

## **Revisiting the Italian MT Boat attack on Malta's Grand Harbour on the 26<sup>th</sup> of July 1941**

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## Abstract

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<b>Research/Project Title</b>  Revisiting the Italian MT Boat attack on Malta's Grand Harbour on the 26th of July 1941		<b>Number of words excluding abstract, references and appendices - 5604</b>
<p>The failed attack by Italian naval special forces using explosive motor torpedo boats and manned torpedoes on Malta's Grand Harbour on the 26th of July 1941 was one of the highlights of Malta's Second World War History and the most well-known attempt to attack the Maltese harbours from the sea during the war. This long essay sought to revisit the event and evaluate how the actions of the key participants contributed to the success of the defenders and the failure of the attack. The contribution of the well-planned defences, the role of the gunners, most of them Maltese, as well as the Italian attackers' strategy, were analysed. The sequence of events that led to the attack's failure was reviewed through a selection of publications and reports which narrated the story from both the perspective of the attackers and that of the defenders. As a basis for the research, interviews were carried out with eminent researchers and experts in the field. The author also carried out site inspections of the main defences involved in the event to understand the impact of the weaponry placed in these strategic locations around the Grand Harbour together with the complex system of observation and communication used to coordinate the defences. As a result, several interesting facts and conclusions have been brought to light, giving the account a new perspective. Based on these findings, a guided tour of the still-existing Grand Harbour defences has been designed. This tour offers participants a detailed account of what happened in different locations around the attacked areas from both the attackers' and defenders' perspectives. The possibility of further tour itineraries has also been evaluated to enhance the experience including a seaborne tour for those wishing to experience the perspective from the side of the attackers.</p>		
<b>Keywords</b> WWII, Malta Grand Harbour, Operazione Malta 2, Italian e-Boat attack, Fort St Elmo		

## Declaration of Authenticity



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26th of July 1941

### Declaration:

I hereby declare that this research study is based on the outcome of my research. I, as the author, declare that this research study is my composition which has not been previously produced for any other qualification.

The research study was conducted under the supervision of Mr Martin Debattista, senior academic at ITS.

*29<sup>th</sup> January 2023*

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Date

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Student's Signature

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## 1. Introduction

Much has been written about Malta's pivotal role in World War II and several significant events from that period are celebrated. The attack on Malta's Grand Harbour by Italian Naval Commandos on the 26<sup>th</sup> of July 1941, is a well-known but rarely commemorated event and its 80th anniversary in 2021 fell right into the Covid gap in local public activities. This is a pity as this event symbolizes both the skill and courage of the Maltese gunners as well as the effectiveness of the Grand Harbour defences against the only attack ever attempted from the sea during this conflict.

One of the objectives of this essay is to address this gap and create a better awareness of what occurred just outside Malta's Grand Harbour on the 26<sup>th</sup> of July 1941. The evidence of the attack, dubbed *Operazione Malta 2* by the Italian attack fleet named the *Decima Flotilla MAS*, is ever present in the remnants of the 1919 bridge across the Grand Harbour's breakwater. In 2012 a new bridge, vaguely reminiscent of the original was installed over the gap, however, the central column of the original structure remains visible as a poignant testimony to the event. Following the successful defence by the islands' military forces, details of the attack were the subject of several British Top-Secret military documents, many of which were only released for public viewing in 1972. Subsequently, researchers and historians have delved into these and other documents as well as biographies and publications to piece together an intricate story of military strategy, defensive tactics and untold bravery and personal sacrifice by many of the protagonists, to place it firmly on the itinerary of visits of WWII sites in Malta.



Fig. 1.1 The breakwater viaduct before the attack (left), with one span, collapsed immediately after the attack (right). Note the fallen girders of the outer span creating a further obstruction to the passage. The

nets hanging from the girders are also still visible and reach the seabed. (Maj Tony Abela, *The Times of Malta*, 23rd July 2016).



Fig 1.2 a & b. The remains of the central legs that used to support the viaduct linking St Elmo Point to the breakwater. In 2012 a new bridge was built linking the span. (Maj Tony Abela in *The Times of Malta* 24<sup>th</sup> July 2016).

## 2.0 Literature Review

In 1991, Joseph Caruana, a researcher in Maltese maritime and naval history, published an article in the *Warship International* titled '*Decima Flotilla Decimated*' and in this, he goes into the details of the attack from both the Italian perspective as well as from that of the defenders. He followed up in 2004 with his book, *The Battle of Grand Harbour*, by going into newfound detail and filling in a lot of the gaps in the published history of the attack.

This book delivers an accurate account of how the attack developed, references are made to serious failings in consideration and knowledge of the attack area, it also addresses the defenders' preparedness, aided by top secret information via intercepted Ultra messages, as well as unprecedented experimental radar effectiveness. These two publications provided the author with the basis of the story of the attack as outlined in the next section of this essay.

### 2.1 The Plan of Attack by the Italian 10<sup>th</sup> Flotilla MAS

In his 2004 book, Caruana charts the history of the development of the unit that attacked Malta's Grand Harbour in July 1941 from its formation in WWI. He refers to the successful raids of its predecessors in 1918 leading to the formation of the unit codenamed *Decima Flotilla MAS (X-MAS)* in March 1941. He relates how Malta's Grand Harbour had been in the sights of the Italian Navy since those early days. As a major British Naval base, it consistently offered a good selection of targets for an attack but was known to be heavily defended and difficult to penetrate.

According to Caruana the success of the March 1941 attack on Suda Bay, in Crete, which destroyed the British heavy cruiser *York* and damaged the tanker *Pericles* using motorboat (MT) explosive boats paved the way for an attack on Malta's Grand harbour.

Caruana describes in some detail the unsuccessful attempts of the *Decima Flotilla MAS* of the beginning of June 1941, and of the night of the 27<sup>th</sup> of June 1941, codenamed *Operazione Malta*, spoiled by the rough seas.



He then moves to the story of the 3<sup>rd</sup> attempt, codenamed *Operazione Malta Due*, and planned for the dawn of Saturday 26th July 1941. According to Caruana the flotilla now included a mother ship, the gunboat *Diana*, to transport nine MT explosive boats and two manned torpedoes to within striking distance of the entry to Malta's Grand Harbour. Two larger MTBs (Motor Torpedo Boats), MAS 451 and MAS 452 and a smaller MTS (a smaller Torpedo Boat) also accompanied the fleet for protection during the attack phase.

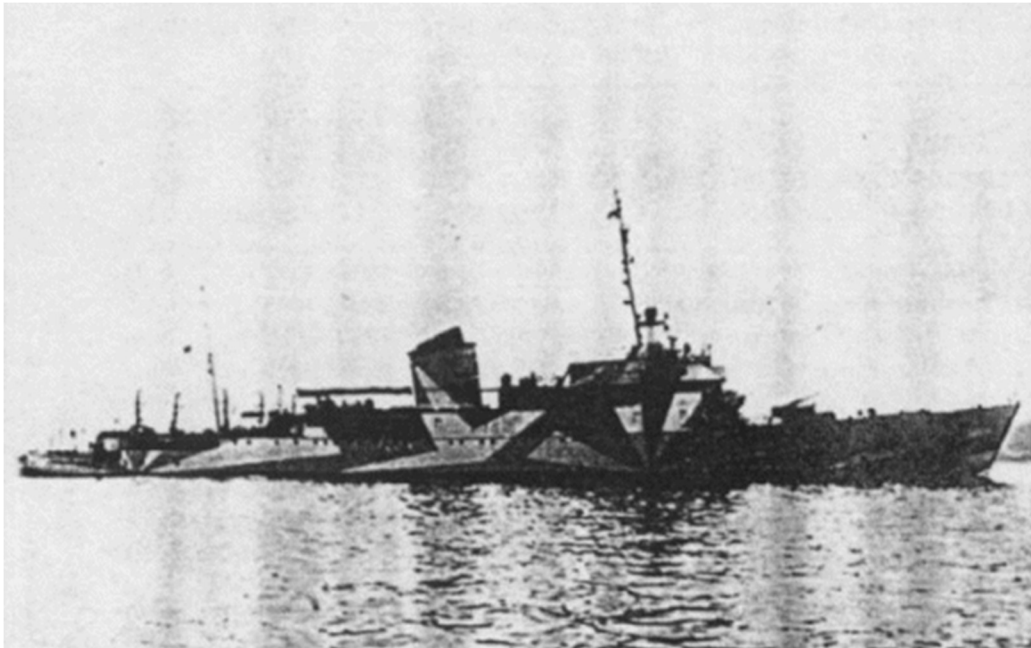


Fig 2.1 The Aviso (Gun Boat Mothership) Diana which carried the 9 MTs and 1 MTS and towed the MTL (Caruana, 2004, p. 25)

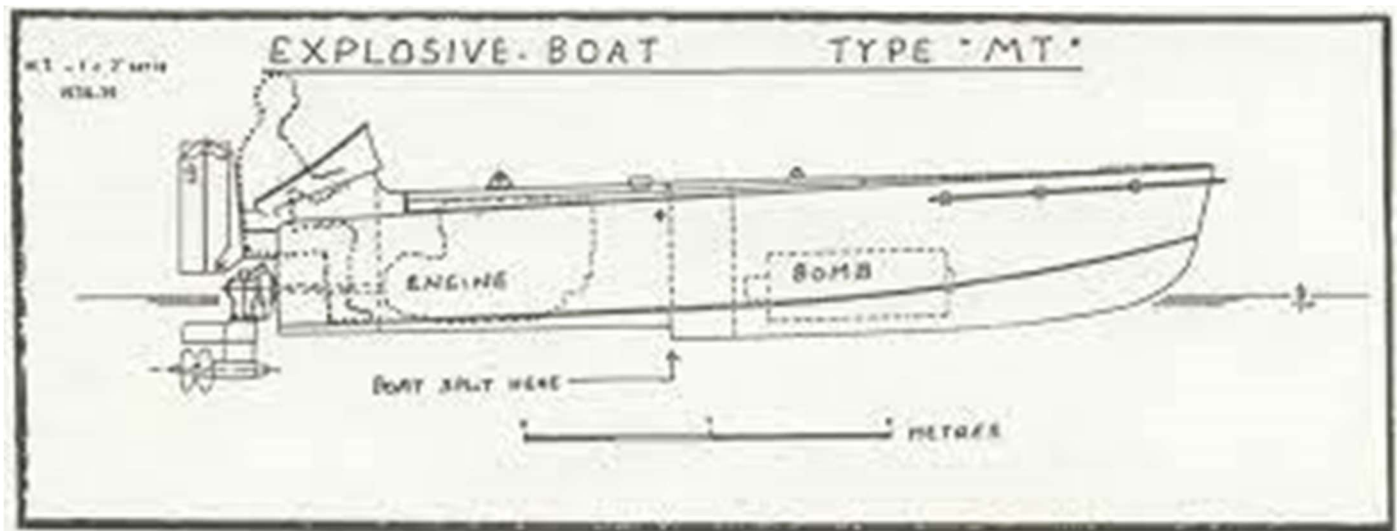


Fig 2.2 The MT, (Motoscafo Turismo) Explosive Boat (Caruana, 2004, p.13)



Fig 2.3 MAS 451(larger MTB) (Caruana, 2004, p.25)

Caruana states that two SLC (*Siluro a Lenta Corsa* – slow running torpedo) manned torpedoes were introduced as a means of breaching the nets protecting the entry to Grand Harbour, opening a way in for the MT Boats, as well as to attack the British Submarine Base on the Marsamxett side of the peninsula. He reminds that the developer of the SLC, Maggiore (major) Teseo Tesei was to pilot the first *Maiale*, as it was known by the Italians, to its target, the nets hanging from the St Elmo Viaduct.



Fig 2.4. MTL (*Motoscafo Turismo Lento*) unloading. (Source, <https://www.drass.tech/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Immagine1.jpg>, F. / Harraeur)



Caruana concludes that the target of this attack was a convoy of six merchant British ships, codenamed *Operation Substance*, which had entered Grand Harbour on July 24<sup>th</sup> in the afternoon. This was not a coincidence but, like the Italian attack, was also timed to take advantage of the new moon period of July (Caruana, 2004, p. 47, note 3).

Caruana also lists the Italian Naval personnel involved in *Operazione Malta Due* particularly the Commanders, *Capitano di Fregata* (Frigate Captain) Vittorio Moccagatto and second in command *Capitano di Corvetta* (Corvette Captain) Girogio Giobbe who was in charge of the assault boats. He states that the complete team numbered 45 men, 19 were members of the *Decima Flotilla MAS* and 26 crew on board the 2 MTBs (ibid., p. 46).



Fig. 2.5. A midsize submarine of the type developed by Teseo Tesei which was used in the attack on Grand Harbour. These were slow-running manned torpedoes called SLC nicknamed *Il Miale* by the Italians. (Maj Tony Abela, *The Times of Malta*, 23rd July 2016, Photo: Vincent P. O'Hara, Enrico Cernusch)

In the book, the plan of the flotilla's approach towards Malta and the attack itself are analysed in detail indicating that Caruana had an excellent source of information of the Italian strategy, probably from documents captured on one of the two craft salvaged after the raid.

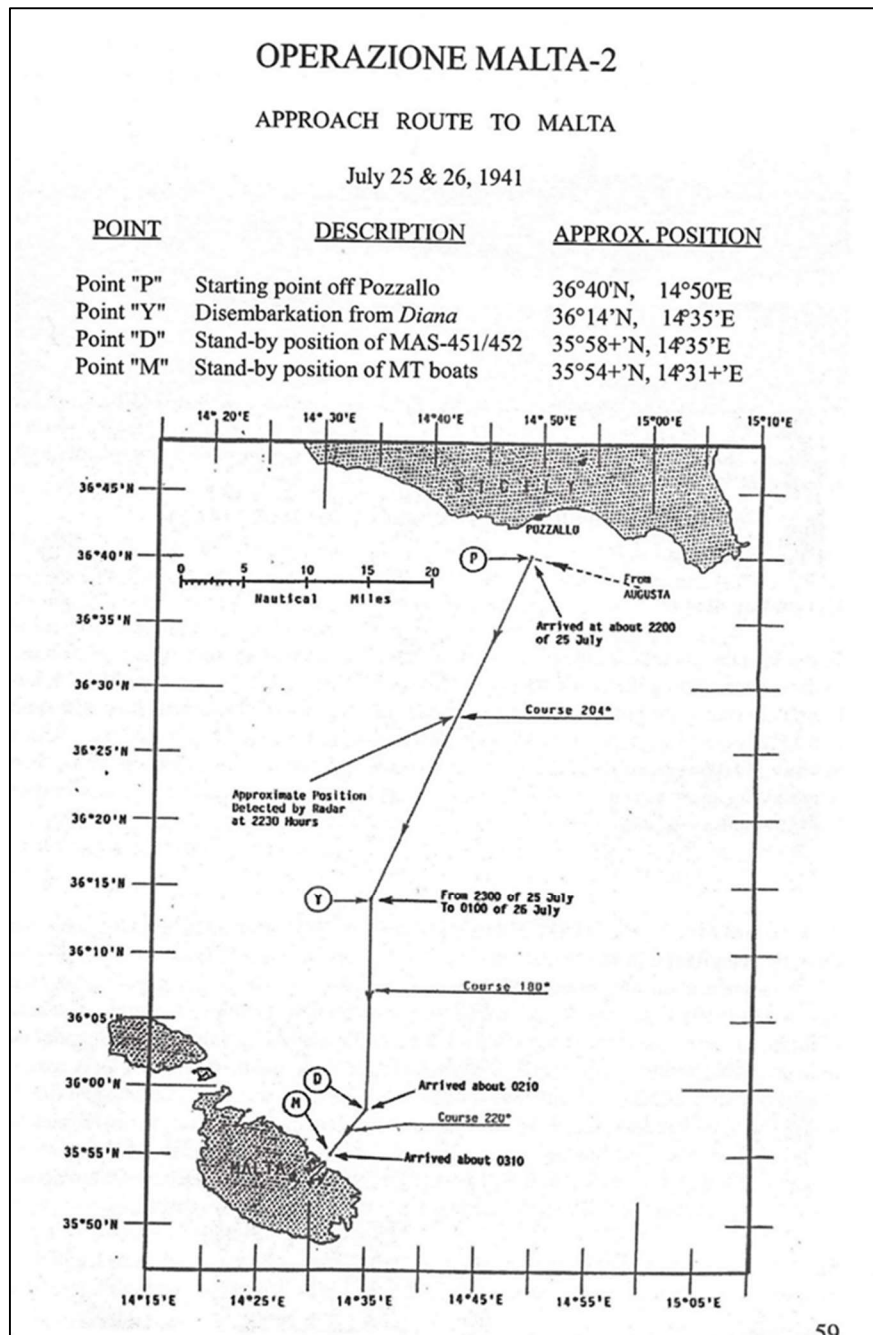


Fig 2.6 Italian Approach route to Grand Harbour and Planned stops (Caruana, 2004, p. 59)

However, from the onset, according to Caruana the plan started to go astray. The Italians were not aware that the British forces on Malta had radar detection equipment and that as early as 10.30 pm on the 25<sup>th</sup> of July when they were 39 nautical miles (72km) NE of Malta. (Point Y in Fig 2.6). the flotilla had already been plotted on their screens.

Caruana relates the reaction of the British Forces on the Island to this information and accounts for its source as being a top-secret Royal Air Force (RAF) Radar Station located at Madliena. This followed the movements of the larger craft, the *Diana* while it offloaded the smaller craft and then retreated. According to Caruana, the equipment, still in its early stages of development, was not sensitive enough to pick up the smaller craft but it did the job of alerting the defenders to a possible threat most effectively (Caruana, 2004, p. 26).

Caruana also points out that coastal defences and the RAF were placed on alert until the plot faded away, however, even then, instead of leaving their posts, the gunners manning the coastal guns and searchlights were ordered to rest by their guns. In his book, the same author also highlights the availability of Top-Secret information, via enemy-decoded messages, indicating that the Italians were planning an attack on a Mediterranean island. Hence the British were very wary of any suspicious activity around Malta and were not taking any risks. (ibid., p. 47, note 4).

At this stage, Caruana charts the movements of the attack force (Fig 2.6) and incidents which had significant repercussions on the timings of the attack and on the events that followed. He minutely accounts for the movement of the Italian attackers and the response of the British defences. These included the attack on the boom nets by Roberto Frassetto, and acts of heroism by some of the Italians, such as the suicide attacks by Teseo Tesei and Aristide Carabelli.

## **2.2 The Grand Harbour Defences**

Colonel Henry Ferro, (Commanding Officer 3<sup>rd</sup> Coastal Battery, Royal Malta Artillery, who were manning the Guns designated D, E, F, G, H, and I at St Elmo. Figs 2.7 & 2.8) writing in

the *Malta Land Force Journal* in July 1967 provides an excellent first-hand account of the defenders' perspective.

Ferro confirms that the Harbour was protected by a series of anti-torpedo nets strategically placed to deter multiple attacks from the sea (Fig 2.9). Both Harbour entrances were also defended by a series of 9 twin six pounder quick firing guns strategically located on the St Elmo Peninsula and Fort Ricasoli to the South (Fig 2.7) and searchlights aimed at the key target areas of the guns were positioned along the same bastions (Fig 2.8).

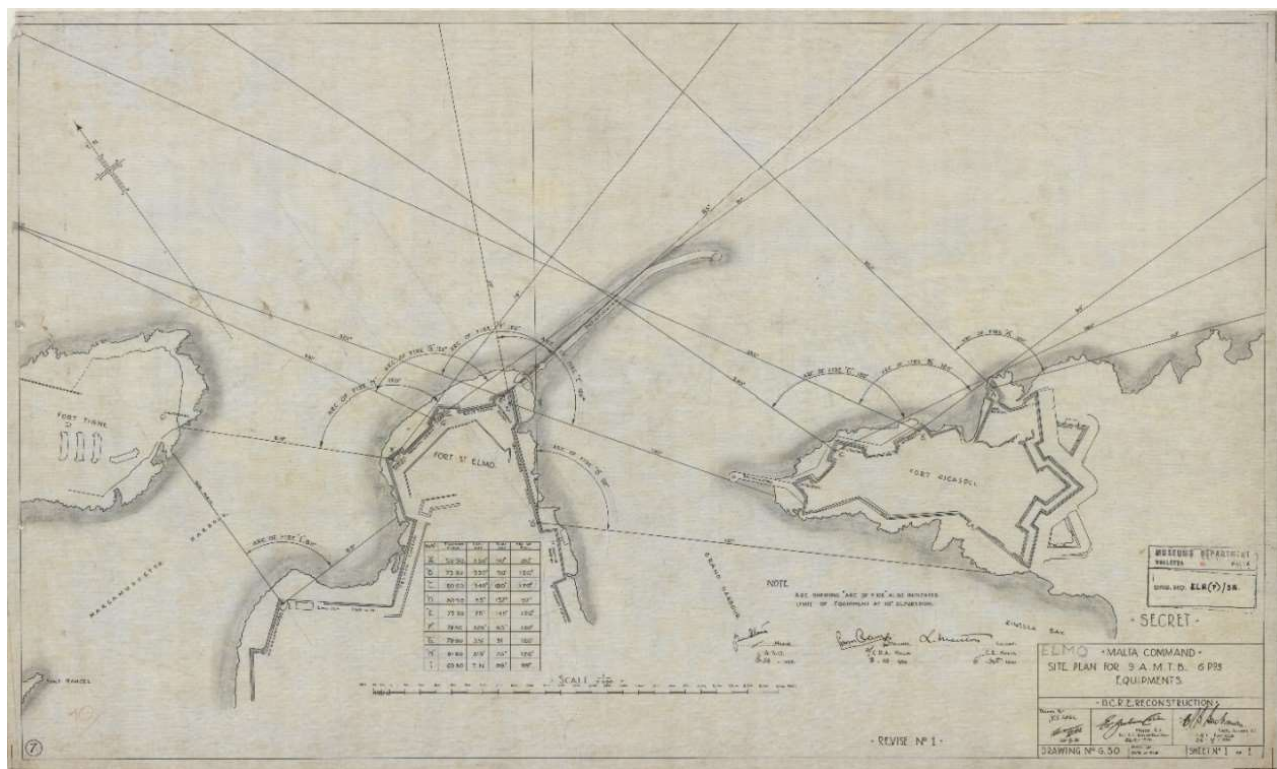


Fig. 2.7 Original British Military drawing showing the Arcs of Fire of the 9 Twin Six Pounder Gun emplacements protecting Grand Harbour and Marsamxett (Source Matthew Balzan)



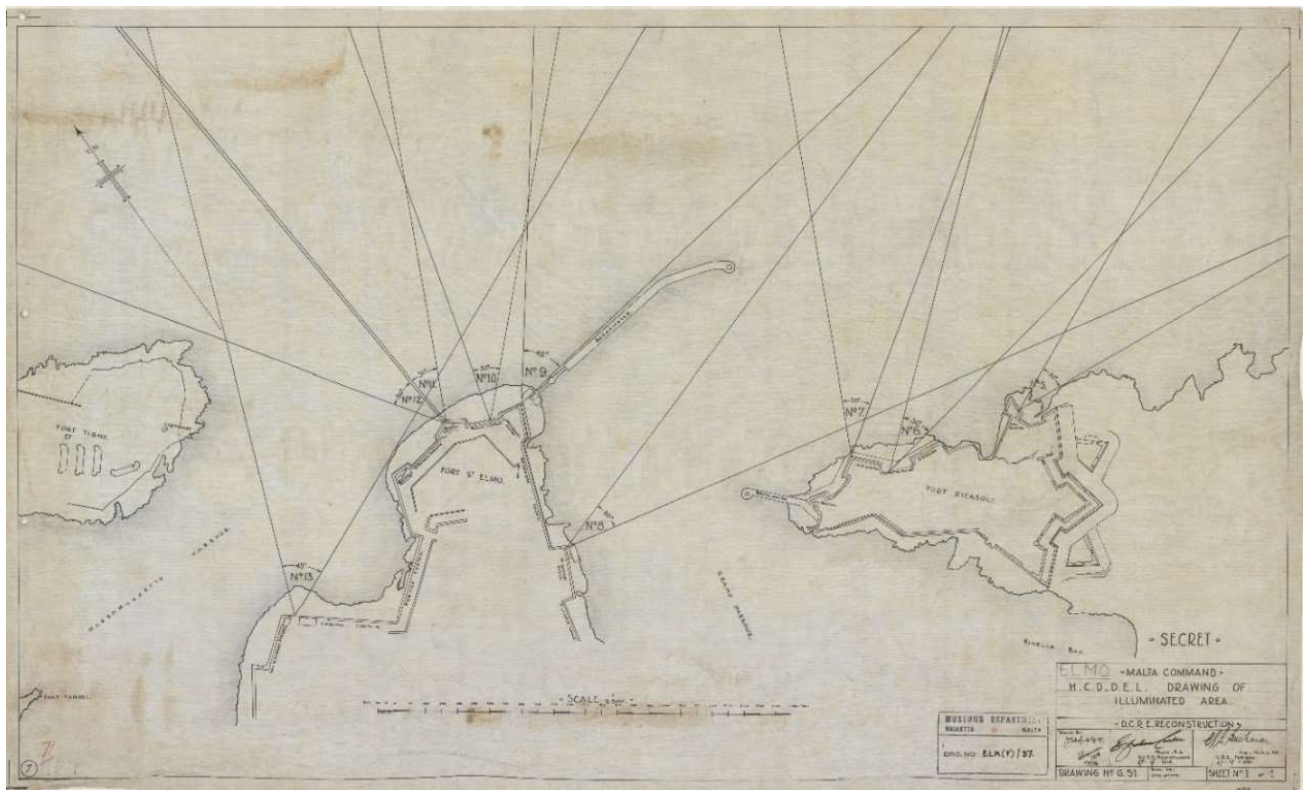


Fig 2.8 British Searchlight Emplacements covering Grand Harbour and Marsamxett (Source Matthew Balzan)

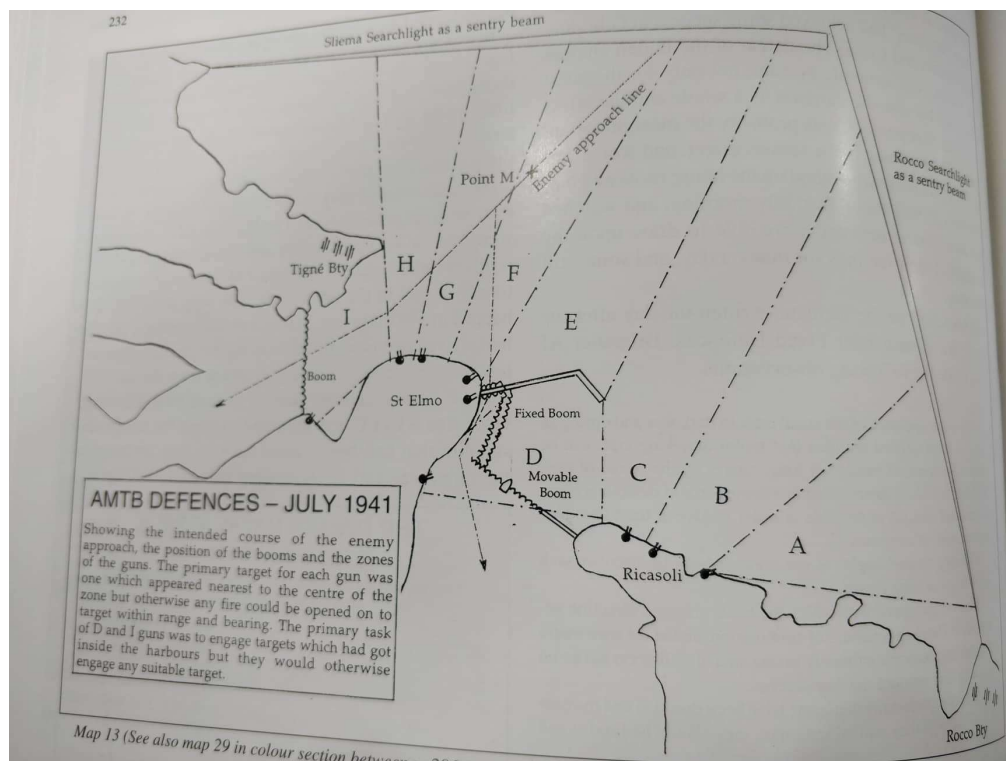


Fig 2.9 Drawing showing Boom Defences, and 6 Pdr Gun Target Zones. (Source Rollo, 1999, p. 232)

Ferro's account indicates that when radar gave the first warning of suspicious activity, at 10.30 pm the previous evening, Ferro and Capt. E. Fiteni, Commanding 1<sup>st</sup> Coastal Battery, Royal Malta artillery at Fort Ricasoli, placed their troops on full alert. When the track of the command ship *Diana* faded at around 11.30 pm, the soldiers were ordered to stand down but remain at their posts with guns loaded and searchlights primed ready for action. This gave the defenders just 2 seconds to move into action and about 30 to 40 seconds for the searchlights to light up the target zones.

Here Ferro's account presents a few interesting points which may have come from his contact with survivor Frassetto. Ferro states that the attackers' eyes had been treated with medicated eye drops which enabled them to see in the dark (Ferro, 1967, p. 59). He also states that whilst at point 'M' Frassetto noted the drift to the Southeast and adjusted the position of the rest of the waiting MT boats closer towards the entry to Marsamxett Harbour to compensate (ibid.). Ferro's account mentions that at 4.15 am during a diversionary air raid which dropped bombs over Marsacala, Frassetto, in the leading MT boat, inspected the defences right below the patrolling sentries at Fort St Elmo. He confirms that Frassetto used a night signalling torch (blue light) to carry out his inspection and signal his compatriots from right under the bridge. Frassetto waited 15 minutes after the 4.30 am target time for Tesei to arrive at the bridge and then commenced his attack on the nets protecting the bridge. Ferro's account gives the impression that it was Frassetto taking the decisions not Giobbe, who was in command. From this point on both Caruana and Ferro agree about what happened with Frassetto's failed attempt to blow up the nets, however, once again Ferro adds to the account by indicating that Frassetto himself signalled Carabelli in the 2<sup>nd</sup> MT to proceed with his attack. (ibid., p. 60). At this stage, Ferro also makes it clear that the waiting MT Boats were positioned outside Marsamxett Harbour and that Carabelli's run towards the bridge at high speed came from this direction (right across the field of fire of the guns at St Elmo). Ferro's account then moves to 4.44 am, when Gunner Vella, the lookout on Gun 'E' at Fort St Elmo heard Carabelli's speeding engine and saw the white wave made by the MT seconds before it hit the bridge pillars and exploded, sending Carabelli's body flying up into the air. (ibid., p. 60). This detail is interesting because it indicated firstly how alert the lookouts were, notwithstanding the pitch darkness, and secondly how stealthy the attackers managed to be, for Frassetto to arrive at the bridge, position his MT and retreat without attracting their attention. It also explains the



instantaneous response of the defensive guns, as Gunner Vella's sharp lookout gave the defenders the couple of seconds, they needed to move to action stations.

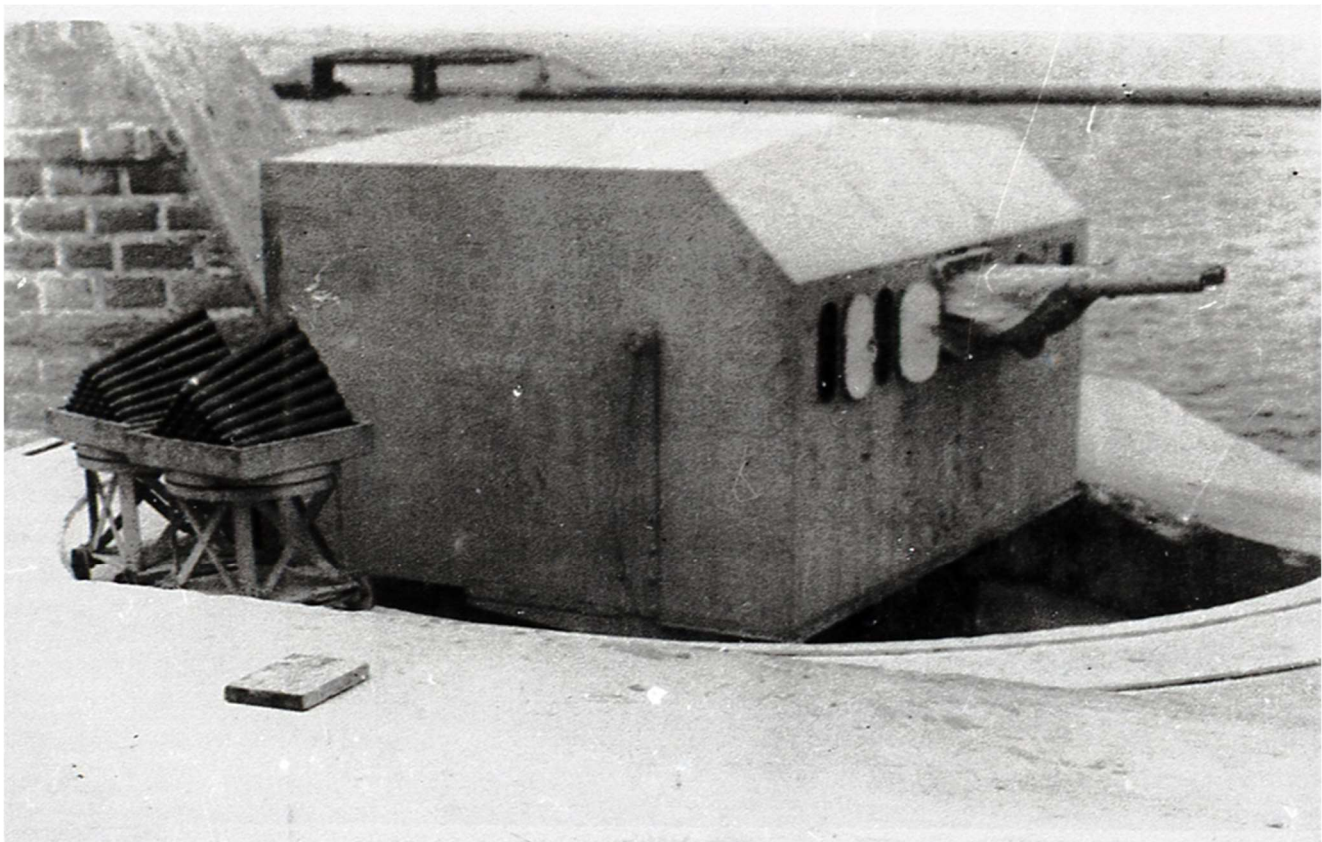


Fig 2.91 Twin 6 pdr, Gun 'D' with ammo at St Elmo, photo taken before the Attack as bridge still intact in the background (Caruana, 2004, p. 20)

It was at this stage that according to Caruana, Tesei and his co-pilot met their fate. A design feature of the SLC which, according to Caruana (2004, p. 29) was to cost him his life and that of his co-pilot was that the pilot steered the craft with his head just above the surface of the sea. Sgt V. Zammit on Gun 'G' spotted a small wake in the water within his arc of fire, fired at a point just ahead of the wake, at a range of not more than 300 yards and one shell caused the target to explode. Caruana concludes that this must have been Tesei's SLC Torpedo, the small wake was caused by the heads of the divers as the craft navigated in front of St Elmo towards the Bridge.

From here Ferro's account of the actions of the guns is very detailed and highlights several interesting points. He states that Frassetto, whilst still in the water, spotted a gap in the net

and called up the next MT, piloted by Bosio. Bosio approached the bridge at high speed and was hit. At this stage, Ferro indicates some minutes where nothing appeared in the area lit up by the searchlight beams, and the time as being 4.44 am. Caruana's version has the gunfire resuming at 4.49 am (3.5 minutes later) with Bosio's MT veering away into the darkness and the next MT, piloted by Vittorio Marchisio being hit and disabled and the pilot remaining wounded in the water. The 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> boats were hit and blown up, but their pilots (Follieri & Pedrini) survived and were later taken prisoner. Both sources agree that three MTs were hit by gunfire and that three escaped into the darkness outside the searchlight zones. Ferro also mentions that one MT was engaged by a heavy machine gun from the foreshore under Fort Ricasoli. Caruana records this as the 6<sup>th</sup> boat, piloted by F. Capriotti, and indicates that it too got away. Both agree that 'E, F and G' Guns from St Elmo carried out this action.

That action according to all sources concluded the first phase of the Attack and the first successful action by the defences.

According to Ferro, two derelict boats were visible just off St Elmo, however as they appeared abandoned, the guns did not fire upon them and Harbour Fire Command Officer, Major Dunkerly, agreed with a suggestion by Ferro to capture the two boats intact and duly informed Naval HQ to pick them up. (Ferro, 1967, p. 63). However, Capriotti, unobserved in one of the two MTs, chose to move his MT towards the second boat and immediately set off 'Phase Two' of the defenders' action.

This provoked a barrage from the Guns at both St Elmo and Ricasoli. Ferro also mentions that the resultant display was observed from Valletta bastions, Sliema front and Għar id-Dud by crowds of Maltese who had gathered there following the first barrage. Ferro states Sgt Barbara on Gun 'F' hit the leading boat, closely followed by the 2<sup>nd</sup> Craft. The pilot, Capriotti, jumped and swam towards the Injured Marchisio whose MT was also destroyed.

Ferro and Caruana (2004, p.41) between them account for the loss of the Italian attack commanders, Moccagatto and Giobbe, killed by a shot from a St. Elmo Gun manned by Sgt. Barbara who took aim even though the boat was beyond the maximum range of his gun.

By now it was dawn, and the Royal Air Force had sent its fighter planes to finish off any further threats by the attacking force. This prompted another interesting story of one Hawker Hurricane (a British fighter aircraft) pilot, who, after being shot down by machine gun fire from one of the Italian MTBs (MAS 451), paddled his life raft to another abandoned Italian MTB. This turned out to be the above-mentioned MAS 452, which had received the direct hit in its wheelhouse from Ferro's St Elmo guns and presented him with the gruesome sight of 8 dismembered Italian bodies. The pilot's attempts to attract the attention of a rescue launch at dawn raised extreme suspicion as he was vigorously waving to attract attention and the boat flew an Italian flag at half-mast. This prompted the crew of the launch to call in for further assistance to handle this 'aggressive Italian survivor' and RAF fighters shot at the boat. He was rescued over six hours later by an RAF seaplane and the Italian craft was towed for inspection (ibid, p.44). This craft and one MT explosive boat were the only two Italian boats captured virtually intact from the whole attacking force.

Of the Italian attacking force, 16 were killed, 18 were taken prisoner, and 11 escaped on the MTS but one died of his wounds. One Italian fighter pilot died in dogfights with British fighter aircraft at dawn (ibid., p.46).

In their Volume III of the *Malta at War* series of chronicles, John A Mizzi and Mark Anthony Vella also provide another interesting detail which sheds light on Major Ferro's detailed account of the attack. Their account mentions how Frassetto was found on the foreshore and taken prisoner by Warrant Officer Carmel Blackman, the Officer in charge of No. 3 Searchlight close to the breakwater arm, below St Elmo (Mizzi & Vella, 2001, p.1011). In this extract, Blackman states that he handed over the wounded Frassetto to Major Ferro at Fort St Elmo. This could explain why Ferro's report is biased towards Frassetto's perspective, as, he was the first officer to speak to him and hear his account straight after the event.

### **3.0 Research Background and Methodology**

Most of the participants and/ or observers of the event under study have passed away and first-hand accounts are confined to written records and publications.

To evaluate the event from both the attacker's and the defenders' perspectives the writer chose to conduct interviews with highly focused historians, researchers, and academics, who provided invaluable information and documents related to the sequence of events that lead to the actual raid.

Interviews were conducted with the following experts:

1. Major Tony Abela, for his knowledge of Royal Airforce Radar Systems and their role in the successful defence on the day.
2. Professor Stephen Spiteri, for details of the fortifications and defences around Grand harbour and the East Coast of Malta.
3. Matthew Balzan, the principal curator responsible for the fortifications at Heritage Malta, for details of the WWII Gun emplacements and Fire Command Positions at Fort St Elmo and Ricasoli.
4. Frederick Galea, prolific author about Maltese aviation history, especially during WWII, for the role of the Royal Air Force in the defence of the island garrison.

#### 4.0 Analysis

The series of interviews conducted as part of the research for this paper presented the author with an excellent outline of the event itself, and the literature to consult, as well as providing a good background into the architecture which still stands and which forms part of the tours.

All four interviewees addressed different aspects of the storyline and provided both detailed insights as well as materials to support the research and tour

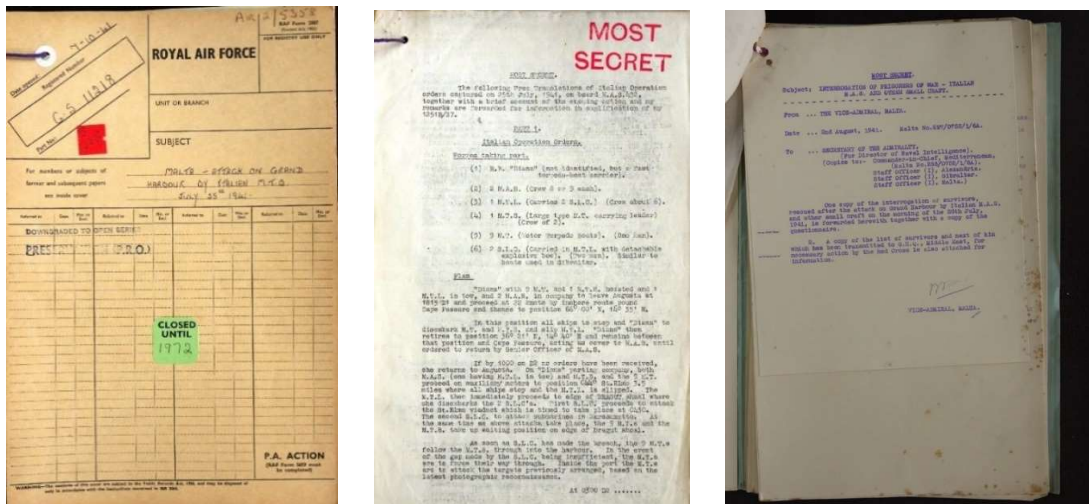
**Major Tony Abela** accepted an invitation to an online interview on the 20th of May 2022. His perspective proved to be most interesting due to his long years of service with the Royal Air Force, mostly on Early Warning Defence systems more commonly known as Radar. It was Major Abela who highlighted much of the detail of how Radar spotted the flotilla at such an early stage due to adjustments to the equipment which had been done in Malta, increasing its range, coverage and effectiveness.

Apart from the contents of the interview and access to his writings, Major Abela also provided detailed attack plans from the Italian side as well as copies of the Prisoner Interrogation Reports from the time. These were located by Major Abela at the National Archives in Kew, UK and were only released for public viewing in 1972.

The reports highlighted the attitude and approach of the reporting entities, the different mindsets of the Italian officers and men, as well as the opinions of both the defenders and attackers after the attack was thwarted.

Much of this information was not yet available to Caruana or Ferro and filled in a number of gaps in the story and literature review.

The Appendices to this essay include a report of the discussions with Major Abela.



Figs 3.1 Top-Secret Reports on the Attack and extract from the interrogation report of Italian prisoners. (Source National Archives, Kew UK, and Major Tony Abela)

**Professor Stephen C Spiteri** provided additional information related to the July 1941 Attack on Grand Harbour. This interview was conducted in person on the 27th of May 2022 and a report of the discussions is also attached in the annexes to this essay.

Professor Spiteri is a lecturer at the University of Malta. He served as the Superintendent of Fortifications and Curator of the Fortifications Interpretation Centre, in Valletta.

The objective of this interview was to evaluate the role of the actual fortifications in the defence of Malta's Grand Harbour and how these ancient battlements had been adapted over the centuries for modern warfare. Professor Spiteri also shared and highlighted the sources of many of the pictures used in this essay. Prof, Spiteri provided a detailed explanation as to how the twin 6 Pdr Gun Emplacements were effectively incorporated in the original structure, their performance parameters and that the Command Towers were not yet in use at the time of the attack. A fact not mentioned in the literature consulted. He also highlighted the early introduction of the Boom defence system and its main purpose.

**Matthew Balzan** is extremely well versed in Malta's WW2 Architecture and history and accepted an interview on the 4th of July 2022.

The focus of this discussion was the Harbour Defences and the defences around the Submarine Base at Marsamxett. These were the main targets of the attack on the 26th of July and many of the emplacements and gun positions are still present and being preserved by



Heritage Malta. Mr Balzan provided excellent information on all the positions involved in the action and was instrumental in helping the writer in mapping out the route of the tour which accompanies this essay. He also passed on several drawings of the gun positions, searchlight emplacements and Fire Control Towers dating to the time and made it possible for the author to photograph the sites as they are today.

Mr Balzan provided further details regarding the Boom Defence system, how it functioned in WW2, and why it was so effective in protecting Grand Harbour from both surface and submerged threats. These details were of great assistance as they highlighted the reason why their destruction was one of the foremost priorities for the attackers.

Regrettably, **Frederick Galea** was not available for a semi-structured interview for personal reasons. However, his recommended reading list included the extremely relevant publication *The Battle of Grand Harbour* by Joseph Caruana which proved to be one of the most rewarding reference books for this essay, as evidenced in the literature review.

## 5.0 The tour

To describe the events which took place outside Malta's Grand Harbour on the 26th of July 1941 a tour of the immediate areas where the attack took place had to be designed. The route for this tour concentrates mainly on the areas of Grand harbour and Marsamxett where the activities related to the attack happened. *Figs. 5.1 & 5.2* and each stop provides a backdrop for a part of the story to immerse participants in the atmosphere of the attack and the perspective of the attackers and defenders.

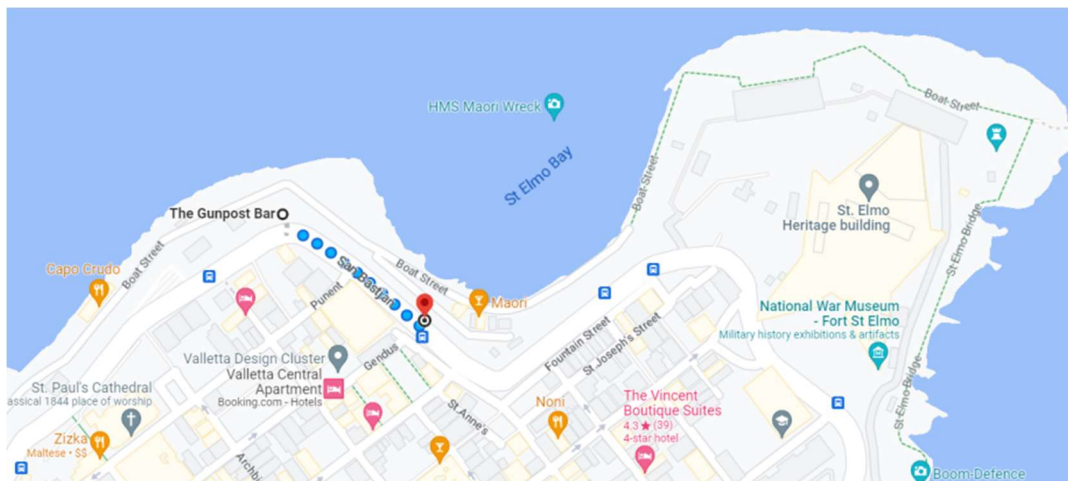


Fig. 5.1 Route of the tour from Gunpost Snack Bar to Jews Sally Port

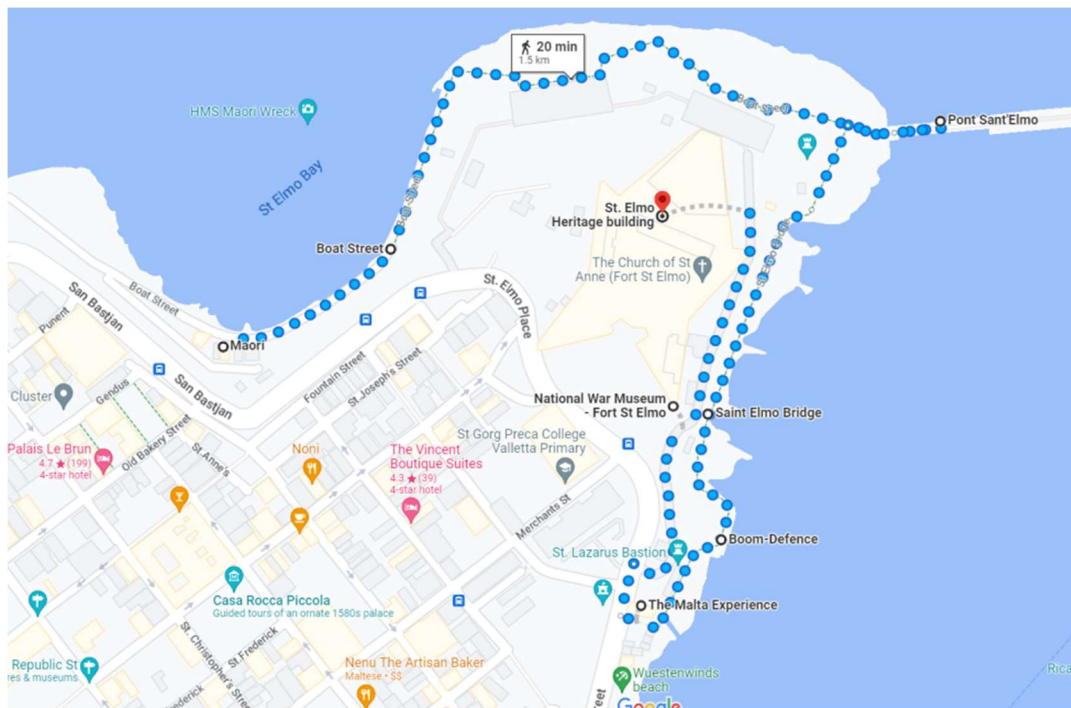


Fig. 5.2 Route of the tour from Jews' Sally Port to Fort St Elmo via the shoreline





Fig. 5.3 Gunpost Bar, Start Point of Tour and Gun Position 'I'

1. The tour starts at the *Gun Post Bar*, near *Auberge de Baviere*, along the Valletta coastal road. This is the site of Gun 'I', protecting the entrance to the submarine base in Marsamxett. Here the location of the submarine base and the boom defence chain across Marsamxett harbour will be indicated as part of the introduction to the defences protecting the target areas as well as the positioning of the attackers on their final approach.
  
2. The tour then proceeds on foot through the *Jews' Sally Port* to the shoreline below St Elmo, where the attack plan of the Italian flotilla will be outlined with the defensive bastions and the sea-level perspective as a backdrop to the storyline. The tour will proceed on foot along the foreshore leading towards the entrance to Grand Harbour and the damaged bridge. Along the way, searchlight positions will be pointed out and the lines of attack of the Italian forces as well as their rallying points will be indicated. A description of the types of craft used will also accompany this walk to the bridge in preparation for the account of the attack itself. The Location of points 'D' and 'M' outside Marsamxett will be highlighted for their proximity to the shore (ref. to Fig. 2.6).



Fig.5.4 Jews Sally Port, leading to sea level foreshore



Fig.5.5 The route along the foreshore leading to the bridge

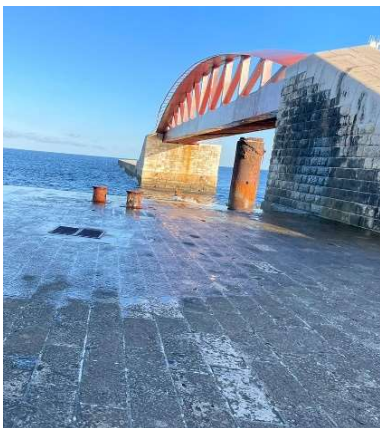


Fig.5.6 The Bridge

3. At the Bridge the actions of the Italian attack boats will be highlighted supported by the image of the damaged viaduct itself. The initial approach of the first two MT Explosive boats, the positioning of the undetected attackers and their unexpected drift with the current will all be highlighted at this point. The first explosion which set off the alarm and its effects on the bridge will be narrated at this point supported by pictures of the damaged viaduct.

4. The tour continues past the bridge and along the coast to the site of the Harbour boom defence mechanism inside Grand Harbour. Here an explanation of the protective barriers provided by this system will be given based on the excellent TVP of the site itself and the entry to the harbour. Charts showing the layout of the defensive chains and nets, and the location of the precious convoy ships berthed in Grand harbour on the 26th of July 1941 will be provided to further explain the dynamics of the defence.

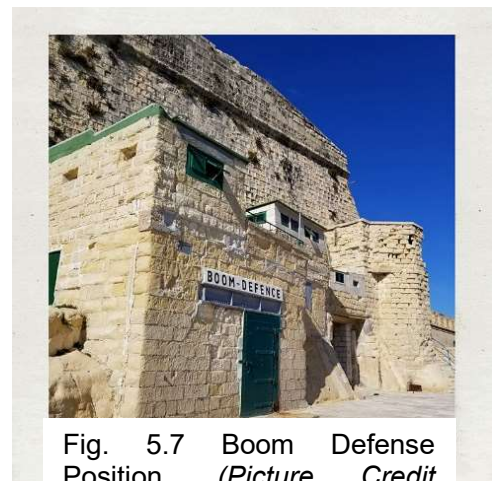


Fig. 5.7 Boom Defense Position, (Picture Credit <https://www.gotaway.ca/malta/grand-harbour-walk/>)





5. From the boom defence site the tour will proceed along the coast and up the stairs leading to the *Sacra Infermeria*, the Mediterranean conference centre, and the entrance to Fort St Elmo. The tour will enter the grounds of Fort St. Elmo and proceed to the main entrance of the fort and the parade ground. Along the way, the route for the rest of the tour will be highlighted to orientate participants to the site.

*Fig.5.8 The stairs leading to the Entry to St. Elmo (Picture Credit <https://www.gotaway.ca/malta/grand-harbour-walk/>)*

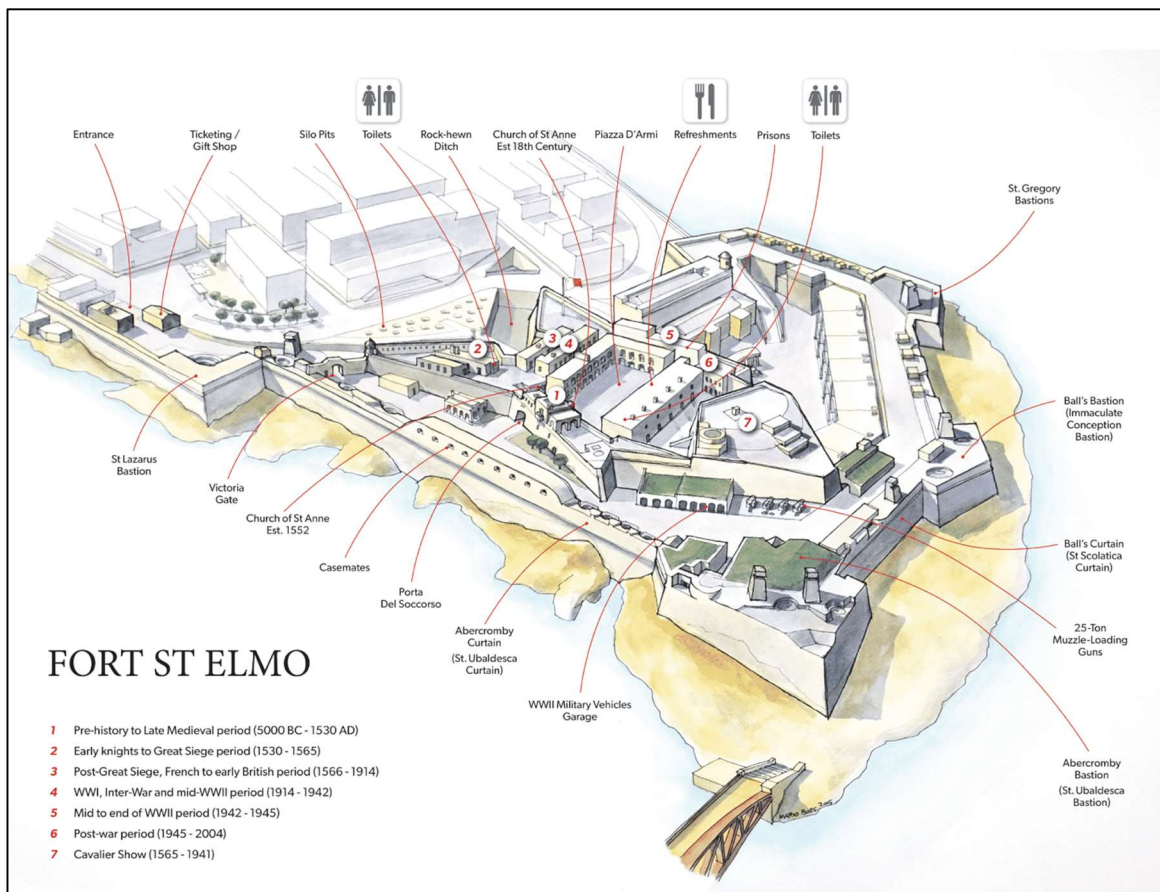


Fig. 5.9 Plan of Fort St. Elmo, Picture Credit Fort St Elmo - National War Museum - Heritage Malta

6. From the parade ground at St Elmo the tour proceeds to the Harbour Fire Command positions at the highest point of the bastions. (Location 7 on Fig.5.9)



Fig. 5.91 & 5.92 The Harbour Fire Command Positions and Detail of WWII Range Finding Notes

At the St Elmo Harbour Fire Command Positions, a detailed explanation of the observation and communications setup installed here during WWII will be given. The location of the various personalities who participated in the defence on the 26th of July 1941 will be identified and their respective roles outlined. Major Ferro's position when accompanied by one of the survivors, Frassetto, will be highlighted. A brief description of Italy's declaration of war in June 1940 and the 1st air attack on Malta will be given near the memorial to the victims of this first air raid. The Location of the 9, twin 6 pdr batteries of guns identified as Guns D to H in the narrative will also be pointed out from this vantage point.

7. The tour will then move down to the gun positions on the perimeter road within the St Elmo complex. This is the location of the twin 6-pounder gun emplacements D to H which formed the main defence against close-range seaborne attacks at the time. These were the guns which thwarted the attack, manned by their Maltese gunners, under the command of Major



Ferro. We will position ourselves in Abercrombie Bastion, the site of Gun positions E&F which is easily accessible and well-preserved.

Fig 5.93 Abercrombie Bastion, Guns E&F as seen from Gun G, St Elmo

The concrete twin gun emplacement and Command Towers will serve as a backdrop for a description of the actions of Lance Bombardier Bugeja on Gun E, Sgt. Barbara on Gun F and

Sgt Zammit on Gun G who between them destroyed the majority of the enemy craft as they navigated their way from Point 'M', outside Marsamxett, towards Grand Harbour, right across the sights of these guns. The shot, taken at maximum range, from Gun 'F' by Sgt. Barbara will also be described and the repercussions of this shot on the Italian MTB, MAS 452, and the leadership of 10th Flotilla MAS crammed in the wheelhouse of the boat explained.

Here also the story of the downed Hurricane Pilot who boarded MAS 452 and discovered the gruesome spectacle left by this shot will be told with its interesting conclusion in retrieving the pilot. Charts of the Gun and Searchlight Batteries will also be provided for further appreciation of the defensive layout. A description of how the guns worked, where the ammunition was stored and where the soldiers spent the night at their posts on the 25th to 26th of July 1941 will be provided at this location.

8. The final stop of the tour will be inside the War Museum, where an MT Explosive Boat is on display. Here the layout of these MT Explosive boats will be explained and the position of the pilot ejector seat shown. This location will also provide an excellent opportunity for a conclusion and question time.



*Fig. 5.94 a captured MT Explosive Boat at the War Museum, St Elmo. This is not the one recovered from the Grand Harbour attack but a similar model. (Picture credit: <https://www.malta.com/en/attraction/culture/museum/malta-national-war-museum>)*

## 6. Conclusion

Revisiting the events of the 26th of July 1941 proved to be a task which provided the author with scope for extremely detailed research on what happened on the day itself and afterwards as a result of the attack. Each segment of the intricate chain of events which started with the formation of the Italian Flotilla in Sicily, their plans to attack Malta's Grand Harbour and the attack itself and its aftermath unveiled a multitude of tactical, military and human interest stories all interconnected with each other.

The research provided excellent material for both specialised and broader spectrum tours which could be of interest to both local and foreign participants. These would include individuals and groups with an interest in the island's WWII history, niche clients interested in military architecture, cultural tourists, persons with an interest in war tourism and students of past conflicts and military tactics and history all of whom fall under the possible categories of interested parties for any future tour guiding initiatives on this subject.

The interviews provided further insight into interesting human interest stories, such as the reasons why Radar was so effective even in its then-primitive form as highlighted by Major Abela.

There are good possibilities for enhancing the tour by adding other locations of interest related to the event on the 26th of July 1941. These could include the sites of the radar stations at Dingli and Madliena, and their corresponding stories. The area around St. George's bay where the second SLC was scuttled and Costa and his co-pilot taken prisoner, The submarine base at Manoel Island, the Lascaris War Rooms command Centre in Valletta and the War Museum at Fort St Elmo itself.

All these avenues will be explored in further detail as part of the follow-up to this paper and as material for achieving the author's objective of increasing awareness of Malta's military history and heritage.



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## **Appendix 1 – The Tour – Notes, Logistics and Timings**

### **The Italian E Boat Attack on Grand Harbour – 26<sup>th</sup> July 1941 – 4 Hour walking tour**

#### **Start Location Gunpost Bar, Ring Road, Valletta**

#### **1. Gunpost Bar to Jews Sally Port - on foot 30 min**

- Introduction at Gunpost Bar
  - The system of gun positions and their target areas
  - Position of other defences
  - The Attack targets

#### **2. Jews Sally Port to Grand Harbour Entrance & Bridge - on foot 45 min**

- The attackers – the Formation of Italian 10<sup>th</sup> Flotilla MAS and its history
- Previous attempts to attack Malta
- *Operazione Malta Due*, 25 to 26th July 1941, complete with attack plan

#### **3. Bridge to Boom Defense position inside of the Grand Harbour- on foot 30 min**

- Boom defence layout
- The Fort Ricasoli guns and Fort St Rocco guns
- Convoy codenamed 'Substance' in port
- Positions of Convoy ships in Grand Harbour

Proceed on foot along the foreshore path to stairs leading to the entry of Fort St Elmo, across the parade ground and up to the Harbour Fire Command positions overlooking the Bridge.

#### **4. Fort St. Elmo Harbour Fire Command - 30 min**

- Background and Context
- Gun and machine gun positions
- Chartroom, plotting targets.
- Telephone Room, connected to main HQ & Guns
- Fortress Observation Post, monitors all of the East coast of Malta



- Fire Command Post personnel
- Searchlight Command Post Officer commanding Elec lights
- Below-ground telephone exchange
- The memorial

Proceed on foot to Abercrombie Bastion below via the parade ground and out to the internal perimeter road within the fort.

#### **5. Abercrombie bastion (Fort St. Elmo) - 45 minutes**

- The Armaments (the guns)
- Searchlights at the points to light up specific areas
- Ammunition lift from underground storage
- Gun Crew quarters
- 1<sup>st</sup> Phase of Gun action.
- 2<sup>nd</sup> Phase of Gun Action

#### **6. War Museum - 30 minutes**

- Italian MT Boat on display
- Conclusion of tour

## **Appendix 2 – Interview transcripts / main points**

### **Interview No. (1)**

#### **Online Interview Report**

**Maj Tony Abela – 20<sup>th</sup> May 2022**

#### **A lot of info sourced from Kew Archives, UK**

- Contract for building Malta Harbour Breakwater
- Records of POW interrogations after the attack

#### **Italian attack of 26<sup>th</sup> July 1941**

- Detected by RDF 504 (Dingli)
- Systems were Top Secret and even the local farmers had no idea what the equipment was for
- Attack failure was due to early detection by RDF; however, the technique was new and unproven. Info was not always immediately acted upon until it was proved to be correct. Belief in the capability of RDF was low and this hampered the results.
- The First plot was detected at 10.30 pm the day before the attack
- 2<sup>nd</sup> stronger plot was detected at midnight.
- By 4.00 am movement had stopped
- Defenses went on lower alert as nothing was happening.
- A soldier on land spotted a wake at sea
- Marsamxett was also targeted.
- A torpedo boat was found at St. George's Bay
- Most damages to the flotilla were caused in the morning when planes dropped Depth Charges
- The pilots of the Italian e-boats were supposed to jump off before impact, but some did not
- RDF (radio direction finding) equipment was available in Malta in 1941 by the RAF
- (Americans called it radar in 1943)
- 3 detection stations

- 504 on high ground in Dingli
- 501 tas-silg
- 502 Madliena outside and below fort (still present) originally above ground then moved underground.
- The equipment was rotated by hand and included stops to restrict the angle of view. Operators removed stops, which enabled the sites to cross each other's arc of cover, making them more effective.
- 504 from Dingli detected the raid due to its higher positioning giving it a longer range
- Info was passed to the control room (then still at Hastings)
- RDF detected multi targets (viewed on an oscilloscope), a strong main target and smaller ones
- It later resulted that the Italians had planned to launch the attack on another day but bad weather delayed the operation
- At the time the RAF did not fly at night
- At first light planes detected stationary boats and a wake of a craft
- **Material from Maj TA includes Italian attack plans in detail, Prisoner interrogation reports**

## **Interview No. (2)**

### **Interview Report**

**Prof Stephen Spiteri – 27.05.2022**

**Donald Pace**

**Interview Recording and Notes with kind permission of Stephen Spiteri**

### **Background Info**

- Fortifications changed with new technology.
- In 1600 the focus was on siege from the landward side, hence the high bastions facing land.
- The onset of the Ship of the Line changed this focus due to the firepower and threat from the seaward side.
- In 1670, Ricasoli, Caraffa, Fort Tigne was built to counter this new threat.
- In 1714,15,16, new coastal defences were introduced using French military engineers.
- In 1760, Armier & Spinola
- From 1800, for the first 50 years, the British made do with what existed. Their Navy protected the Island from seaward attacks.
- The industrial revolution, the introduction of the rifled, muzzle-loading gun and steam-powered ships changed things once again.
- Bombardment from a distance became possible.
- The opening of the Suez Canal made the Mediterranean Sea more readily accessible and increased naval movements. Malta's strategic value grew.
- This required the re-fortification of the Island, over a larger area.

- In 1872, the fortress scheme was introduced running from Marsaxlokk to Pembroke, protecting the whole coastline around the grand harbour. The North-west front was fortified along the line of the great Fault to prevent landward movement onto Valletta.
- To protect against Naval Bombardment a system of coastal batteries were built to house 9" to 17" RML Guns protected by Casemates, Shields, Barbettes, and also some disappearing guns at Corradino and San Lucian.
- A 2<sup>nd</sup> generation development was the 6" Gun, barbette mounted, with hydraulic systems which offered a high rate of fire and a small target so could be positioned above the skyline.
- At Ricasoli, protection against aerial bombardment was introduced and at Fort Campbell, blast walls were built for the first time.
- From 1860, most guns were positioned to face the seaward side.
- Next to be introduced were the 6-pounder guns, and 6" Breech Loading Guns on 45 deg Mounts at **Tigne & Ricasoli**. Increasing their effective range. 9.2" coastal guns were also introduced for coastal defence.
- In the 1880s more batteries were added, and the introduction of **Electric Power** saw the first use of Defense Electric Lights and Coastal Artillery searchlights. These followed the target or provided fixed beam light. (see Denis Rollo's book).
- From 1880 onwards the use of reinforced concrete was also introduced in fortifications.
- The **Boom Defense system** was set up to protect Grand Harbour. Brennan Torpedo systems were also briefly introduced at Tigne Point & Ricasoli (wire-guided Torpedoes fired from the land against shipping).
- The **Breakwater** was also built to be a defensive feature.
- Tigne Battery also got 12-pounder guns placed at a low level to protect against MTB attacks from the seaward side.
- Concrete Canopies and Turrets were also introduced to protect 6-pounder guns against air attacks.



- Ammunition Magazines were hidden inside bastions. Davits, hoists, and lifts were used to facilitate loading. (Ricasoli plans are available at Santo Spirito Archives) Gun Crew shelters were built using shuttering. Ruined buildings can be an excellent source of info.
- Coastal Barbed wire entanglements and Pill Boxes by the sea followed next.
- St Elmo was equipped with searchlights, 6 pdr gun emplacements, harbour fire command posts and **Telephone Communications** were introduced.