

‘THE ORDER OF MALTA’S EFFORTS DURING THE WARS OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY: A GLORIOUS TRADITION OF AID.’

The archives of the Sovereign Military Order of Malta feature precious photographic records that demonstrate the extraordinary relief work performed by the Order of Malta's Military Corps. Moreover, the aid work carried out during the Italo-Turkish war in Libya (1911-12) and the Second World War is described in articles published in the Order of Malta's magazine.

Founded in 1877, the Military Corps is heir to the glorious traditions of the Knights Hospitaller of the Sovereign Order of Saint John who, ever since their creation, have had a very important mission to accomplish: caring for the sick. The twentieth century was marked by wars that, due to their extent and brutality, accelerated the evolution of systems and organisations for aiding wounded civilians and soldiers, recognised by the Hague and Geneva Conventions. After the First World War, representatives from the Order of Malta decided to set up associations in the countries in which it operated so as to organise and develop relief work and hospital care. Today the Order's emergency relief agencies operate in 30 countries on all continents.

The Order's Military Corps has been a special auxiliary volunteer corps of the Italian Army since 1877. Its relationship with



THE REGINA MARGHERITA HOSPITAL SHIP, 1911-1912



HOSPITAL TRAIN I NEAR THE RUSSIAN FRONT DURING THE SECOND WORLD WAR

the Italian Armed Forces is one of close cooperation, though it remains an independent corps that can intervene in case of natural calamities.

Thanks to the photographs and articles published in the Order of Malta's magazine, available on this website, you can read about the work done by the Corps during the following missions:

- The 1911 Italo-Turkish War in Libya with a hospital ship, the Regina Margherita;
- The First World War – 1915-18 – with four hospital trains, a territorial hospital and six first aid stations;
- The Second World War and the Resistance – 1940-45 – with 19 territorial hospitals, numerous first aid stations and four hospital trains that brought home over 24,000 wounded soldiers, particularly from the Russian front.

In addition, the Magistral Archives have preserved photographs and articles on the first mobile field hospital, the Baracca Ospedale (or 'hospital hut') of 1877: a modular building made of wood and waterproof canvas that could easily be moved, even over long distances.

The Order of Malta's hospital and humanitarian relief work during the Italo-Turkish War in Libya (1911), the First World War (1915) and the Second World War will be presented according to the following topics:

- Hospital ships
- Hospital trains
- Hospitals, first aid stations and clinics



THE BARACCA OSPEDALE 'HOSPITAL HUT',
19TH CENTURY

The protection of hospital ships is guaranteed by the Hague Convention

Hospital ships were officially recognised in the Hague Convention of 1907. Article 4 specifically states the conditions whereby a vessel could be considered a 'hospital ship':

- The ship must be clearly marked and lit as a hospital ship.
- The ship should give medical assistance to wounded personnel of all nationalities.
- The ship must not be used for any military purpose.
- The ship must neither interfere with nor hamper enemy combatant vessels.
- Belligerents, as designated by the Hague Convention, can search any hospital ship to investigate violations of the above conditions.

Should any of the above conditions be violated, the ship must be considered a combatant vessel and can be legitimately hit and sunk. However, deliberately opening fire on, or sinking, a hospital ship, as recognised by the Hague Convention, must be considered a war crime.

The Regina Margherita hospital ship

The Regina Margherita steamer, requisitioned and hired from the Italian Royal Navy, was placed in the hands of the Association of Italian Knights of the Sovereign Military Order of Malta from 12 October 1911 to 28 February 1912 and during that time it successfully carried out seven missions in Libya as a hospital vessel.

Different activities were carried out on board by the following figures:

- A director and vice director representing the Order, reporting to the President of the Association of Italian Knights.
- A healthcare service run by a chief medical officer with four assistants, a pharmacist and care personnel, reporting to the directors.



MEMBERS OF STAFF ON BOARD THE REGINA MARGHERITA HOSPITAL SHIP, 1911-1912

- Religious services run by a chaplain and six Sisters of Divine Charity, reporting to the directors.
- Nautical, engine room service etc. run by the ship's captain, with three officers and the merchant seamen employed by the ship's owner.
- Military command and communication services run by a lieutenant of the Italian Royal Navy.

At the end of its four-month mission, the list of its achievements was truly extraordinary. Apart from the first aid provided and the free distribution of medicines, medical materials and provisions, over 1,300 people were admitted and treated and over 1,000 were taken home. It was only a few days after its last mission that the news broke that the Regina Margherita steamer had suddenly sunk while moored in the port of Genoa, due to a damaged hull.

FOR MORE INFORMATION, VIEW THE FOLLOWING ARTICLES FROM THE MAGISTRAL LIBRARY:

Rivista Illustrata del SMO di Malta 1942, Anno VI, Num. 1, Gennaio-Febbraio, pag 9-14.

Rivista Illustrata del SMO di Malta 1942, Anno VI, Num. 2, Marzo-Aprile, Copertina

Rivista Illustrata del SMO di Malta 1942, Anno VI, Num. 2, Marzo-Aprile, Allegato 2

Rivista Illustrata del SMO di Malta 1942, Anno VI, Num. 2, Marzo-Aprile, pag. 10-18

Rivista Illustrata del SMO di Malta 1943, Anno VII, Num. 2, Marzo-Aprile , pag. 4-13

The Order of Malta's hospital trains

The first hospital trains fitted by the Order of Malta's Military Corps with 300 hospital beds began active duty in 1898.

They were used for the first time on 27 December 1908 when a catastrophic earthquake hit Messina at 5.21am, followed by an enormous tidal wave. The Order of Malta immediately came to the assistance of the local population, setting up its 'hospital hut', with 125 beds, and ordering the departure of Train III from Milan and Train I from Rome to transport the wounded to the hospitals of Naples and Rome.

Later on, in 1915, the Military Corps prepared to enter the First World War with four trains. The trains had an essential role, both in freeing up hospitals in the war zone and during military manoeuvres, transporting and treating the sick and wounded.

On 29 July 1940, Her Royal Highness the Princess of Piedmont visited Ostiense station to see the first hospital train of the Sovereign Order of Malta to have been refurbished with groundbreaking improvements. During the Second World War, hospital trains I, II and IV came into active service during the Campaigns of Greece, Albania, Yugoslavia and Russia.

Below is an excerpt from the article that appeared in the Order of Malta's illustrated magazine in 1942, Year VI, June, page 9:

TORNANO I FERITI DALLA GUERRA

L'arrivo del treno-ospedale dei Cavalieri di Malta, dall'Italia sul fronte di guerra nel Bacino del Donez era un avvenimento così notevole, che destava meraviglia fra i reparti dei nostri prodi. Un treno-ospedale italiano, con la candida Croce dei Cavalieri di Malta, proprio là, a più di quattromila chilometri dalla Patria, tra il groviglio di binari di fortuna continuamente battuti e sconvolti dalle raffiche dei nemici che tentano invano di arrestarci sul cammino della vittoria, poteva sembrare anche una imprudenza. Era già la terza volta che quel treno compiva un



INSIDE A HOSPITAL TRAIN

così lungo viaggio. Mai gli ardimenti della carità non sono secondi agli ardimenti della guerra. Il treno con i suoi volontari, medici, infermieri, suore, diretti dal Bali Marchese Carlo Maresca di Camerano - come già altre volte dal Marchese Luigi Tornielli e dal Bali Barone Antonio Cavallini Garofoli si era spinto fin là, e si era fermato tra un edificio bombardato la notte, e alcuni crateri recenti di bombe esplose sui binari. Bisognava raccogliere il maggior numero possibile dei nostri prodi, non fiaccati nello spirito, ma vulnerati nel corpo dalle armi e dalle malattie, e portarli lontani dal teatro della guerra, e possibilmente in Patria. Il gelo, il vento, il nevischio, la pioggia non arresteranno la pia fatica dei volontari della carità. Le ambulanze traballanti sul terreno tutto a fosse e fango giungono dagli ospedaletti da campo, mentre tuona il cannone e nel cielo fosco, gli aeroplani amici e nemici si contendono il volo e l'offesa.

FOR MORE INFORMATION, VIEW THE FOLLOWING ARTICLES FROM THE MAGISTRAL LIBRARY:

Rivista Mensile Illustrata del SMO di Malta 1940, Anno IV, Num.8-9, Agosto-Settembre, pag 19-21.

Rivista Illustrata del SMO di Malta 1941, Anno V, Num.3-4, Marzo-Aprile, pag 12

Rivista Illustrata del SMO di Malta 1942, Anno VI, Num.4, Giugno, pag 7-14

Rivista Illustrata del SMO di Malta 1942, Anno VI, Num.6, Agosto-Settembre, Copertina

Rivista Illustrata del SMO di Malta 1943, Anno VII, Num.1, Gennaio-Febbraio, pag 6-9

Rivista Illustrata del SMO di Malta 1943, Anno VII, Num.5, Luglio-Settembre, pag 7-10

The Order's hospitals, clinics, first aid stations and children's homes

As soon as Italy entered the war in 1915, the Military Corps prepared itself by setting up eight first aid stations, opening Santa Marta hospital in Rome (with a capacity of 350 beds), a field hospital in Togliano (in the province of Udine) and deploying its four hospital trains.

The Royal Decree on 'Measures regarding the personnel running ACISMOM (the Association of Italian Knights of the Sovereign Military Order of Malta) services' was signed on 4 January 1938 and it was later finalised on 26 July by the 'Convention on the ACISMOM's wartime cooperation with the health service'. The ACISMOM mobilised four hospital trains, eight first aid stations, one field hospital and one or more territorial hospitals. In 1941, it set up the Principe di Piemonte hospital in Via Monserrato, Rome, in just 25 days.

Below are a few extracts from an article which appeared in the Order of Malta's illustrated magazine (Year III, issue 3-4, March-April, 1944 pp.6-12):

"...Esso è stato modernamente attrezzato in ogni suo reparto superando non lievi difficoltà di ubicazione, di ambienti e di installazioni, in soli 25 giorni, ed ha una capienza di 225 letti dei quali 30 per ufficiali. Si divide in quattro Reparti, intitolati a nomi cari alla storia dell'Ordine: Reparto Malta, per ufficiali; Reparto Rodi, per degenti "Chirurgici"; Reparto Tripoli d'Africa, per degenti "Malati"; Reparto Gerusalemme per "Otitici". Ogni reparto ha una sua "medicheria" con un piccolo "Magazzino biancheria", sezioni di smistamento del Magazzino principale. Chiudiamo questo breve cenno sull'Ospedale dell'Associazione dei Cavalieri Italiani in Roma, indicando la cifra delle degenze che al 31 gennaio 1944 ammontavano a 170.263: ed è questa una cifra che dimostra chiaramente l'intensità della vita che si è svolta tra le sue mura dall'inizio del secondo conflitto mondiale ad oggi."



A MAP OF ROME SHOWING THE HOSPITALS AND FIRST AID STATIONS SET UP BY THE ASSOCIATION OF KNIGHTS OF THE VENERABLE TONGUE OF ITALY IN 1944, DURING THE WAR

The article goes on to list other first aid stations:

“Altri posti di soccorso l’Associazione gestisce in Roma; Quattro di tali posti hanno capacità di ricovero; sono i Posti di Soccorso di Piazza Monte Grappa, con una capacità di 20 letti, diretto da I P.pe Fabrizio Pignatelli; Tuscolano, con una capacità di 20 letti; del Santuario dei Divino Amore con una capacità di 20 letti; Pariola, con una capacità di 70 letti, diretto dal Principe Giulio Pacelli. Quattro posti hanno solo possibilità di pronto soccorso: quelli della Pineta Sacchetti : dei quartiere Nomentano , di Sant’Agnese e della Garbatella (Villa Pozzi). Essi sono, come si vede, eretti nei punti periferici della Capitale e destinati prevalentemente alle prestazioni medico-chirurgiche per le vittime eventuali di bombardamenti aerei, di incidenti di qualsiasi genere derivanti dallo stato di guerra.....L’Associazione gestisce inoltre un piccolo Ambulatorio medico gratuito per i poveri, situato in via Labico ed affidato alle amorevoli cure delle Suore di San Paolo. Un’altra importante attività assistenziale è doveroso menzionare per completare il quadro delle opere di bene alle quali, conformemente al suo Statuto, il nostro Ordine si è dedicato in questo tremendo periodo. Gran Magistero dell’Ordine ha ritenuto opportuno promuovere la costituzione di una importante scorta di medicinali e di latte per i bambini e gli infermi nei locali dell’Istituto delle Figlie della Carità, in via dei Bresciani n. 33. Il quantitativo giornalmente distribuito ammonta a 350 litri, suddivisi in razioni di un quarto; esse sarà prossimamente raddoppiato.”

In order to make sure that this complex system of medical and humanitarian aid worked properly, many figures from the Order were involved: Knights as unit directors, military chaplains, commissioned officers, some of whom were warehouse managers or adjutant generals, medical officers employed by the Order, Franciscan Elizabethan Sisters, Sisters of Divine Charity, volunteer nurses, male nurses, sentries and the Order's hospital attendants.

In 1945, His Royal Highness Lieutenant General Umberto of Savoy decreed that a home for blind and maimed children should be set up in a building – part of the Quirinale presidential palace – and handed over to the Association of Italian Knights of the Sovereign Military Order of Malta: Casa Maria Beatrice.

FOR MORE INFORMATION, VIEW THE FOLLOWING ARTICLES FROM THE MAGISTRAL LIBRARY:

Rivista Illustrata del SMO di Malta 1941, Anno V, Num.3-4, Marzo-Aprile, pag 6-12.

Rivista Illustrata del SMO di Malta 1941, Anno V, Num.8-9, Agosto-Settembre, pag 11-14.

Rivista Illustrata del SMO di Malta 1942, Anno VI, Num.5, Luglio, Copertina

Rivista Illustrata del SMO di Malta 1943, Anno VII, Num.4, Giugno, pag 5

Rivista Illustrata del SMO di Malta 1944, Anno VIII, Num.3-4, Marzo-Aprile, Allegato con Pianta di Roma con Indicazione degli Ospedali e Posti di Soccorso

Rivista Illustrata del SMO di Malta 1944, Anno VIII, Num.3-4, Marzo-Aprile, pag 6-12

Rivista Illustrata del SMO di Malta 1945, Anno IX, Num.1, Gennaio-Marzo, pag 7-11

Rivista Illustrata del SMO di Malta 1945, Anno IX, Num.2, Aprile-Giugno, pag 9-11

Rivista Illustrata del SMO di Malta 1945, Anno IX, Num.4, Ottobre-Dicembre, pag 17-20