

MALTA EXPEDITION 1961Newsletter No. 1.

11th July, 1961.

This is the first of what we hope will be a series of newsletters at intervals of about a week. It is intended that each one should be written by a different member of the expedition, recording impressions and items of news which would not normally go into a formal report.

This, then, is the tale of the Land-Rover party's journey to Malta and the first few days on the island. As a consequence of Messrs. Martini & Rossi's arrangements for our overnight stops, our southerly progress became something of a Grand Tour. Night after night four tired, sweaty and dusty characters would try to convince a series of hotels that they were indeed the persons for whom the luxurious rooms had been booked. An hour later, something of a transformation scene would occur, with obsequious waiters bowing four clean, respectable and obviously English gentlemen in the direction of the local Martini agent and a good dinner.

The trip was not without its tribulations, which started in a minor way at Dover, with a pedantic official of a certain Motoring Organisation insisting that our little outboard motor would need a Carnet all to itself. The story of the filling-in of the Carnet is quite a good one, but had better be told when we get back. It is worth saying that apart from this nonsense at Dover, and a solid five hours of haggle at Valetta, no other Customs man in Europe did more than glance vaguely in the trailer.

It is superfluous to elaborate on the journey to Turin; it was entirely straightforward with, as we have implied, considerable hospitality at Paris, Geneva and Turin itself. We then pressed on to Siena along the Autostrade, which now extends as far as Florence. The Bologna-Florence section crosses the Apennines and must be one of the better roads in the World. Long stretches consist of alternate bridges and tunnels, and the whole thing is a superb piece of engineering. It will be a great day when it extends down to Reggio Calabria, crosses the straits of Messina, and presses on to Palermo. Anyway, at the moment, the Florence-Siena road is not too good and we arrived in our usual scruffy state. Fortunately, we were restored to respectability by the time the Martini agents appeared to inform us that seats were organised for the Palio, plus an interpreter/guide to simplify the communication problem. After a brief walk to the main square and some curious traverses of mediaeval milk-bars, we found ourselves in excellent seats in the vicinity of one Miss Sophia Loren. The Palio itself is a mediaeval manifestation in which, very briefly, the 17 districts of Siena lay on a spectacular pageant and then compete for a banner (the Palio itself) by means of a horse-race around the square. The colour, noise and heat are spectacular. The whole populace of Siena is packed into the middle of the square with the well-to-do (like us and Miss Loren) in seats around the perimeter. The course runs around the square, which is graced by an exquisite Town Hall. The pageant lacked nothing in spectacle, although the Italian indifference to discipline became apparent from time to time. The horse-race duly took place, amid vociferous cries of encouragement, despair, and aspersions relating to the parentage of the starter. By a singular stroke of good fortune, the district of our guide won, who enlarged upon the entertainments in store later in the evening. At this juncture, the numerous American tourists put away their movie cameras and departed, saying to one another how swell it was, but little realizing that what they had seen was merely the preliminary formality. After an excellent dinner, our hosts took us in the direction of the winning district's H.Q. where, amid scenes of mediaeval splendour, something of a mediaeval carouse was taking shape. Somehow, we were swept into a happy group who were gratefully accepting wine, freely dispensed from a great barrel. Some of it was literally flowing down the gutter, but by far the major proportion was flowing down the throats of the citizens at a great pace. An attempt by the locals to

initiate some of the American tourists into this engaging practice was not entirely successful, since the latter clearly regarded it as rather insanitary (unwashed glasses, etc.) We were then swept into an inner sanctum, where music and dancing were taking place and wine of a most superior quality was being lavished upon one and all by the local nobility. We got to bed rather late, our final memory of the Palio being the sight, from the hotel window of the churches of Siena outlined in little flickering flames.

Our appreciation of Siena was slightly modified the following dawn by the discovery that some chap, doubtless a little overcome by his emotions, had bounced his wretched vehicle off the side of the Land-Rover. However, there was evidence that he had had the worse of the encounter.

Onwards then to Naples, via Rome, whose splendours were viewed in the space of 10 minutes or so. The next two evenings were relatively quiet, although the interpreter kindly produced by the Reggio Martini agents, a retired Professor of English, caused some amusement by lavishing a similar title on one member of the expedition. Thence to Syracuse and the "Star of Malta".

This vessel, it eventually transpired, is a standing joke amongst those who do not have to use it, and a severe penance to those who do. Its hull is clearly a hydrodynamic catastrophe and we were later given to understand that the Land-Rover was fortunate to escape with only three dents in the bonnet and a demolished radio aerial. We emerged at Valetta, under the cheerful guidance of Flt/Lt. Mike Edmonds, expecting to step ashore, collect our gear and atone for the rigours of the Star of Malta with a good breakfast. Even with the most diligent assistance from Mr George Zammit-Cutajar, the local Martini agent, who managed to persuade the Customs chap that he really wouldn't enjoy spending some hours examining all the contents of the trailer under a hot sun, it was not until 12.30 that we escaped to the Phoenicia hotel to change for an excellent lunch with various local celebrities (minus the Land-Rover filler-cap this time).

Since then, we have got the camp organised, with generous help from the Royal Air Force at Marsaxlokk and Sifa, whilst the Zammit-Cutajar organisation exerts its influence to produce items such as a Calor gas stove and a refrigerator. Our encampment, in the middle of the R.A.F. football pitch, is becoming rather splendid.

The hired boat is very reliable and most of the equipment is beginning to work quite well. There have been a few practice dives in warm blue water and our anti-sunburn devices are fully deployed. The prospects are mostly very pleasing.

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Things have settled down here in the camp now after our second week in the island. Our comfort has been assured in the culinary direction by a Calor Gas Stove and a paraffin refrigerator. In order to protect the stove a most imposing structure made of Dexion and Polythene has been erected around it. This structure looks remarkably like a public lavatory, and the local Malts must think we are really civilised.

The weather here is terrific, as will be no surprise to anyone, but just at the moment we are plagued with a high wind from the North West that has succeeded in laying low two of our tents, and last night, it was really cold. Everyone had to apply sweaters to their persons in order to keep the cold at bay.

Also, during the rather high winds that have swept the island this week, our small motor launch managed to drag its anchor, and it drifted 200 yards, straight between a line of three R.A.F. Air Sea Rescue launches. We saw the C.O. of the camp the next day, and happened to mention this to him. He grunted, disappeared and three minutes later a Malt appeared struggling with a very superior anchor for us. We haven't dragged since.

A very curious thing happened a few evenings ago. The returning boat party was seen to be in the company of a strange woman, about 40 years of age, dressed in red treader pants, and a striped shirt. She proceeded to introduce herself to everyone, and gave the impression that she intended to be here for the duration. All attempts to get rid of her failed, even the cunning try at elevating the surveyor, dressed in filthy khaki, to the status of Wing Commander, and telling her that the "Wingco" disapproved. Unfortunately, this only succeeded in making her avoid the spurious R.A.F. types, which pleased him greatly, since her volume of chatter was simply stupendous. She was eventually dumped in the middle of LUQA Airport, despite tempting offers of coffee and biscuits to the driver of the Land Rover. By chance, we discovered later from our Martini friends that this woman is notorious for her eccentric activities, and is known as "Yellow Anna". Despite her threat to reappear soon, she fortunately has not done so yet.

Regarding the purpose of our sojourn in Malta, we have so far discovered only brass shells by the ton, and a few large fish, although yesterday great excitement prevailed when a small team discovered what looked like underwater Carttracks, as are found in small areas of the island. These Carttracks consist of two parallel grooves, rather like tramlines, although more widely spaced, and much deeper. Unfortunately, the submerged ones are much narrower, and of a radically different nature, but their existence in fairly large numbers in Mersaxlokk Bay, running dead straight, certainly warrants further investigation, and the plotting of their position on the map to see if anything can be determined of their origin. Maybe in the next newsletter, something more that has come to light on these interesting finds will be included.

The third week of the I.C. Underwater Club Expedition in Malta has proved quite eventful.

Two trips to Xlendi on the neighbouring island of Gozo have been made. One was to make a survey and chart the reef on which Roman amphorae have been found and the other visit was to dive in conjunction with R.N. and R.A.F. divers and bring to the surface any archaeological findings.

Whilst swimming at Salina, Imperial Roman pottery and what is thought to be part of a sun dial, were brought up from some foundations about 30' below sea level.

At the beginning of the week whilst investigating mysterious submarine carttracks at Marsaxlokk our boat was hailed by a R.N. launch and the officer in charge asked permission to board us. Reason - they were looking for two of their diving team whom were missing. They did not know whether the divers were really lost or just playing a practical joke. Having ascertained that the divers were not in our cabin the officer departed muttering "I wouldn't trust either of them further than I could trust them".

The zoology of Malta is proving very interesting - particularly the marine mollusca. Already two parcels of shells have been sent to the British Museum (Natural History) for identification. The Museum is particularly interested in these because we can give them precise details of habitat, depth, etc.

This also comes at a time when the B.M. are carrying out extensive renewal and reclassification of their mediterranean collection.

The last expedition which came out to the mediterranean to send live mollusca back to the B.M., placed them in tins together with the necessary data, only to find that on arrival in London the mollusca had eaten their vital statics!

Rarely a day passes without the team being warned of dangerous sharks that have been seen off Marsaxlokk but although we have dived from there nearly every day, not the slightest glimpse of one has been seen. We are rapidly coming to the conclusion that any large fish seen, must be a 'shark', for a 6' tunny and several groupers over 5', amongst others have been recorded. Flying fish are not uncommon.

An interesting side line to the expedition is being carried out by the biologists. Transects are being made at various depths. That is scrapings from the rock surface to collect all the fauna and flora from an area of 100 sq. cm are taken at exponential levels down to 140'. The major animals and plants found are then identified and charted. By the end of the expedition an interesting zonation should result.

The Maltese Customs have caused many difficulties. They are asking for duty to be paid on all consumable articles sent to us, including first aid, films and cigarettes. Many hours have been wasted filling in forms in triplicate and waiting about for literally hours, in customs houses. All articles brought into Malta must be taken out when we leave to obviate the need to pay tax even if they are broken beyond repair. Any articles lost are liable for duty.

The coastline here provides ample opportunity for training in deep diving and the week ended with all the team having dived to at least 120' the limit without decompression.

When we first planned to visit Malta to carry out an archaeological programme, the choice was made by inspecting the islands' position on the Mediterranean trade routes, and studying its early history. Although no archaeological remains had ever been found around the coast of Malta, we decided to take a chance on our being able to find a site worth working on.

Thanks to the kind of good luck that only comes once in a lifetime, some R.N. amateur divers found amphorae on the reef at Xlendi (Gozo) on the very day we set out by Landover from London. A week of work by the R.N. divers showed that there had been a Roman ship wrecked on the reef and that a very large proportion of its cargo - although scattered - was still intact.

Our arrival coincided with the virtual completion of salvage work on the North side of the reef - where the original remains were found, but several members of our team were able to visit the site on board a R.N. diving boat at weekends. During these visits we were able to dive to the base of the reef at 200 ft. below sea level (the R.N. divers are forbidden to dive below 120 ft.) and came to the conclusion that the salvage work (thought to have been completed) had in fact only touched on the remains of the wreck - most of which had slipped to the foot of the reef and been partially covered by a subsequent rock fall. Further, we found that the south side of the reef - thought to be devoid of any remains - had an even richer pile of amphorae at the somewhat deeper base (220 ft.).

Our work at Marsaxlokk came to an end about the 7th/8th August, so we decided to shift camp (?) to Mgarr (where we have been given the free run of Captain Gollocher's luxury villa), keep our boat at Marfa (the nearest Maltese port to Gozo) and sail over to Xlendi each day to work on the reef.

The naval divers are mostly members of the Fleet Air Arm, and - seldom going to sea - suffer from the most violent sea-sickness in all but the flattest calm; so now that the weather has started to deteriorate, and rough seas become more common, we see less and less of our naval friends, and have had to work alone on the reef for most of the time. The amphorae, etc., that we raise are handed over to the local police every day amid great scenes of popular interest and cries of 'any money?' from the local Gozitans (who look on the Maltese, rather as the highlanders look on the English!) This strong local feeling has helped us to ward off 'private' divers from the wreck - only the other day a boat-load of Italians arrived to start removing anything they could from the reef; but a quiet word in the ears of the local police soon cleared them away!

Diving to 220 ft. presents a large number of difficulties that are new to most of our team. Luckily we brought with us the two vital instruments for this type of work, a pressure proof watch, and a strong depth gauge. To avoid the bends we have to restrict our stay on the bottom to ten minutes, and follow this with a gradual rise to the boat, taking ten to fifteen minutes between sandy bottom and the boat. A very tedious ascent - we have all vowed that next year we will bring plastic playing cards for a quick game of poker while sitting on the anchor chain 30 ft. below the surface. Another feature of working at these depths is the mysterious "Rapture of the Depth". A feeling of great well-being (akin to moderate drunkenness) that comes over one after five minutes or so on the bottom; our early fear of this has now declined and we now expect, and respect, it. Tony suffered from (probably), a case of anoxia the other day - he blacked out while over exerting himself trying to shift a sandfilled amphora, and only regained consciousness on reaching the warmer water near the surface. We have all learnt, now, how to avoid these diving dangers, and indeed we all feel that there is more danger of food poisoning, and physical injury resulting from lifting heavy cylinders!!

One rather pleasant feature of diving to 220 ft. is that we are forced to spend six hours resting between dives. These six hours are spent in one of the most delightful beauty spots in the island, and with the local (and only) hotel selling iced lager at a shilling a bottle, all is well. Or rather, all seems well, until we dive the second time, when on resurfacing (with the equivalent reduction of pressure) the lager tends to bubble rather violently - with the obvious results!!! We also notice that "Rapture of the depth" sets in rather earlier on the second dive of the day! However, despite the apparently lazy type of day I have described we find that after two deep dives we are ready for a very early bed, and that two days of this work is as much as we can do without extreme fatigue. We are, at present, working to a rotation that gives one, two days diving followed by a day in camp. This keeps our efficiency up to the "just run-in" performance, without cutting down too badly on the work achieved each day.