti-aircraft regiments, namely the 2nd Regiment under the command Lt. Col. S. Borg and the 11th Regiment under the command of Lt. Col. J. Terreni. There were also British heavy anti-aircraft and light anti-aircraft regiments, probably one of each.

The Ministry of Defence in London had thought this was enough to keep the Italian Savoia Marchetti bombers from dropping their bombs on their targets in Malta. The Regia Aeronautica (Italian air force) flew into Malta’s airspace at very high altitudes, and they could only be engaged by heavy anti-aircraft guns and the slow moving Gloucester Gladiators. Because the Italians dropped bombs from 10,000 feet or higher, they seldom hit their intended target and this type of warfare allowed convoys to slip into Malta carrying food and ammunition from the Eastern Mediterranean.

Meanwhile, Germany had invaded Russia in the spring of 1940. The aim here was clear – to take over the oil in the Caucasus. But the German plans failed because of the tough winter weather. The German army could not cope with freezing Russian winter conditions. On the other hand, a large part of the Luftwaffe (the German air force) was transferred to Sicily to defend the Axis’s (German and Italian union) shipping lanes between Italy and North Africa where General Rommel was building his Afrika Korp in Tripoli with the intention of overrunning Egypt and occupying the oil wells of the Middle East. The arrival of the Germans in Sicily coincided with the departure of a large convoy from a UK port.

The convoy was escorted by an even larger naval escort. As the convoy entered the Mediterranean, the Germans and Italians were preparing to meet it south of the Italian island of Pantalleria. In the battle that ensued, a large part of the convoy
and its escort, as well as Axis aircraft and torpedo boats, were destroyed. What was left of the convoy and escort limped into the Grand Harbour on January 16, 1941. In trying to sink what remained of the convoy and its escort in harbour, mainly the aircraft carrier HMS Illustrious, which was berthed at Senglea Point, the German Stukas (JU 87s) dive bombers totally destroyed Senglea and to a large extent also Vittoriosa and Cospicua. This was the point when the British Ministry of Defence realised that more light anti-aircraft guns were required to defend the harbours and airfields from the constantly attacking dive bombers.

Two light anti-aircraft British regiments were rushed to Malta but the Ministry of Defence also decided to raise a Maltese LAA regiment. The third battery that went into the composition of the LAA Regiment was made up of volunteers who had worked in the Dockyard. These men were, however, not formally enlisted. In fact dockyard boiler suits were worn by those on duty, while civilian clothing was worn by workers on their way home. The new battery had no number and was simply referred to as the Dockyard Battery (DDB). After a while, the MOD realised that having civilians manning military equipment in wartime was in fact contravention of the Geneva Convention, so the men of the DDB were offered the option of swearing allegiance to the British Crown and become soldiers or return to their former role – a dockyard worker. Some took the oath of allegiance while others returned to the ‘yard. The vacancies by those returning to the ‘yard were filled by newly conscripted men and thus 30 Battery was formed.

On March 18, 1941, the three batteries, 10th, 22nd, and 30th, under the command of Major E. Sammut Tagliaferro, Major Hannibal Scicluna and Major Cox now became 3rd Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment under the command of Lt. Col. E. Salomone. The new regiment gave the enemy all it had for as long as its planes kept coming over to bomb Malta. At one point, 22nd Battery, the Battery I had the honour to serve in – had logged a proud record of 10 enemy aircraft and one E-Boat among its victims.

When war started to recede from Malta, the MOD started demobilising those men who were not regular soldiers. However, they retained the 10th Battery from the 3rd Regiment, one Battery from the 11th Regiment and 8th Battery from 4th
Searchlight Regiment. These three Batteries became known as Second Composite Regiment, while 3rd and 11th Regiments were put “into suspended animation”.

In 1952, the Ministry of Defence decided to resuscitate the 3rd and 11th Regiments as Territorial Army units. The 3rd Regiment was now rebuilt and made up of 15th, 22nd, and 30th Batteries, the 15th Battery having originally appeared as part of 3LAA Regiment in 1943.

On June 14, 1966, 3rd and 11th Regiments were amalgamated into one regiment which became the 3/11 LAA Regiment RMA(T) under the command of Lt. Col. J.M. Cremona. The regiment, with its last commanding officer Lt Col. M. Petrocochino was formally disbanded on March 31, 1972, in a parade held in the main courtyard of Fort St Elmo.

Thus came the end of the 3rd LAA Regiment, a grand regiment.

(These memoirs were published by the Sunday Times, August 31, 2008.)

Captain George Pace Balzan, always the real gentleman, highly respected by all who knew him, sadly passed away in 2010, he was the last surviving living link with war-time 3rd LAA Regiment. May the Lord grant him eternal rest.
Mr. Walter Debattista, a very close friend of the late Capt. George Pace Balzan, contributed the following:

George Pace Balzan enlisted in the army in 1941 aged 17 and a half and was originally posted to the 8th Searchlight Battery but was transferred to the 22nd Battery of the 3rd Light Anti Aircraft Regiment on request. During the war he served for two years and three months as a Bombardier and two years three months as an Officer.

A poignant incident which George Pace Balzan recalls was the day in July 1943 when the gun detachment crew of which he formed part at the Hal-Far runway. The sergeant, the No.1 of the gun, was on leave that day and George Pace Balzan was acting in his stead. As two German fighter bombers suddenly flew low overhead, the gun detachment opened fire and George vividly recalls seeing the fuselage of the lead aircraft hit five times, causing the aircraft to veer right and crash in a field some 300 yards away. Breaking all regulations, most of the detachment ran to the crash site to collect souvenirs. They were met by a heart breaking scene. The pilot was clearly dead but the navigator behind him was alive and desperately trying to open the jammed cover of the burning aircraft before it explodes and it was dreadful to see the man scorched to death. That is war.
Victor Filletti, Rene Grixti, Walter Debattista with George Pace Balzan

Farewell
George Pace Balzan
2010

Saviour Portelli, Harold Harris, Aldo Micallef and Alex Booker with George Pace Balzan.