CHARLES DEBONO

THE MALTA 'COMMAND DEFENCE' SCHEME OF 1942 A COMPARISON BETWEEN THE MALTESE PILLBOXES (1935-'42) AND THE SICILIAN *CASEMATTE* AND BUNKERS (1939-'43)

The beaches and their approaches of both Malta and Sicily had a similar defensive system. It was a typical system similar to the one implemented between the 16th and 18th centuries, where in Sicily a large number of coastal towers were constructed against the incursion of Barbary and Turkish corsairs. The system of chain of towers was to be implemented also in Malta during the 17th century for the same reason.

However, the systems we are going to discuss in this paper went the other way round, where nearly all the Malta pillboxes were constructed between 1939-'42, whilst the Sicilian *casematte* were built mainly between 1942-'43. The circumstances for which they were built was the same; Malta was to find itself focal in the Allied strategy to defeat Rommel's Afrika Korps and their Italian allies in North Africa, whilst Sicily was to be the first step to be taken by the Allies to liberate Axis Europe.

The case of Malta. Building of the first group of pillboxes, 1935-'39

Although the first building programme of pillboxes and other field defences began in 1935, when Italy invaded Abyssinia, the first real pillboxes were built around August 1938. Land began to be purchased from civilians or ceded by the Government to the War Department for the building of pillboxes and other type of defences. It seems that the real building programme of pillboxes started in 1938 because this is the early date that shows the building of the first defences of this type in Malta. These pillboxes were built by the Royal Engineers. Many of the pillboxes built during this period were beach-posts[1], but there also a number of depth-post too[2].

The first type of pillboxes can be distinguished easily from the second group built after 1939. The majority of these pillboxes are low and have a longish shape. Others have a semi-circular façade and there are others similar to a box. But nearly all of them have a rubble wall camouflage. Their camouflage helped them to look-like rubble, a very effective disguise in case of an invasion. This could be seen as a continuation of the defences built in 1935, which consisted mainly of trenches and rubble wall parapets[3].

The machine-gun armament of the early pillboxes was on the front of the structure and generally they had two port-holes for the Vickers 0.303-inch machine-guns. Generally, the soldiers manning these machine-guns had a semi-circular concrete bench to sit on them. But there are several examples of pillboxes which didn't have a concrete bench. They have also loop-holes for rifles, an entrance hatch on the rear of the structure and a square observation cupola. They were built on strategic positions, both along

[1] S.C. Spiteri, *British Military Architecture in Malta*, Valletta, pp. 511-513.
[2] Ivi, p 515.
[3] See C. Debono, *Uħud mill-pillboxes li nsibu fil-Mellieħa- 2'* in: *Socjeta Filarmoika. La Vittoria Mellieħa, Malta: Festa Maria Bambina 2000*, eds. by J. Cauchi, P. Fenech, J. Catania, P. Vassallo, Printwell Ltd, Malta 2000, pp. 123-125 and pp. 164-167.

the coasts and inland. Those which were built inland were generally built on the edge of ridges to have a good command of the surroundings[4].

Building of the second group of pillboxes, 1939-'42

Meanwhile, as a result of the growing threat of war, after the occupation of the whole of Czechoslovakia on March 1939[5], the previous type of pillboxes was discarded. The stone cladding camouflage and curved fronts had to be abandoned and so a new type of pillbox, which was similar to the shape of a box, was introduced. The new type of pillboxes like the previous ones was built by the Royal Engineers. The building of the previous type of pillboxes was found to be time consuming and because the threat of war was increasing, an easy model of pillboxes was introduced[6].

There were three main types of pillboxes built during this period and many of them were left without camouflage. On the other hand, a number of them were painted to look-like rubble walls or even painted to appear as rural farm houses, in the latter were added also doors and windows. As had been told above the pillboxes built during this period had the shape of a box. Nearly all of them have four rectangular machine-gun port-holes in the four corners of the structure[7].

They have also an observation cupola either in the middle of the pillbox roof or in the front, the latter generally consisted of a longish cupola that is raised from the ground floor. The observation cupola was reached by a ladder. In the middle each wall there are two rifle loop-holes and they have an entrance hatch on the rear[8]. Although the first raids on Malta began on 11 June 1940, the building of pillboxes continued till the siege was lifted, in mid-1942[9].

The vulnerable bays were not only defended by pillboxes, but also by a number of obstacles laid in the sea and on the beaches. The obstacles consisted of five feet high concrete pyramids with iron spikes, one and a quarter ton each, which were laid along the one fathom line in two rows 20 feet apart and 20 feet between each obstacle[10].

How the pillboxes were armed and supplied

The beach-posts were generally armed with Vickers 0.303-inch machine-guns while the depth-posts and reserve-post were armed with Bren guns. Apart from these small arms soldiers could use also their rifles from the small loopholes that all the pillboxes had. All the machine-gun portholes and rifle loopholes had a shutter where they could be closed in colder days. Every pillbox had sufficient ammunition where in case of an invasion could resist for a number of days. Many of the pillboxes had also a Bren gun mounted on a tripod to be used against low flying enemy aircraft. These Bren guns were surrounded with sand bags against enemy bullets. Every pillbox had also a small water tank for the soldier's daily use[11].

Inside every pillbox there were wooden beds where the soldiers could sleep during the night. The soldiers were also supplied with their daily needs like skinned milk, coffee and other food items. They had also kettles, mugs, bowls, and kitchen pots, all made of enamel. Each structure had a telephone connected

---

4 Ibidem.
5 E. Jablonski, *A pictorial history of the World War II years*, Wings Books, New York, Avenel, N.J. 1977, p. 21.
6 Spiteri, *British Military,* cit., p. 538.
7 Debono, *Uhud mill-pillboxes*, cit., pp. 164-167.
8 Ibidem.
9 Ibidem.
10 D. Rollo, *Guns and Gunners of Malta*, Mondial Publishers, Malta1999, p. 204.
11 Information taken from Naxxar Reserve-Post restored by Fondazzjoni Wirt Artna.

with other pillboxes and the Headquarters. Each pillbox was surrounded with double barbed wire for in case of invasion enemy soldiers would be prevented from reaching the structure[12].

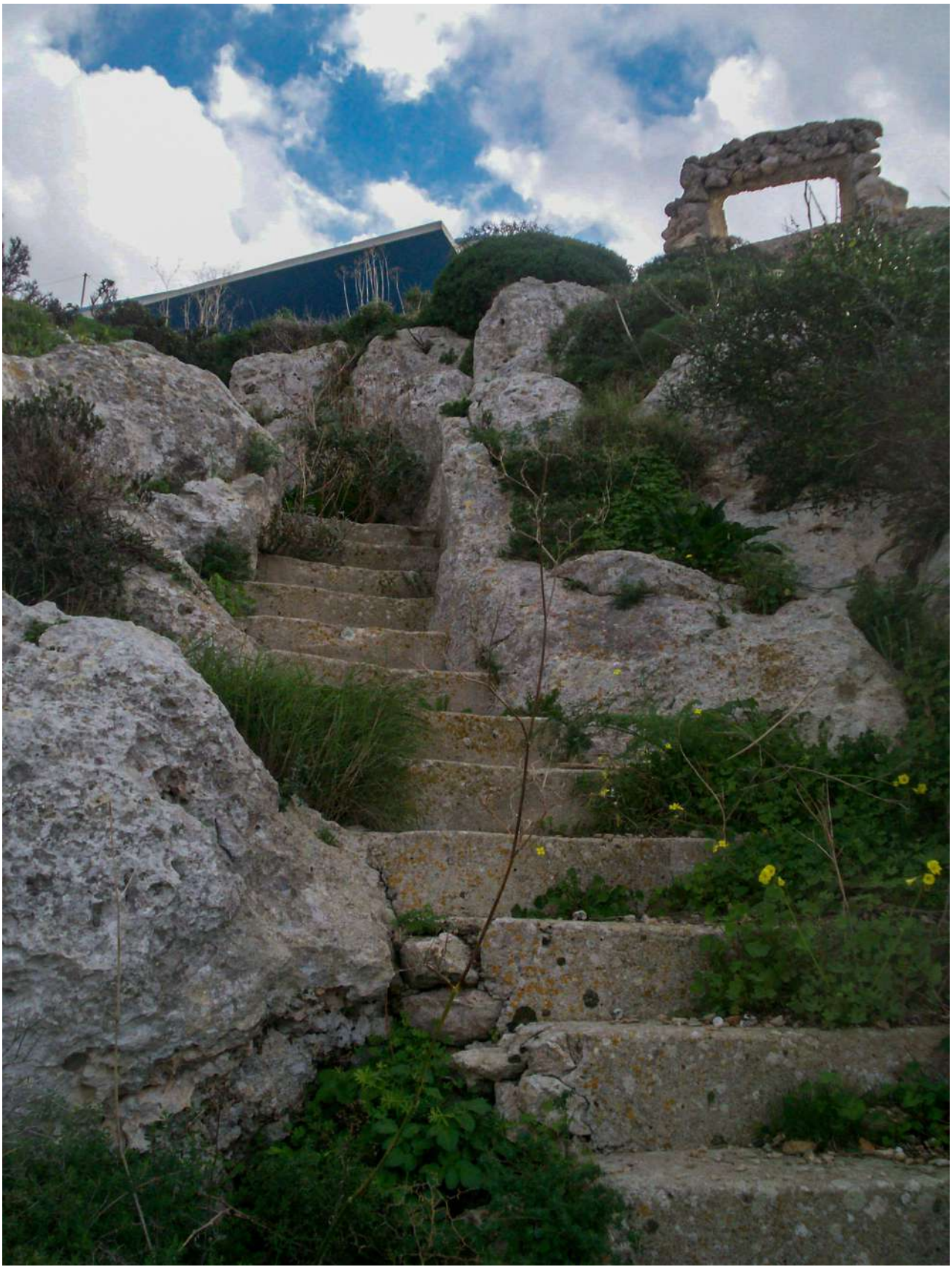
Those pillboxes which were double storey had a ladder where soldiers could reach the second floor. All the beach-posts were armed with a Lyons-lights to be switched on in case an invasion was launched during the night. All those pillboxes which were not stone cladded were camouflaged by applying paint. Those pillboxes which were in the countryside were painted like farmhouses or rubble walls, while those in the vicinity of the sea were painted similar to the rock[13].

A bunker connected to an infantry trench, at Ġnien Ingraw Valley, Mellieħa, which were constructed during the Abyssinian Crises of 1935-'36 and 1903 respectivelly.

[12] Ibidem; and Interview with the late Gunner Louis Grima (Royal Malta Artillery).
[13] Ibidem.

Part of the infantry trench and casemates for a Vickers 0.303-inch Machine-Gun and the entrance to the bunker from the same trench.

The depth-post beneath the infantry-trench at Ġnien Ingraw Valley.



A flight of steps from the trench leading to a pillbox, effectively a depth-post, at Ġnien Ingraw Valley (right), constructed in 1938-'39 during the Munich Crises.

Inside the pre-war depth-post, with one of the concrete benches and a machine-gun port-hole.

Another pillbox or depth-post (left) was constructed at Ġnien Ingraw Valley, Mellieħa between 1939-'42.

A pillbox or beach-post, constructed at Ramla Bay, with a searchlight emplecement, but without a turret.

A concrete bunker for an 18-pounders field gun at Id-Dahar, was positioned on the way leading to the Red Tower, where the latter, constructed between 1648-49 during the Knights' Period, was incorporated into these defence lines.

Another depth-post with a semi-circular facade, a turret and cladded with rubble-stones, is situated in the North-East of the Red Tower.

A hexagonal pillbox, which was part of the Victoria Lines, incorporated in the reserve-post line.

Not only concrete structures were built or used. Even a number of farmhouses were converted into pillboxes, such as this one at San Ġwann.

A rather unusual pillbox at Anchor Bay, Mellieħa.

A squarish pillbox with a longish turret and four machine-gun portholes at Il-Bokka ta' Ċarcara, Mġarr, Malta.

A low pre-war beach-post which covered Golden Sands Bay, Mellieħa.

A pre-war beach-post at Għar Lapsi Bay, Siġġiewi, where part of the Italian invasion force was to land.

A small squarish beach-post at L-Aħrax ta' Gewwa, with a searchlight emplacement and a plce for the generator.

A squarish pillbox with a longish turret and four machine-gun portholes at Il-Qammieħ.

A squarish pillbox with a longish turret, four machine-gun portholes and a frontal searchlight emplacement at the feat of the same structure, at Il-Qortin tal-Iskrovitt.

Two depth-posts forming part of the second defensive line; one at Selmun (left) and the other at Imgiebaħ (right).

Between 1995-'99, a pillbox or Reserve-Post at T'Alla w Ommu, Naxxar, was restored by Fondazzjoni Wirt Artna.

Another unusual pillbox, built out of rubble stones, is situated at Tal-Qroqq, Msida not far from Mater Dei Hospital.

A low squarish Reserve-Post, situated on Fort Mosta.

A pre-war beach-post, with a searchlight emplacement on its rear, overlooking Mistra Bay, Mellieħa.

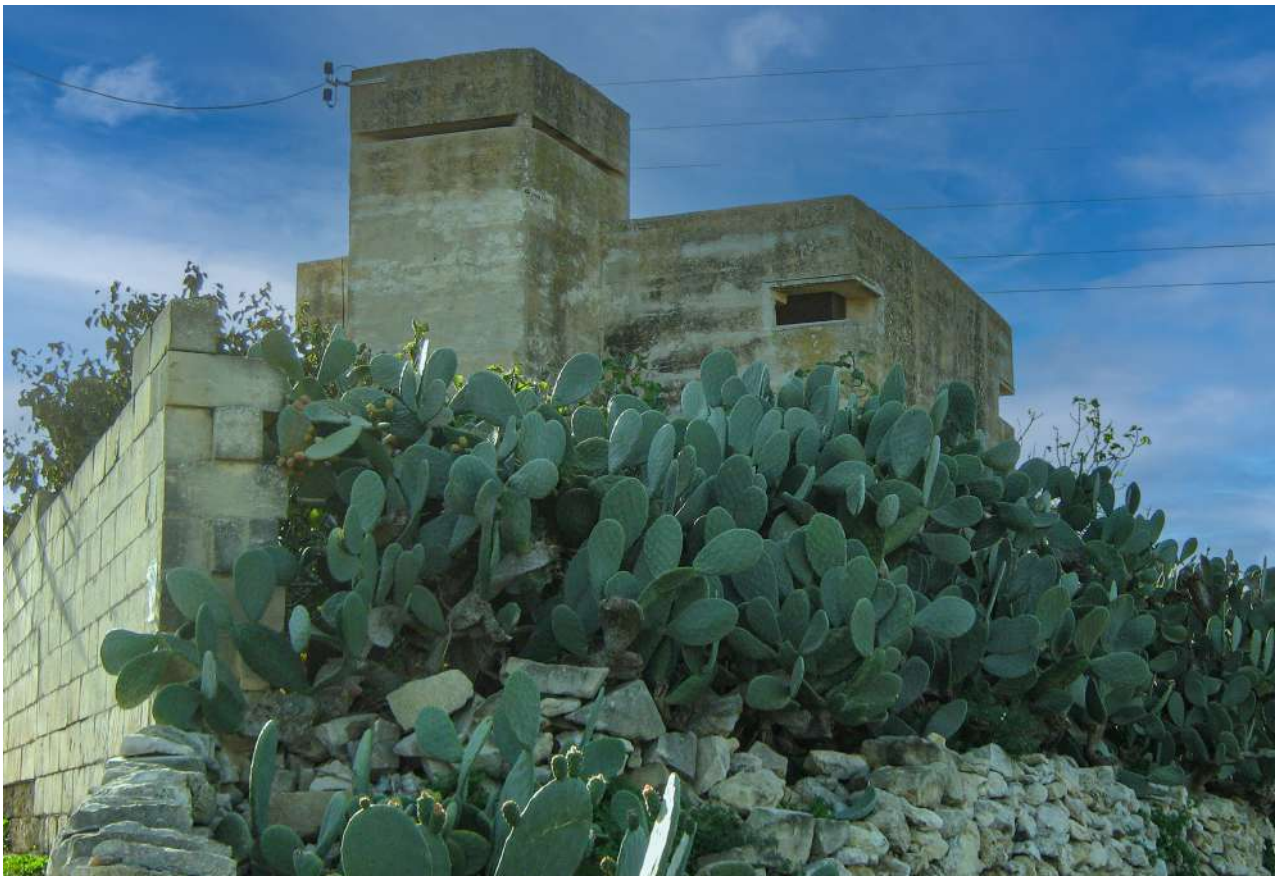
A low squarish Reserve-Post, overlooking Wied il-Għasel, Mosta.

A squarish, but different kind on Depth-Post at Ir-Triq tas-Salina, Naxxar.

A squarish pillbox with a longish turret, four machine-gun portholes at San Martin, St. Paul's Bay.

A squarish pillbox with a turret, within the confines of Marsaxlokk and Żejtun.

A squarish pillbox with a longish turret, four machine-gun portholes and a small searchlight emplacement at Bengħisa, Birżebbuġa.



A low squarish pillbox, overlooking Wied Dalam, Birżebbuġa.

A squarish pillbox with a searchlight emplacement on the roof, overlooking Wied Dalam, Birżebbuġa.

A squarish beach-post overlooking Pretty Bay, Birżebbuġa.

Fort St. Lucian overlooking both sides of Marsaxlokk Bay.

Beach-post overlooking Għar Lapsi Bay, Siġġiewi.

Beach-post overlooking Wied iż-Zurrieq Bay, Qrendi.

The Sicilian case. *Casematte* (pillboxes) and bunkers in Sicily and nearby islands

In the 1930s, Italy launched the study and construction of a series of coastal fortifications in order to prevent the enemy from mooring in Italian territorial waters. The *Comando Supremo* (Italian High Command) started by organising an investigation of a series of coastal outposts, followed by field-type outworks for installation of semi-automatic weapons and artillery, on the coasts. The most concentrated work was carried out in Sicily and Sardinia, which saw the intensification of the works of permanent fortifications in 1941, especially in Syracuse and Ragusa, with the construction of concrete circular outworks called *fortini*.

There were a lot of difficulties to be surpassed, especially logistics (transport, concrete, iron, water, poor health zones) but works were hurried where it was possible, to finish these coastal works.

The execution of these works was under the responsibility of the Military Engineers, who had the duty to monitor the coastal defences of Augusta-Syracuse, and to check the seafront which measured 35km from Cape Campolato (Brucoli) towards Cape Murro di Porco (Maddalena Peninsola), the best location of the defensive sites[14].

The defensive organisation realised about this time in Sicily, was the potentiality that was already done, or was being implemented, which showed a certain robust protective asset of the Island. Due to the availability of a large quantity of forces and war material by the Allies, especially in the Mediterranean, it was, indispensable to integrate the measures of defence, decided or in due course, with others to

[14] L. Bovi, A. Moscuzza, *Bunker: la difesa di Siracusa. Guida turistica,* Edizioni Ardite, 2018, p. 16.

be taken. Only, the three principal military harbours of the island, Augusta, Palermo and Syracuse were nearly unassailable, but the situation on many other beaches suitable for disembarkation was different.

There were few bunkers, mostly without weapons and camouflaged. There were insufficient barbed wire, minefields and the anti-tank obstacles on the shores. The reports of the RAF pilots, sent to verify in aerial reconnaissance the defensive situation in Sicily, were optimistic. The Island presented numerous laterals which were practically without defences and so ideal for a disembarkation.

The insufficient defences on the beaches of Sicily were partly the result of a lack of time, but also of an Italian precise strategy. The *Comando Supremo* was convinced that the Allies were to attack on a larger front, and therefore, it evaluated that it was no sense spend great effort for permanent defences. Roatta was explicit and didn't hide the difficulty and admitted that there wasn't any possibility of reinforcing the anti-ship defences and in fact had written that there wasn't other solution if not to trust the Italian aerial and naval reaction and the duty of protection of all the exposed elements. All vulnerable zones for a disembarkation were analysed and it was found that Gela, Licata, Marsala, Mazara del Vallo and Porto Empedocle were without anti-ship batteries. Therefore, it was indispensable to complete the defensive arrangements. The question was urgent and cannot be taken lightly by an ordinary administration.

Reading the Report of Roatta, there is the sensation that he hadn't much confidence in the employment of Sicilians in the defence of Italian soil. He suggested as indispensable a number of measures such as the employment of local technicians and manpower or otherwise the prohibition of non-necessary civil works.

Types of *casematte* (pillboxes)

Typical *casematte* consisted of at least of three types: well-shaped posts, built-in "Circular 7000" defensive posts and "Circular 15000" defensive posts. The well-shaped posts construction is similar to the denominated German "Tobruk" outposts. This defensive construction typology was based on the use of automatic weapons, and consisted of small dimensions, constructed in concrete or in stones excavated in earth. It had also a communication trench or directly to a circular well, dug around 1 metre in earth, for one or two soldiers. The majority of these well-shaped posts constructed in the stronghold of Augusta-Syracuse were made of stones cut on the site, rather than concrete, especially along the coasts. Concrete was used, instead, in the construction of well-shaped posts along the countryside and the streets[15].

The "Circular 7000" of General Pariani, introduced a new defensive concession and especially a new typology system. With the massive and complexed fortifications, were flanked and then substituted from 1938 onwards, by concrete built-in. These new defensive posts were destined for one or two weapons, manned by three or four men, and were easy to construct with reduced costs[16].

The new constructive typology was hugely employed in the stronghold of Augusta-Syracuse, with the construction of around 300 circular *fortini*. With their 360° range of fire, they had the relieve function; for strategic factors, they were installed along the intersections and provincial streets, the coast, along the carriageways, and the train stations of Syracuse-Vizzini.

The selection of camouflaging the circular *fortini* was the priority in the defensive strategy of a stronghold, in such a way to confuse the enemy or with vegetation in which were inserted or with an adjacent habitation system[17].

The camouflage scheme of the built-in *fortini* utilised in the stronghold of Augusta-Syracuse, near the inhabited complexes or streets, were to be camouflaged as civil buildings with false windows to hide the loopholes. Another way was by stone-cladding the whole concrete structure.

---

[15] Ivi, p. 19.
[16] Ibidem.
[17] Ivi, p. 20.

The typical armament commonly used in a circular *fortino* was the machine-gun or the artillery piece (Cannone da 47/32 mod. 35 or the Cannone da 75/27). However, by 1943, all the anti-tank guns of the *fortini* of Syracuse were removed, to be used elsewhere[18].

The "Circular 15000" of Maresciallo Rodolfo Graziani, the new Chief of Staff of the *Regio Esercito*, is dated December 1939. These included fixed positions and more complexed of the "Circular 7000", with the capacity of a certain autonomy guaranty in tactic-logistic for the posts, a major ability, and capacity to observe and connecting the defences near the entrances.

The defences were realised with the exploitation of the terrain where they were to be implanted: the favoured accommodation was in caves or combined with a shelter in cave and posts for weapons in reinforced concrete, formed built-in emerging from the terrain[19].

Coastal defences of Pantelleria and Lampedusa

The defences of Pantelleria predicted the construction of 157 complexed works for the use of 550 machine-guns, 300 sub-machine-guns and 48 pieces of 47/32 anti-tank guns. The outworks had to be accomplished in proximity of the coast along the accessible bays in order to stop the disembarkation of enemy troops. The outworks had to be in caves where it was possible, in cement most of them. Most of the works were to resist against heavy calibre shells, while those works which were considered important were to resist medium calibre shells[20].

The fixed defences of the Island of Lampedusa consisted of various dislodgements of the *Regio Esercito*, were constituted of cornerstones distributed along the coast. The systematic defence predicted the constitution of 63 cavern works or in cement with protection against medium calibre. As in the case of Pantelleria, it wasn't possible to finish the programme of construction of these coastal defences by 8th May 1943, and so some of these works were completed[21].

One of the *casamatte* at forming part of the *Cozzo Telegrafo* complex at Brucoli Campolato with thin longish portholes for observation and machine-gun/s. It is cladded with rubble stones. This defensive complex defended the stronghold of Augusta and Syracuse [source: Lorenzo Bovi].

[18] Ibidem.
[19] Ibidem.
[20] L. Bovi, S. Barone, *Bunker. Guida Storico- Turistica. La difesa di Pantelleria*, Nuova Grafica Invernale, 2022, p. 10.
[21] Id., *Bunker. Guida Storico- Turistica. La difesa di Lampedusa*, Nuova Grafica Invernale, 2023, p. 9.

Another view of the same *casamatta* [source: Lorenzo Bovi].

A restored *casamatta* at Ponte Grande (Ristorante Dafne) of Syracuse, with two longish portholes and what it seem to be an entrance. It also housed a light anti-tank gun [source: Lorenzo Bovi].

A 'Tobruk' type concrete emplacement, in Cassibile Cugni Stallaini area, Syracuse, for a garrison of two or three soldiers armed with a machine-gun and other light weapons [source: Lorenzo Bovi].

The interior of a *casamatta* [source: Lorenzo Bovi].

The corridor to a 'Tobruk' type concrete emplacement [source: Lorenzo Bovi].

Another *casamatta* with narrow portholes, for two/three soldiers [source: Lorenzo Bovi].

A 'Tobruk' type concrete emplacement.

A hexagonal concrete *casamatta* with at least two longish machine-gun portholes and an entrance protected by a shallow wall [source: Lorenzo Bovi].

A close-up of the entrance to the same *casamatta*. Note that the wall is not shallow, but dug in earth, protected by a wall, as consigliament [source: Lorenzo Bovi].

The entrance door to a shallow *casamatta*, which was also dug and constructed with concrete, probably for an anti-tank gun [source: Lorenzo Bovi].

A much more higher *casamatta* with a number of machine-gun portholes at Punta Secca, Scicli [source: Lorenzo Bovi].

The rear of a *casamatta*, with an entrance and two machine-gun portholes at Punta Secca, Scicli [source: Lorenzo Bovi].

A lower *casamatta*, with what seems to be a machine-gun porthole at Punta Secca, Scicli [source: Lorenzo Bovi].

A rectangular *casamatta* with a longish porthole for a light anti-tank gun, at Punta Secca, Scicli [source: Lorenzo Bovi].

Conclusion

There is a comparison between the Maltese pillboxes and the Sicilian casematte – they were built to resist and stop any attempted invasion of their Islands. However, those built in Malta were never tested, while those in Sicily were tested by being bypassed/overwhelmed, with the result that brought the Island into the Allies.

Both islands experienced the starting programme of such constructions before the Italian declaration of war on June 10, 1940. In Malta, the two main shapes used in the building of such structures were mainly low/longish shape and box-like shape. Those constructed in Sicily consisted mainly of two shapes; the well-shapes posts derived from the German "Tobruk" outposts and the circular-shaped posts. The Maltese pillboxes were mainly armed with heavy/light machine-guns, rifles and revolvers, while the Sicilian casemated were armed with machine-guns, sub-machine-guns and two types of anti-tank guns.

Last, but not least, they are an integral part of both Islands recent history and must never be abandoned or left to be demolished for one reason or another. In both islands there are many WWII history enthusiasts who ae dedicated for the preservation of these pillboxes/*casematte*[22].

The author wishes to thank Dr. Davide Zendri for encouraging me in presenting this paper and Lorenzo Bovi who is an expert about the Sicilian casematte for helping and supplying photos and some cut-out drawings.

[22] The author wishes to thank Dr. Davide Zendri for encouraging me in presenting this paper and Lorenzo Bovi who is an expert about the Sicilian *casematte* for helping and supplying some cut-out drawings.

Abstract

Il saggio offre un'analisi comparativa dei sistemi difensivi costieri di Malta e Sicilia durante la Seconda guerra mondiale, con particolare attenzione alle fortificazioni erette tra il 1935 e il 1943. Entrambe le isole, infatti, si dotarono di un sistema di fortificazioni per contrastare un'eventuale invasione nemica.

A Malta, la costruzione delle *pillbox* iniziò nel 1935 in risposta alla crescente tensione internazionale, intensificandosi poi tra il 1938 e il 1942. Le prime *pillbox*, costruite con cura e attenzione al mimetismo, presentavano forme arrotondate e rivestimenti in pietra per confondersi con l'ambiente circostante. Con l'avvicinarsi della guerra, si privilegiò la rapidità di costruzione, realizzando strutture squadrate, spesso semplicemente dipinte per mimetizzarsi. Le *pillbox* erano armate con mitragliatrici, fucili e disponevano di scorte di munizioni, acqua e viveri per garantire la sopravvivenza degli uomini in caso di assedio.

In Sicilia, la costruzione delle "casematte" si intensificò tra il 1941 e il 1943, in previsione di un possibile sbarco alleato. Le casematte, realizzate in diverse tipologie, comprendevano postazioni a pozzo di derivazione tedesca e fortini circolari di varia grandezza, spesso mimetizzati con la vegetazione o integrati in edifici civili per sfuggire all'osservazione nemica. L'armamento era costituito da mitragliatrici, cannoni anti-carro e pezzi di artiglieria.

L'articolo evidenzia come, nonostante le similitudini, i due sistemi difensivi ebbero un destino diverso: le *pillbox* maltesi non furono mai messe alla prova, mentre le casematte siciliane vennero sopraffatte durante lo sbarco alleato del 1943. Debono conclude sottolineando l'importanza di preservare queste strutture come testimonianza storica di un periodo cruciale per entrambe le isole.