Last of the Bofors

by

Lt. Col. Herbert C. Abela, MBE
Introduction

I was encouraged to write about the Last of the Bofors anti-aircraft guns. What makes this interesting and unusual is that here we follow the equipment and not a campaign, formation or unit as one would often do and also that it is about the ‘endex’ phase for Bofors. One does not normally start a story at the end so a little about when Bofors came into service and its use in the British Army would be a good scene setter. Of the overseas stations the article will focus on Malta where there has been a close relationship built between the equipment and the soldiers that served the guns following the epic air defence of the island during the Second World war.

Other armies and navies have also used Bofors and some still do, however, that is outside the scope of this article. My personal experience with Bofors is towards the end of its life in the TA in Malta with 3rd Regiment RMA(T) from 1960 to 1963 as a Gun Number or Layer with two stripes. Later after commissioning into the RMA I ran the radar troop in 2nd Regiment RMA for a few months in 1967 and the last time I was to see Bofors was after my transfer to the Royal Artillery when attending a YO’s Course and visiting Manorbier in 1968. Little did I realise at the time that Bofors was just about on its way out. It was a great piece of equipment which has given stalwart service and was fun firing.

Birth of Bofors

The first basic Bofors gun was produced in Sweden in 1930 and during the war it was used by practically every combatant on either side. In 1937 the British Army placed an order with the Swedish Bofors Company for a batch 100 M/36 40 mm automatic anti-aircraft guns plus a large quantity of ammunition. Shortly afterwards a licence to undertake production in UK was granted and additional orders were obtained from Poland which had already procured the 40 mm for its own use and for export. Between 1937 and 1939, 509 guns
were ordered and a small number of this order, some 18 – 24, were embargoed at the outbreak of war. Great Britain also bought guns from Belgium, Hungary and Poland because Bofors could not deliver within the time limit desired. According to plans the requirement was for 1,000 Bofors guns in 1938 but this was not met.

By 1939 the gun was in service with 18 different countries and the United Kingdom was among ten nations producing them under licence. Germany was not on the list but it was not long before they acquired Bofors first from the Poles and later from the Dutch and British. The Japanese, too, got Bofors by this method as they conquered Dutch colonies. The Battle of Britain and El Alamein were among the major encounters where the gun played a prominent role.

Wartime UK

With losses suffered at Dunkirk UK AA Command only had 273 Bofors guns for the defence of UK in July 1940. A number of guns had also been sent to Malta, Egypt and Syria and later to the Far East. On 15th September 1940 the number of Bofors guns available for AA Command was 502 and increasing but when Japan attacked Pearl Harbour more than 200 guns were sent to USA and also a large number to Singapore. By September 1942 AA Command had 1,414 Bofors guns and another 142 were delivered in October 1942. By the end of the war total production from British, Canadian, and Australian factories was over 2,100, while U.S. lend-lease added about 150.

The 40 mm Bofors automatic anti-aircraft gun became the standard anti-aircraft gun for the British Commonwealth during World War 2 and was also manufactured in Canada and USA, where it was known as the 40 mm Anti-aircraft Gun MkI. The 40 mm was also used by the Royal Navy in both single and twin mounts. The following ammunition was used: AP (armour-piercing) which could penetrate 52 mm of armour at 457 metres
or 42 mm at 914 metres; or an HE projectile weighing 0.9 kg with a muzzle velocity of 853 metres per second.

Wartime Malta

Bofors played an important part in the air defence of Malta(i). In May 1942 there were 11 batteries with 129 Bofors deployed in the light air defence of Malta and in July 1943 prior to the allied landings in Sicily there were 20 batteries of Bofors in Malta and at that time a battery would have 12 guns but five batteries had 18 guns making a total of 270 Bofors.

Post War

After the war Britain continued to protect airfields and installations with Bofors and production continued with constant updating and improvements. The weapon was superseded in the British Army by the 40 mm L/70 automatic anti-aircraft gun in 1957 when 16 AD Regiment Royal Artillery was equipped with L40/70, with its three batteries having a total of 18 guns. The L/70 had entered service with the Swedish Army in 1951 and was manufactured under licence in various countries including UK.

There were two basic models Type A and Type B. Type B had a three phase 220 volt 50 Hz APU mounted on the rear of the carriage and Type A was fed from an external power source. A high rate of 300 rounds per minute was achieved through ramming the rounds during run out. It had five types of ammunition for anti-aircraft and anti-armour roles. The Pre-Fragmented HE round (PFHE) had a proximity fuze with an effective range of 6.5 metres against aircraft and the improved Mk2 could effectively double this figure. Flight time to 1,000 metres was 1.1 seconds and 4,000 metres 4.4 seconds.
Post War Operations

Bofors was deployed four times on operations by the British Army after the War and its going out of service and that was during the Korean War 1950 – 1953, The Suez Crisis of 1956, Aden Protectorate 1962 – 1964 and The Borneo Confrontation 1962 – 1966. The Korean War saw the deployment of 120th Light Anti-Aircraft (LAA) Battery, Royal Artillery, (October 1951 – December 1952) and 42nd Lt AA Battery RA, Royal Artillery, (November 1951 – February 1952) as part of the 1st Commonwealth Division.

In 1956 during the Suez Crisis Bofors was deployed to Egypt, Libya and Cyprus. 31 Battery, 34 LAA Regiment RA was sent to Egypt from UK and while it did deploy not a single shot was fired, arriving a day or so after the Cease Fire was declared; 80 LAA Regiment RA deployed to Libya (Tripoli and Benghazi) from Malta. In addition to 43 LAA Regiment RA, which was already in Cyprus, 16 LAA Regiment RA deployed to Cyprus from UK. In October 1962 11 (Sphinx) Battery, 34 Lt Air Defence (AD) Regiment RA was deployed with two 6-gun troops of Bofors to Aden, following the violation of Aden’s airspace and an attack on the Emir’s Palace.

This fast deployment acted as a deterrent and 11 (Sphinx) Battery RA reported that: Unfortunately the only aircraft seen were friendly. 11 (Sphinx) Battery RA was replaced by 58 (Ayres) Battery RA of the same Regiment. An air defence presence was maintained with the support of elements from T (Shah Sujah’s Troop) Bty RA, 12 Lt AD Regiment RA until 1964.

The last operational deployment of Bofors by the British Army was during the Borneo (Indonesian–Malaysian) Confrontation, December 1962 to August 1966. UK already had 12 Lt AD Regiment RA stationed in West Malaysia at the start of the Confrontation; with T (Shah Sujah’s Troop) and 9 (Plassey) Lt AD Batteries.
The batteries rotated between Tampin (Malay Peninsula) and Kuching airfield in Borneo, equipped with L40/70 Bofors and Radar Fire Control Equipment 7 (FCE 7), a large radar set used for target acquisition and tracking. Last but not least was the noisy diesel powered generator which ran for 24 hours a day supplying the power for the equipment and also for the Sub accommodation, command post, cookhouse and that most important of places - the bar for those off duty!

I did find out in 1967 that the radar with its air conditioning was also a good substitute for a fridge and that earned one a number of friends. 12 Lt AD Regiment RA reported in Gunner in 1964: The Kuching commitment is a taxing one, involving round the clock readiness, but morale remains high despite the fact that the battery has yet to have an engagement. It is something to know that the object of the exercise is being achieved for as long as the enemy aircraft do not show up. 12 Lt AD Regiment RA returned to BAOR in May 1966.

In June 1964, 111 LAA Battery Royal Australian Artillery equipped with Bofors L40/60 guns deployed from Australia to RAAF Butterworth near Penang, close to the Thai border. In September 1964, 22 Lt AD Regiment RA with two batteries 42 (Alem Hamza) Lt AD Bty RA and 53 (Louisburg) Lt AD Bty RA arrived from BAOR (Hubbelrath, Germany) to defend RAF Changi and Seletar in Singapore, and 11 (Sphinx) Lt AD Battery RA of 34 Lt AD Regt RA arrived to defend Kuching airfield with batteries rotated through Kuching for the next two years.

All of the UK batteries were equipped with Bofors 40/70 guns and FCE 7 radar. 53 (Louisburg) Lt AD Bty RA then undertook a further tour to ensure stability in the region in 1966 to Tampin and Kuching, Borneo.

16 Lt AD Regiment RA replaced 22 Lt AD Regiment RA in March 1965, working with 12 Lt AD Regiment on individual battery tasks. 16 Lt AD Regiment RA deployed from BAOR, Germany in March 1965 for a 30 month tour of Singapore and Borneo with 30 (Rogers's Company) Lt AD Bty RA and 32
(Minden) Lt AD Bty RA. Within six hours of stepping off the aircraft men of 30 Roger’s Company were manning the guns of the air defences of Changi airfield having relieved detachments of 22 Lt AD Regiment RA.

The daily manning and training routine at Changi started at 04.30 hrs and went on until stand to after 19.15 hrs and combined with keeping 50% of the guns manned 24 hours a day and patrolling local islands. 32 (Minden) Lt AD Bty RA was equally slick in taking over the defences of Selatar Airfield. At the end of April 1965 30 Roger’s Company took over the defence of Kuching Airfield.

Each battery carried out two operational tours at RAF Changi, Singapore and RAF Kuching, Borneo. The Regiment was equipped with L40/70 Bofors and FCE 7 radars. The Regiment returned to the UK in November 1966.

16 Lt AD Regiment RA was tasked with the low-level air defence of RAF airfields, to counter the threat of attacks on Malaysia and Singapore by Indonesia. For the period from 23 March 1965 until 2 June 1966 16 Lt AD Regiment RA was continuously on "10 minute alert". This was the longest duration of action maintained in the Far East of any unit. Although the threat was chiefly from the Indonesian Air Force it inevitably included a ground defence aspect. In addition to its air defence role the Kuching deployment included patrolling jungle and riverside villages and mounting vehicle escorts.

In November 1966, the guns and equipment were loaded at Singapore docks for the voyage home, and 16 Lt AD Regiment RA flew back to the UK for its new posting at Barton Stacey. There is no evidence of Bofors engaging or even sighting enemy aircraft during the Confrontation. Thus ended the last operational deployment of Bofors in the British Army.
Malta post War

Post war there were various re-organisations in Malta and in 1951 the scale for AA defences was for five LAA Regiments and the manning of 54 LAA guns. The Chiefs of Staff Committee approved scales for air defence of Malta at 5 HAA regiments and 5 LAA regiments. At full strength this could not be achieved with available RA and RMA resource. It was, therefore, proposed to reform the Malta Territorial Force in September 1951 as 3 LAA Regiment RMA(T) and 11 HAA Regiment RMA(T) When integrated at full strength it would be possible to meet HAA requirements and deploy 54 LAA Bofors.

There was a flurry of activity in Malta in 1956 during the Suez crisis which resulted in the AA units being deployed and issued with live ammunition soon after the Anglo French Forces started to land in Egypt on 5 November 1956.

As part of this deployment Bofors guns were deployed by 80th LAA Regt RA at Luqa airport having taken the guns out of heavy care and preservation overnight. Pat Stacpoole recounts: I was troop commander of B Troop, 34 (Seringapatam) LAA Battery, 80 LAA in Malta 1956 – 1958. Russian IL 28 bombers were seen over Turkey and at 8.30 pm the Regiment was told to be in action defending RAF Luqa by dawn. The guns were in heavy preservation. By working throughout the night they were all made ready, fully charged with ammunition and stores uncrated.

In 1957 11 HAA Regt RMA(T) changed to the LAA role while 3 LAA Regt RMA(T) had been in the Bofors role since 1951 and by 1959 we also find the two regular RMA Regiments, 1 LAA Regt RMA and 2 LAA Regt RMA in the LAA role each with 3 batteries of six guns armed with Bofors L40/60 which was power controlled for elevation and traverse and needed only one layer.
10 LAA Bty, which was an independent battery, had converted from searchlight duties to the LAA role around 1954 and manned Bofors until its disbandment in September 1958. In 1960 the old L60 Bofors were exchanged for the new 40/70 AA L3 all power controlled and their power supplied by generators. In 1961 an announcement was made that 1 LAA Regt RMA was to serve in Germany in the transport role in support of 7 Arty Bde and to relinquish its LAA role and 1 Regt RMA moved to Germany in 1962.

2 LAA Regt RMA retained its LAA role with Bofors and took on an operational role in the Near East (standby role for Cyprus for which training was carried out in Libya).

Apart from training and doing practice camps in Malta the RMA undertook the Libya training mentioned above. 2 LAA Regt RMA trained in Libya in 1959, 1960 and 1964. 2 LAA Regt’s deployment in September/October 1964 was the last RMA overseas training exercise and the last time the RMA Bofors deployed outside Malta.

Brig Rupert Montanaro recalls: This exercise involved Regtl HQ and a LAA Bty. We were landed in Tripoli, camped for a short while in Tarhuna, then proceeded in convoy along the coast road to Benghazi / Tobruk, (thus also training for a BAOR role), ending up with a night deployment / occupation of El Adem airfield. After a few days we proceeded to a ground live-firing range behind the Gebel Ahdar, where we had a visit from Gen Johnny Frost (GOC Malta - of Arnhem fame), who was particularly interested in the use of the weapon in the ground role. The weapon proved accurate and very effective at ranges up to 800/900 yds, using solid shot. We then carried on behind the Gebel to El Mecheli, and finally round to Benghazi for our return to Malta.
RMA End Game

Early in 1968, 2nd Regt RMA handed over its LAA operational role. It reorganised in preparation for its new role in the Malta Land Force reducing to two batteries of which 6 Bty retained the artillery role and 7 Bty that of an infantry company. On 10th February 1970, 1st Regt RMA ceased its operational role in Germany. 2 LAA Regt RMA disbanded on 12th April 1970 and its men became part of 1st Regt RMA which took over its role. 1 Bty had the artillery role and 3 Bty the infantry role. 1st Regt RMA left the British Army at the 26th September 1970 parade.

On 26th September 1970, 1st Regt RMA held a Farewell Parade at the Independence Arena Floriana. The parade was under the command of Lt Col W J Attard RMA and the Master Gunner St James's Park General Sir Robert Mansergh took the salute.

1970 Malta Land Force

The Royal Malta Artillery ceased to appear in the Army List after 1st October 1970, ending 170 years of integrated service with the British Army and the Royal Artillery in peace and war. In August 1970, Malta established its own Armed Forces and from 1st October 1970, 500 officers and men of the Royal Malta Artillery ceased to form part of the British Army. The RMA became integrated with the Malta Land Force.

The Territorial Army also went through restructuring. On the formation of the Malta Land Force on 1st April 1965 the three units that formed the Territorial Force of Malta were transferred from the British Army to the Malta Government. Soon after, the Authorities realised that the role and structure of the Territorial Artillery Regiments within the Malta Territorial Force had become untenable. A decision was taken to amalgamate 3 LAA Regiment RMA(T) and 11 LAA Regiment RMA(T) and this took place on 14th June 1966 with the new Regiment titled 3/11 Lt AD Regt RMA(T).
The new Regiment carried on in its Bofors LAA role and in an article on 3/11 Regiment RMA(T) News(ii) Major R P Abela RMA reported: This year’s training camp took place in Ghajn Tuffieha in early July [1969] and for a fortnight the whole unit lived and trained together carrying out LAA deployments, firing practice shoots and brushing up on many other aspects of military training.

In a further newsletter of June 1970(iii) Major Abela reported: The major events during camp include a light Air Defence deployment for 20 and 30 Batteries, a regimental deployment, and a seaward shoot from Torri Qalet Marku range. Civil Defence training also featured – this shows that the Bofors were still active in the Regiment in June/July 1970. However, there is no evidence of any firing by the Regiment after this.

The Malta Land Force organisation as at September 1970 still had Bofors and the orbat was:

HQ & Signal Section
1 RMA
HQ Bty
1 Bty Lt AD (Bofors)
3 Bty Infantry
Log units (Engineer Tp, Electrical & Mechanical Engineering Tp, Ordnance Section)
RMA Band
3/11 Lt AD Regt RMA(T) which included Bofors
1st Bn King’s Own Malta Regt (T)

The Labour Administration of Dom Mintoff disbanded the Malta Territorial Force with effect from 1st April 1972. 3/11 Lt AD Regt RMA(T) disbanded in April 1972, having become part of the Malta Land Force in April 1965. On 26th March 1972 the farewell parade of 3/11 Regt RMA(T) was held at Upper St Elmo when its guns were handed over to the Commander Malta Land Force (Brig G V Micallef).
A final Regimental Guest Night was held in the Officers’ Mess of 3/11 Lt AD Regt RMA (T) at their mess at Sliema Point Bty on 11th March 1972.

A reorganisation occurred on 5th May 1972 when the Emergency Labour Corps was formed. Under the new organisation HQ Bty established a Maintenance Troop and took over the guns from 1 Bty which re-roled as a Maritime Bty.

Evarist Saliba recollects that the Bofors could still be deployed in some form in 1973–74 and confirmed this in conversation with Colonel John Spiteri around the same time. In 1973 or '74, an Israeli gunboat had entered Marsaxlokk (or Marsascala) without any permission, because of very heavy seas and was ordered to leave but ignored the order. The stand-off continued for some hours, until the Israelis felt they could face the rough seas again. He believes that a Bofors gun should have been deployed in the area as a deterrent to elicit compliance. A warning shot would have elicited greater cooperation and some respect and he was confident that a serviceable gun would have been available but no deployment took place.

On 1st May 1976 a restructuring created the Armed Forces of Malta (AFM) and the title Royal Malta Artillery fell out of use and the structure did not have any artillery in it. The political aim was to break with the past but at least the gun in the cap badge was to remain(iv). While the new organisation did not have a gun battery the Bofors guns were retained and a number of guns were actually deployed at Luqa airport up to, as late as, the mid-eighties.

Farewell to Bofors in UK

As the British Army reduced in size after the War so did the LAA regiments and from dozens and dozens of wartime units the number of regular units came to three in the 70s namely 12 Lt
AD Regiment RA, 16 Lt AD Regiment RA and 22 Lt AD Regiment RA.

Bofors survived within the British Army until 1979. The arrival of the Rapier anti-aircraft missile, along with the inability to have a costly gun – missile mix, saw the gradual phasing out of Bofors and 30 AD Battery (Rogers Company) RA, 16 AD Regiment RA was the last sub-unit in the British Army to retain them. Soldier Magazine reports on the Farewell Parade to Bofors in its May 1979 edition, in its article ‘Bang Goes the Bofors’. The ceremony took place at Kirton in Lindsay in Lincolnshire. Four Lightning Jets from RAF Binbrook swept overhead in a last salute as the Lord Provost of Glasgow (the Battery is 80% Scottish) carried out an inspection of the men and guns on parade. The guns then fired eight rounds of breakup shot in quick succession from each gun and with shell cases bouncing over the concrete – it was their farewell after serving the British Army for 40 years. GOC NE District and Mr Hodge took the salute as the troops marched off.

Malta Bofors

With the RMA Bofors fading into the background in 1976 and the British Army bidding farewell in 1979 one would have expected Bofors to have been retired beyond this point in Malta. This was not the case and 1979 saw the revival of Bofors in Malta.

In 1978 2nd (Engineer) Regiment AFM undertook the repair of the four Mk 7 Tactical Control radars and then were given the task of getting the 40 mm L70 Bofors into firing order. The guns had been laid up for seven years but the task was achieved in very short time. There were lots of eager hands and the Bofors were not left idle after this – drill books were dug out and a Nos 1 Course took place culminating in a seawards shoot at St Patrick’s Field Firing Range which included firing at signal parachute flares as targets. Gun Numbers Courses followed in 1979. This appears to be the period when Bofors was last fired in
Malta. At some stage around this period Bofors were assigned to the defence of Luqa Airport. At the time of the ill-fated highjack(v) of the Egypt Air passenger aircraft of 23rd November 1985 AFM troops were assigned to the Bofors guns which were then permanently positioned around Luqa airfield.

In May 1988 the Armed Forces of Malta were once more restructured and amalgamated with the Task Force. AFM covered the three environments, land, air and sea, and in October 2005 it was reported to have consisted of 1,600 officers and men and made up of a HQ and three regiments, with 2 Regiment’s role that of maintenance of Malta’s airspace, maritime and territorial integrity.

2 Regiment had an air defence battery at the time which was equipped with Bofors and ZSU-4 machine guns; other subunits had boats and aircraft. Bofors being the 40L/70 operated manually or powered and supported by radar. In the late nineties the Malta Land Force was presented with a Battery’s worth of Bofors complete with fire control equipment by the Italian Army as they phased out the weapon.

In August 2007 the AFM concluded a major reorganisation(vi) to better tackle its tasks and those stemming from EU membership. AFM restructured into a HQ and five individual units. 2 Regiment was disbanded and 1 Regiment took on the Bofors air defence element known as the Air Defence and Support Company on top of its infantry role. It was noted at the time that this was a period of transition for air defence as Bofors was aging and a new weapon system needed to be identified, spelling the retirement of Bofors in Malta.

Today 1 Regiment still exists and consists of a Regimental Headquarters, Headquarters Company, 'A' Company, 'B' Company, 'C' (Special Duties) Company, and the Air Defence and Fire Support Company(vii) (note same as 2007). The ZPU-4 14.5mm Anti-Aircraft Machine Gun still features but there is no trace of Bofors. One has to assume that Bofors, like old soldiers, never die but fade away.
Acknowledgements:
Contributions from: Brig Rupert Montanaro, Lt Col Pat Stacpoole, Maj Denis Rollo, Maj Ronnie Abela, Capt Evarist Saliba, Capt Alex Abela, Capt Saviour Portelli, Capt Patrick Caruana-Dingli, Colin W Robinson, Mick Clazie, Paul Evans


i. This is well documented in The Guns and Gunners of Malta by Denis Rollo (Mondial Publishers 1999)
ii. The Royal Malta Artillery Journal No 1 of December 1969
iii. The Royal Malta Artillery Journal No 3 of June 1970
iv. rationale is that by then this badge had established itself as representing the Maltese Military entity, incorporating proud traditions, associations and achievements. While this heritage was based on 170 years of artillery service from this point it did not signify that the Force had artillery or otherwise. Thus the retained gun within the cap badge was to survive numerous reorganisations and role changes between 1976 to the present day.
v. On 23rd November 1985, an Egypt Air hijacked airplane landed in Malta. The 24-hour ordeal ended in a massacre with 62 people dead when Egyptian commandos stormed the plane. Only one of the three hijackers survived and was brought to justice.
vi. AFM On Parade Journal September 2007
vii. In 2013 The Air Defence and Support Company (ADFS) Company is tasked with providing combat support to the Force. It is responsible for generating dedicated fire support by deploying mortars, heavy machine guns or anti-tank weapons as required. The company has the additional capability of providing point ground based air defence. The ADFS Company has an additional role as it doubles up as 1st Regiment’s training cadre; with the Emergency Volunteer Reserve Force (EVRF) also falling under its command.
L40/60 Wartime Bofors gun at Fire Power The Royal Artillery Museum, Woolwich (Herbert C Abela).

Godwin Hampton comments: The gun in the photo is from one of the original orders placed with Sweden and supplied from Swedish, Polish or Hungarian sources. Later in the War it was upgraded by having the Stiffkey sight and the armour shields fitted.
Wartime Bofors 40 mm/L60. This example includes the British-designed Stiffkey Sight, being operated by the aimer standing to the right of the loader (turned sideways). It operates the trapeze seen above the sights, moving the sights to adjust for lead.

Godwin Hampton comments: This is a self-propelled Bofors L60 on a Morris Commercial C9/B, with the truck dug in or covered to make detection from the air more difficult.
Wartime Bofors 40 mm /L60 in the desert.

Godwin Hampton comments: A British-produced Bofors gun, on the Mk 2 platform with 9.00-13 balloon tyres. Here it has been hastily deployed 'in action on wheels'. Normally two outriggers would be inserted in the platform sides, the gun raised on the 4 jacks, the wheels and axles removed, and the jacks lowered to level the platform and provide a much more stable base for the gun.
Godwin Hampton comments: A post war development. Traverse and elevation were effected by battery-powered electric motors and controlled by one layer using a joy-stick. The reflector sight was introduced on this model, the No. 12 (the Bristol Bofors) and carried on to the L70. The generator on the back of the loader’s platform was used to recharge the batteries. Note the outriggers in place and the wheels and axles removed.
Reflector Sight on L40/70 No 12 (Royal Artillery Library)

1958 - Mark 12 Bofors 40 mm L60
B Tp Bdr Wright’s detachment, Troop officer is 2/Lt John Oliver. Detachment 34 (Seringapatam) LAA Bty RA at Luqa in 1956 (Pat Stacpoole)

B Troop, 34 (Seringapatam) LAA Bty RA deployed around Luqa during Suez Crisis 1956 (Pat Stacpoole)
10 Bty RMA Practice Camp Torri Qalet Marku – Sgt Briffa’s Detachment April 1958 (Ronnie Abela)

Bdr Dimech’s Detachment at AA Practice Camp at Torri Qalet Marku, Malta in April 1958 (Ronnie Abela). Sponging out the barrel after it has been removed from the gun.
Target engagement drill at Tigne Barracks late 50s (RMA Journal)

Godwin Hampton comments: It could also be operated without power from the Meadows generator. In fact here it is being operated at 'hand control' as both the gun-layers are in their seats and no cables are connected.

3LAA Regt. RMA(T) Drill Night at St Elmo (Alex Abela)
Gun Maintenance Tarhuna Barracks Square, Libya - November 1959 (Ronnie Abela).

Gun Group at Tarhuna Barracks, November 1959 (Ronnie Abela - also in photo).
Herbert Abela comments: Israeli Gun Boat Incident.

3/11 Regt RMA(T) and the author are pleased that the article has generated additional information and comments. The entry on the Israeli Gun Boat incident was included as it both identified that Bofors were still available to the AFM at the time and that they were in some form of reasonable order and probably under light care and preservation. It is an area of interest and worth expanding on in view of information that has now come to light.

The incident occurred on 30 Nov/ 1 Dec 1973 and involved two gunboats. The anchorage location was in the area of Xrobb il Ghagin (il Hofra il Kbira, near Delimara) and not Marsascala or Marsaxlokk.

The Times of Malta reported on this incident on 3rd December 1973 and this stated:

“Israeli Assurance to Government on Gun Boat Incident – by staff reporter. The Israeli Embassy yesterday gave an assurance to the Malta Government that the two Israeli gunboats which had entered Maltese territorial waters last Friday did so in ‘good faith’. The Embassy said that clarification and more information had been sought from the Israeli High Command. The gunboats had to seek shelter at Delimara due to a fierce gale. It was reported that the gunboats, equipped with sophisticated missiles, had entered Delimara port without permission and that a patrol boat of the Malta Armed Services had approached the boats and sought an explanation. It is understood that one of the boats was on tow, and at one time listing. The patrol boat and two helicopters escorted the gun boats out of territorial waters some time later.

It was also reported that Mr Mintoff, the Prime Minister, had gone to the Army barracks at Delimara to watch closely the surveillance operation.”

It does not appear that the Israeli gunboats contravened International Maritime Law, however, normal courtesies do not seem to have been observed. The weather conditions were terrible, gale force plus. Consequently, the vessels had right of shelter in terms of International Maritime Law, particularly since the smaller of the two vessels required refuelling from the larger. They would have required appropriate clearance from the Maltese authorities if they required to actually enter any port - which they did not.
Normal courtesy for military vessels for anchoring in territorial waters would have been to notify the Port Authorities but this was not obligatory.

The tactics as to whether a show of force through deploying a Bofors gun would have been the right course of action is a subject of debate. It is acknowledged that there are differences of opinion as to what should or could have been done. Those who were close to the incident at the time are better able to judge. What is clear is that the AFM played their part in sending out its own patrol vessel. “An AFM patrol boat, Swift Class - 51 foot, under command of Major ‘Sunny’ Muscat, with Capt Edward Xuereb as 2/i/c, somehow managed to sail out of Grand Harbour and get to the anchorage. They were invited on board, and confirmed the status as reported above.”

The AFM officers were impressed with the potent weaponry the two vessels carried. The AFM Swift Class boat was armed with twin .50" Browning Machine guns amidships and an 81mm Mortar, with a co-ax .50 Browning, astern.

An interesting episode which at the time may have raised questions on defence plans and the role of Bofors, however while there might have been post-incident related activity, nothing on these lines has come to light.

10 December 2013
Evarist Saliba comments:

1. The Israeli gunboats did need to seek shelter in those sea conditions.
2. The Israeli gunboats had no sinister intention in sheltering in Malta's internal waters, but that did not constitute "an innocent right of passage" in terms of international law, thus justifying the absence of notification to the government of Malta.
3. The Israeli government had every reason to suspect that Mintoff would have availed himself of the opportunity to create an incident to curry favour with Gaddafi.
4. In fact, Mintoff did just that by ordering me to meet Gaddafi to seek support for a common security front against the "intruders".
5. Having said that, the Israeli rebuff to the government of Malta could not be ignored.
6. The deployment of a Bofors gun in the light of (5) would have signified to a reasonable person that we were prepared, within our means, not to be bullied.
7. It would have been in nobody's interest to escalate the "confrontation", and that includes the Israelis who were being offered better shelter.
8. In my discussion with John Spiteri, years later, we went over this incident and he opined that a show of limited action, like the deployment of a Bofors gun, would have helped to show that we were not totally impotent. To what extent this had been considered by Mintoff, I do not know, but I am ready to believe that, with all his bluff, Mintoff, who had no experience in military matters, would not have dared to challenge Israel in that way.
9. His approach to me as recounted in my book shows his tactics. He stopped short from telling me what happened once I let him know that I had seen what Xandir Malta had reported, something which would have already been made known to Gaddafi, and he tailored his instructions to corroborate what had been made public.

7 December 2013
53 (Louisburg) Bty RA at Menden in 1958 (RA Library).
L40/70 AA No 12 deployed with radar (RA Library). L40/70 AA No 12 deployed with radar (RA Library).

Comparing Bofors with Rapier (Saviour Portelli / Soldier Magazine)
Bofors at Luqa at the time of the Egypt Air Highjack (Rupert Montanaro)

Herbert Abela comments: At the time, early 90s, 1 Bty (AD) which formed part of 2 Composite Regt AFM had three troops of 6 Bofors each (total 18 Bofors) and a troop of ten 14.5 ZSU-4 machine guns.

Martin Galea comments: The last Bofors shoot. 04th May 2005.
Martin Galea comments: With a nasty bite, Bofors 40/70 still in its emplacement within the Luqa Airport perimeter. 22 January 2014.

Malta Air Defence during World War 2. Painting by Patrick Caruana-Dingli