

Helmet plates, badges and buttons at the Armed Forces of Malta Officers' Mess

Denis A. Darmanin

A frame in the collection at the Officers' Mess of the Armed Forces of Malta contains a fine selection of shako and helmet plates, badges and other uniform distinctions worn by the Royal Malta Fencible Regiment, the Royal Malta Fencible Artillery and the Royal Malta Artillery. These insignia, all beautiful examples of military craftsmanship which have long since disappeared, either to time or into collections, portray the heraldic lineage of these famous regiments and a tribute to the men who wore them.

Since the arrival of British troops in Malta in 1798, Maltese men were enlisted in what were termed as the Maltese Corps of the British Army.¹ The forerunners of all regiments and corps were the Maltese Light Infantry or the Cacciatori Maltesi (1800-02), followed by the Maltese Provincial Battalions, the Maltese Coast Artillery and the Maltese Veterans (1802-15), the Royal Regiment of Malta (1805-11), and the Maltese Pioneers - Maltese Military Artificers, Sappers and Miners (1806-17).



Fig. 1
The framed collection, Armed Forces of Malta Officers' Mess Holdings
(Photo: Justin Gatt, AFM Press Office)

Probably the next Maltese regiment to be raised to function entirely as a 'Regiment of the Line' after the Royal Regiment of Malta was the Royal Malta Fencible Regiment (RMFR). This Regiment was raised in 1815 under the command of Lt Col Count Francis Rivarola. During its reasonably long life, the Regiment was mainly employed in the defence of the homeland, hence the word 'Fencible'. During the absence of certain British units from the island, especially during the Crimean War, the RMFR performed garrison duties and manned the guns on Malta's fortifications and coastal defences, in which it excelled.



Fig. 2
Albert Shako, Grenadier Company
(Photo: The Military Gentleman)

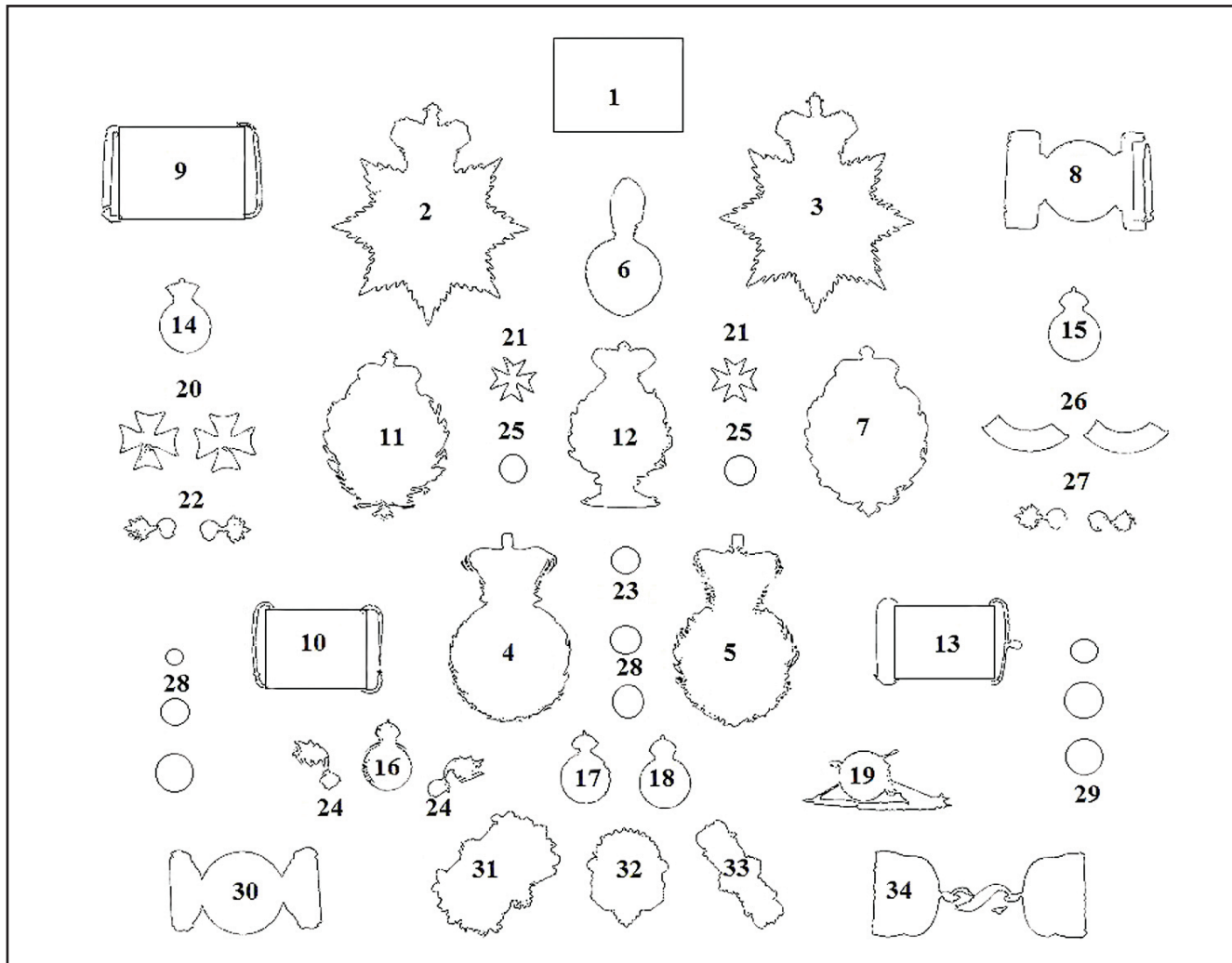


Fig. 3
Legend to the framed collection



Fig. 4
Foreign Service helmet
(Author's collection)



Fig.5
1855 Pattern Shako, Line Company
(Photo: Michael Murrie-Jones)

The RMFR wore the crimson uniform, or 'red coat', of the British infantry and was honoured with blue facings as a Royal Regiment. Throughout its life, the RMFR wore the progressive uniform styles and cuts as worn by most other British and Colonial infantry regiments, until the introduction of the tunic



Fig. 6
Royal Malta Fencible Regiment, Officer Light Infantry Company c. 1830, by R.J. Marrión
(Author's collection)

in 1855, when all uniforms became standardized. Many of these uniforms were illustrated by Edward Caruana Dingli² from original material in the personal collection of Colonel Frederick Gatt CMG. The uniforms of the earlier units were based on the drawings executed by Major James Wier, Royal Marines, who as a Captain commanded the Maltese Light Infantry.

Headdress also varied according to the time frame of the uniform.³ First worn by the RMFR was probably the Regency Shako (1816-1829), followed by the Bell-topped Shako (1829-1844), then by what was not so affectionately known as the Albert Shako (1844-1855), said to have been designed in part by the Prince Consort, and ending their service wearing the 1855 Pattern or 'French Pattern' Shako (1855-1861).⁴

The framed collection

An engraved silver plate at the top of the frame (No.1) records that the collection was presented to the Mess by Colonel George Victor Micallef OBE,⁵ later Brigadier, who commanded the Royal Malta Artillery from 1966 to 1969. No. 2 is a very rare example of a shako plate as worn by Officers on their bell-topped shako from 1829 to 1844. It consists of a gilded eight-pointed star with its top point being replaced by a crown. At centre are a mounted oval strap or belt with filigree type, voided Regimental title 'ROYAL MALTA FENCIBLE REG'T' and an enamel shield with the reversed colours of the Maltese flag. A drawing in the Pattern Book of 1820-1840 of the famous badge and accoutrement manufacturers Jennens & Co. of Oxford Street, London, since in a private collection, shows a similar shako plate for Other Ranks struck entirely in brass. Of a slightly later period and of an identical pattern, No. 3 is the 'Universal Pattern' shako plate as worn on the Albert Shako by most British regiments.⁶ It is the same pattern gilded star and crown with a mounted design at centre consisting of an oval belt with 'ROYAL MALTA



Fig. 7
Author's impressions of two of the die rubbings of the RMFR shako plates; left – Officer Grenadier Company, and right – Officer Light Infantry Company

FENCIBLES' and a voided Maltese cross, all set in thick half laurel and half palm wreath.

The next shako plate, No. 4, consists of a bound circular wreath of half oak and half laurel topped by a crown.⁷ Within the wreath is a belt with the Regiment's name, 'ROYAL MALTA FENCIBLES', and a stringed bugle or hunting horn at centre. This plate is synonymous with the Light (Infantry) Company. It is interesting to note that in a set of pencil rubbings of dies held in the archives of the National Army Museum in London, one shows the Officer's shako plate of a similar pattern as No. 3, but with a 'bugle' or 'hunting horn'. Although not knowing of the existence of such a plate in any collection, and since No. 4 is the plate as worn by a soldier of the Light Infantry Company of the RMFR, it is therefore likely that the Company's Officers wore a shako plate with Light Infantry distinctions. Another of these rubbings is of an Officer's shako plate of the Grenadier Company, again of which no actual plate has been encountered by the author.

Another shako plate, No. 5, was depicted by Edward Caruana Dingli in his illustration of *Private (Light Company) Royal Malta Fencible Regiment 1844-55*,⁸ who is wearing the Albert shako. However, this pattern plate had been

introduced much earlier and was worn by British infantry regiments on their Bell-topped shako.

A second plate (No. 5) is identical except that at centre is the shield with the Maltese colours; it is likely that this was worn by most soldiers of the Line Companies.

Interesting to note is that the title of the Regiment appears on certain appointments as 'ROYAL MALTA FENCIBLES' while on others as 'ROYAL MALTA FENCIBLE REGIMENT'. Although to date no official records giving a valid reason have been identified, it could be that 'Regiment' was dropped from the title during the transition period of when it was converted into an artillery corps.

As it was very active in garrison and coastal gunnery duties, the Royal Malta Fencible Regiment was converted into the Royal Malta Fencible Artillery on the 25th January 1851; it comprised of headquarters and six batteries. On the 28th July of that year, a blue artillery uniform with scarlet facings similar to that worn by the Royal Regiment of Artillery was worn by all ranks for the first time.⁹ The busby was worn with the full dress, with Officers having a gilt grenade plume-holder with a gilt belt inscribed 'ROYAL MALTA FENCIBLE ARTILLERY' and a Maltese Cross in silver at centre (No. 6). It is believed that for the first six years the RMFA had retained most of the uniform as worn by the Royal Artillery, possibly including insignia, but thus far no official confirmation of this fact has been established.

Another item pertaining to the RMFR is a waist belt clasp, No. 8, which bears the Regiment's title on the female part, and a device with the Maltese Cross set within a laurel wreath and topped by a Queen Victoria Crown (QVC) on the male. This pattern clasp was for the white buff belt worn on the tunic introduced in 1855.

In May 1878, the regulation Home Pattern Helmet or Home Service Helmet, made of cork covered in blue cloth was introduced for the British Army. A Foreign Service or 'white



Fig.8
Artillery Officers' shoulder belt and fittings



Fig. 9
Royal Malta Fencible Artillery, Officer Group, c.1880s
(Photo courtesy of the late Brigadier A. Samut-Tagliaferro)

cork' helmet was introduced for hot climate stations, for which the RMFA wore a Regimental pattern helmet plate for the first time. The new helmet plate consisted of a belt with 'ROYAL MALTA FENCIBLE ARTILLERY' and a Maltese Cross in white metal set within a wreath of laurel and palm at centre, with a field gun at their base, and the whole topped by a QVC (No. 7). Officers wore theirs in gilt and silver, while those of the Other Ranks were of brass and white metal. The ball finial and fittings were introduced for Artillery Regiments and selective Corps by General Order 90 of 1881.

Nos. 9 and 10 are two patterns of waist belt plates worn by the RMFR. The first, No. 9, is a smooth rectangular burnished brass plate having a mounted belt and silver cross device as on the badges, and was possibly an early pattern worn by Officers or Senior Non-Commissioned Officers. The second pattern for Officers, No. 10, is gilded, rimmed and has a finely beaded field, while the belt is gilded and the Cross is made of silver.

Alternatively, when in full dress, Officers wore a sword belt of 'fire gilt' artillery lace of Regimental pattern known

as 'waves and scallop edged' on red Morocco leather around the waist with a 'snake clasp' fastener (No. 34). Since the Regiment was granted its own appointments, the clasp worn by the RMFA and successively by the Royal Malta Artillery (renamed on the 23rd March 1889), had the Maltese Cross on the oval 'buckles' and 'MALTA' on the snake. When attending state functions, Staff Officers switched to the Officers' general pattern gilded waist belt clasp with the 'lion and crown' mounted in silver (No. 30). On most uniforms, Other Ranks wore a plain 'snake' clasp which was fastened to a metal loop at each end of the belt (not shown).

Weather Officers wore the 'full dress' gold lace or the white buff pouch belt, the end fasteners consisting of a gilt, floriated buckle with a matching slider and a flaming grenade end ornament (Nos. 31, 32 and 33). When Officers wore lesser forms of dress, the pouch on their backs was decorated with a large, gilded field-gun device on the flap (No. 19). A similar gun, die-struck in brass was worn by Other Ranks.

Brass 'seven-flamed' grenades Nos. 22 and 27 were worn by Other Ranks on the collars of both frock and tunic, and brass Maltese Crosses on their shoulder straps (No. 20), also worn by Sergeants on their shoulder straps, by when in undress. From 1874, Officers displayed their rank distinctions by the different patterns of gold bullion 'knots' on their cuffs. The use of the Maltese Cross, No. 21, is uncertain, but could have been an unofficial ornament worn on the Officers' Mess Dress lapels.

The button worn by the RMFA was the standard Royal Artillery button depicting three field guns topped by a QVC introduced in 1855 (No. 23), which in 1873 was replaced by a button bearing the single gun topped by a QVC.¹⁰ Other Ranks'



Fig. 10
Artillery Officers' leather pouch

buttons were of brass, while Officers' buttons were gilded (No. 28) and mounted for Mess Dress (No. 23).¹¹

When the Royal Malta Fencible Artillery became the Royal Malta Artillery, a new brass and white metal helmet plate for wearing on the Foreign Service Helmet was introduced (No. 11). It was identical to that worn by the Royal Malta Fencible Artillery, but without the word 'Fencible' in the title. The Officers' plate was gilded, and that of the Other Ranks was in brass.

A second helmet-plate for the Royal Malta Artillery (No. 12) was issued to the Regiment and approved by the Horse Guards on the 17th June, 1891, to be worn by all ranks and by mounted Officers on their helmets and on the black leather sabretache. This plate was very similar to the previous one but elongated, having the gun further at bottom.

Most of the uniform distinctions of the RMFA continued to be worn by the RMA, except for where the Regiment's name was displayed. The Officers' Regimental pattern waist belt plate changed slightly, as the mounted device became a circular belt with 'ROYAL MALTA ARTILLERY' and a silver Maltese Cross at centre, all within a wreath of laurel and palm, topped by a QVC (No. 13).

A particular gilt button topped by an Imperial Crown (No. 25), is possibly the only known pattern button bearing the Regiment's name. It is a common belief that it was privately purchased from the Officers' Mess Funds to be worn by Mess Waiters sometime between 1890 and 1905.

In 1899, a new badge (No. 14) was issued for field cap and puggri (or puggaree), a cloth wrapped around the outer headband of the helmet. It can be described as: 'Within a gilt circle inscribed ROYAL MALTA ARTILLERY, a Maltese Cross in silver upon which is the field gun in gilt, above all is the Victorian Imperial Crown'.¹² As always, the Officers' version was gilt and silver and the Other Ranks' in brass with a white metal cross. Following the death of Queen Victoria in 1901, the crown on all badges, devices and buttons was changed to a Tudor or King's Crown, except on this badge, which came later on the 20th April 1904. Apart from the crown, no other changes were made to this badge (Nos. 15 and 18).

Between 1910 and 1912, a new badge was introduced to the RMA for Officers' Service Dress (OSD); some were entirely in bronze (No. 17), while others had a white metal cross (No. 16), depending on the maker. Another version

came slightly later for the Officers' Full Dress forage cap, which had the circle with the title in blue enamel and the Maltese colours (not shown). It is believed, but unconfirmed, that this badge was made so as to correct the error on all previous identical badges which had the red (vertical stripes) of the Maltese flag located on the left side rather than on the right. This badge was worn until 1937.

Along with the bronze OSD badge, Officers were issued with bronze grenades to be worn on the lapels of the new khaki 'open collar' Service Dress (No. 24). Around the same time, brass grenades like those previously worn by gunners on their collars began to be worn by Sergeants and Staff Sergeants above their chevrons on both sleeves (No. 22). In 1907, a curved brass shoulder title with 'R.M.A.' was introduced for the Service Dress worn by Other Ranks (No. 26). These same grenades and titles were also worn on the Battle Dress from 1937, until they were discarded in 1961.



Fig. 11
Royal Malta Fencible Artillery, 1876, by R. Simkin



Fig. 12
'Tailor's Pattern' of the 1891 plate
(Author's collection)

Since Maltese militaria has a strong following by researchers and collectors both locally and overseas, this study will continue in some future issue, whereby all the other known badges and insignia of the former Maltese Corps of the British Army will be featured.

Denis Darmanin served in the Armed Forces of Malta as an army diver, and is part of the Heritage Planning Unit of the Malta Environment and Planning Authority. His research interests include uniform buttons and late 18th and 19th-century uniforms as worn by the armed forces of the Order of St John and the early Maltese corps of the British Army. Denis has contributed numerous articles to military journals and is the author of *Pembroke, From a British Garrison to a Modern Civilian Town.*

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Notes

- 1 Denis A. Darmanin, 'Anglo-Maltese Uniform Buttons', *Treasures of Malta*, Vol. IX, No. 3 (Summer, 2003).
- 2 A.G. Chesney, *Historical Records of the Maltese Corps of the British Army* (London, 1897).
- 3 Arthur L. Kipling and Hugh L. King, *Headress Badges of the British Army, 1800-1918*, Vol. 1 (UK, 1974).
- 4 Bryan Fosten and Gary Gibs, 'The British Infantry Shako, 1800-1897', *The Military Historical Society*, Special Number (UK, 2008).
- 5 Brigadier George V. Micallef MOM CBE: Commissioned into the Royal Malta Artillery almost direct from University in 1939. George Micallef (98282) took part in the first phase of the defence of Malta. He served with five Anti-Aircraft Battery of 2 AA Regiment RMA at AA Position Delimara at a critical time before being posted to Egypt in May 1940. He returned in May 1942 to serve as battery commander with the 2 AA Regiment until 1945. He had a distinguished post-war military career including command of the Royal Malta Artillery. <http://www.military-art.com/mall/profiles.php?SigID=755>.
- 6 Denis A. Darmanin, 'Shako Plates of the Royal Malta Fencible Regiment', *The Bulletin, The Military Historical Society*, Vol. 46, No. 183 (UK, February 1996).
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Chesney, op.cit (1897).
- 9 Anthony Samut-Tagliaferro, *History of the Royal Malta Artillery 1800-1939*, Vol. 1 (Malta, 1976).
- 10 Howard Ripley, *Buttons of the Regular Army 1855-2000* (UK, 2002); illustrations by Denis A. Darmanin.
- 11 Darmanin, op. cit (2003).
- 12 Denis A. Darmanin, 'The Badge of the Armed Forces of Malta and its Lineage', *On Parade* (Armed Forces of Malta), Issue No. 5 (Progress Press 2010).