

And the Band played on

By George Griffiths

I was looking for a story, a good story. Something of human interest, something unusual to share with our readers. I was told to make my way to the Sydney suburb of Yagoona. There, in a tree-lined street, sits a modest but quite a neat cottage, the home of Charles Xuereb.

There I listened to an amazing tale of achievement. I learnt the story of one whose entire long life seemed to have evolved around two things – service uniforms and military music. Everything else paled into insignificance.

From the beginning

It is possibly true to say that the very first thing young Charles heard when he came into this world was a military band. The very first thing he saw as he first opened his eyes were his proud mother and his father's army uniform. Uniforms and military bands continued to be the dominant features of his life.

Charles Xuereb was born on the 18th day of April in the year 1900. A new century dawned. Just for coincidence, readers might observe that the year 1900 was the birth of the Commonwealth of Australia. But that, in the life of Charles Xuereb, came later, as we shall see.

The family Xuereb lived in Floriana, a garrison town where the military presence in Malta was traditional. A military barracks or two, a parade ground, quartermasters stores and the occasional piece of artillery being towed through the narrow streets of the suburb made the town of Floriana, in a way, synonymous with the British Army in Malta.

All this and the fact that his father was serving in the Army lured young Charles to a life in uniform. Combined with a very early love of music, this gave him the opportunity to indulge in a career which was to span the best part of fifty and more years of his lifetime. At the age of 13, Charles left the classroom in the Floriana Garrison School and donned his first smart red uniform of Bands Boy in the First Battalion of the King's Own Malta Regiment of Militia.

Traditions

The Regiment that Charles chose for his military career had excellent credentials. Its origins went back to the year 1888.

A need for the defence of Malta led the then Governor, Field Marshal Sir Linton Simmons, to propose to the Malta Council of Government that a Force of Militia be formed. The proposal was carried unanimously and a year later The Malta Regiment of Militia was born. The idea from its earliest beginnings had the enthusiastic support of the then Chief Secretary to the Government, Malta-born Count Gerald Strickland, who in due course earned a commission in the Regiment.

There was a great deal of military tradition in Malta that the newly formed Militia were expected to live up to. It seems they did this quite well. In time, authority was granted for the raising of a second battalion and His Majesty King Edward VII honoured the Regiment by conferring the title, King's Own. Henceforth the Royal title remained and well do many readers remember the gallant and valuable service it rendered during the Second World War. The Regiment we came to know so well bore the proud title, shortened for convenience by us, to the now famous letters K.O.M.R.

Within a year of service, when Charles was hardly a day older than 14, the Great War cast its ugly shadow over Europe. The two battalions of the Regiment were mobilised in August 1914 and took over the task of defending Malta when the British infantry regiments left the Island for active service abroad. Several Maltese officers and men of the K.O.M.R. volunteered for service on the front and were posted to British Regiments. Amongst the young men was one who was later to return to civilian life and serve as Commissioner for Malta in Australia. Captain Henry Curmi was one of many who did his old Regiment and country proud.

They also served who stayed

The role Malta was called upon to play in the Great War (1914 – 1918) was different to what was demanded of her in the next war that came, one that many of us recall with feeling.

The Island was spared direct enemy action due to the distance from the active war fronts. Malta therefore served as a haven and repair place for the Royal Navy and fleets of Allied nations. As a storehouse of war material and as a Nurse of great humanitarian service to the thousands of war wounded. Malta played its role. The wounded came from various fronts but mostly they came from Salonika.



3. Charles and young family—BW



Amongst these brave men were many Australians, some of whom never recovered. They remained there forevermore in Malta's sacred soil.

The young bandsman Charles Xuereb of the First Battalion, the King's Own Regiment of Militia, served in the best role he was trained for. Frequently the Regimental Bands gave outdoor programmes of music in localities so familiar to our readers. The palace Square and the Upper Barracca saw Charles contributing his part as first Coronet to the band, and the young man played as if life itself depended on it. To the hospitals of Imtarga, Verdala and others the Band went and there played whole afternoon programmes. In the large hospital wards, many a wounded Anzac listened with pleasure and relaxed.

Came the Armistice and with it the inevitable demobilisation, Charles, now in his 19th year, reverted to part-time duties. He supplemented his livelihood with casual engagements with civilian bands. Amongst these was the King's Own Band Club of Valletta and the Orchestra playing at the Royal Opera House in Strada Reale.

For a brief period from 1920, Charles Xuereb was invited to join what remained of the permanent staff of the Regiment, as Music Instructor. However, on the 31st December 1921, the two Battalions of the King's Own Regiment of Militia were disbanded.

Charles recalls quite well the magnificent turnout of the Regiment on this occasion. The Regimental Band, under the direction of Band Master Charles Xuereb, led the ceremonial parade on Palace Square, after which the Colours were deposited in the Oratory of St John's Co-Cathedral, where they remain today.

On return to Civilian life, Charles had served "8 years, 260 days, including 5 years 151 days embodied service and 1 year 134 days as Acting Drummer on the Permanent Staff," or so said his Discharge Certificate.

Only the uniform changed

Civilian life seemed to have held no great attraction to Charles Xuereb after having served the best part of his youth, over eight-and-a-half years, in a Military uniform. But if there was no longer room for him in the Army, perhaps there was a place somewhere in the Senior Service, the Royal Navy! And a place there was for Charles.

Having sat successfully for a competitive entrance examination, Charles Xuereb, in July 1922, passed into the Royal Navy as Ship's Musician.

The task was quite similar; life was almost the same as in the Army. Only the uniform had changed. He was now instructing young seamen in the art of music.

Charles was to serve nine years in the Royal Navy before he again "came ashore" at his own request in August 1931. During this time, as Ship's Musician and later as Bandmaster, Charles was to visit a great many foreign ports. On board *HMS Concord*, *Carradoc*, *Coventry* and the *Cairo*, Charles Xuereb "played on and on," entertained and instructed, served and at the same time enjoyed to the full a seaman's life on the ocean wave. He served too for a while on a ship that never put to sea. This was *HMS Egmont*, which most of our readers will remember as *HMS St Angelo*.

But it was a light cruiser, *HMS Delhi*, that gave Charles Xuereb perhaps some of his fondest memories. It gave him not just a worldwide cruise, but also his first and lasting taste for Australia.

First taste of Australia

In November 1925 the Royal Navy light cruiser *HMS Delhi* was to be temporarily detached from the Cruiser Squadron of His Majesty's Mediterranean Fleet and proceed to sea on voyage to the Commonwealth of Australia, there to serve for a period on combined sea duties with the Australian Squadron including naval manoeuvres and visits to England and foreign ports in the Pacific.

What all this meant to Charles Xuereb was 10 months' foreign-post cruising, band playing and conducting, afloat and ashore. It meant more really. It gave Charles his first taste of Australia, which in time made Charles and his family seek and successfully make a good life for themselves here.

Delhi left Grand Harbour on the 15th November 1925 as Charles stood in typical fine sunny Malta weather with the ship's band playing farewell, as the light cruiser steamed past the Valletta breakwater. At Port Said, Aden and Colombo, the ship called "to show the flag" and give the officers and men a well-earned run ashore. The same at Penang and Singapore. *Delhi* then proceeded to the Dutch port of Batavia, where the ship's company were entertained by the Netherlands Naval Squadron. In typical Royal Navy fashion, the men of *HMS Delhi* reciprocated. En route south, *Delhi* called at Christmas Island to the delight of the few English families stationed there.

First Australian landfall was Fremantle on 3rd January 1926, where *HMS Delhi* received its first typical Australian warm welcome. On board came what seemed to be the whole town population as the ship "was opened to visitors." Ashore went Charles and his ship's band to entertain, and the evening saw the ship's orchestra, under the baton of Charles Xuereb, play light music as the Royal Navy ship played host to visiting Australian dignitaries and their ladies.

The weather was fine and friendly across the Bight and up as far as Sydney, where *Delhi* made anchor on 18th January. Public inspections, exchange of greetings and reciprocal entertainment over, *Delhi* proceeded to Jervis Bay for its first of many naval manoeuvres with the Australian Squadron. Hobart and Brisbane were other ports visited by *Delhi* before the ship paid a courtesy call at Vila (now Vanuatu) in the New Hebrides. Then came Christchurch, Wellington and Auckland in New Zealand, back to Jervis Bay from where *Delhi* commenced her return journey home.

Travelling northward, the ship called at Gladstone and Thursday Island and then onto the familiar ports of Singapore, Colombo and the Suez Canal. At Port Said, a full programme of entertainment was awaiting the ship's Company, including a Gala Dance organised by the Port Said Maltese Community. Charles well remembers the evening the large dance hall elaborately decorated with Union Jacks and Maltese Flags.

HMS Delhi steamed into Grand Harbour on the 20th August 1926 and as the ship's company lined the docks to acknowledge the cheers from the Barracas, Band Master Xuereb and the proud ship's band stood on top No. 5 Gun Platform and "played on".

Looking back

Charles looks back with pride on this part of his life in the service of his country. The journey to Australia on *HMS Delhi* was certainly a highlight in his long service career. But, what of all the incidents does Charles remember most vividly in that journey of 1925 that gave him his first taste of Australia?

There is quite a bit to remember, but surely two incidents come quickly to his mind. One was the way he led the band of the *HMS Delhi* through the streets of Sydney on the Anzac Day March and the other was the day he first met Fr. William Bonert at St Mary's Cathedral.

Charles remembers having met "the priest" within minutes of stepping ashore at Man-of-War steps outside Sydney's Botanic Gardens. A Band Concert given by the ship's orchestra at the Taronga Park Zoological Gardens and another, also "under his baton" and rendered at the Ellerslie Racecourse in Auckland New Zealand, are incidents Charles remembers well.

Change of uniforms once more

Nine years in the Royal Navy packed enough experiences into the career of Charles Xuereb that would take a lifetime in others.

Charles came ashore and ended his service in the Royal Navy on the last day of August in 1931. For the next few months, once more a full-time civilian, he filled his time with engagements with bands and orchestras, things he knew so well.

In the meantime a new Army Regiment was raised in Malta, called the King's Own Malta Regiment, and this was entrusted to Colonel P. Worrall, seconded

from the Devonshire Regiment. The name Worrall was to become a household name with Boy Scouts on the Island, as the huge and jovial Colonel was also to become Island Commissioner of Scouts.

Sure enough our Charles Xuereb could not resist the temptation and in December 1932 he made his way once again to St Elmo and there formed the new Regiment as Band Master. Charles was back to his first love, the Army. His engagement was not permanent, so for extra bread, Charles played first trumpet at the Opera House Orchestra in Valletta.

Peace time Army life as a Territorial was fine; the comradeship, the discipline and the great satisfaction of doing a worthwhile service for one's country were all things that made Charles tick. He loved the Army and music was in his blood.

Then came the fateful year 1939 and overnight Charles, the Army and indeed the whole Island of Malta were all mobilised for war. The rest is in the history books. What of all things does Charles remember most vividly of the war years? Of course there was so much from which to choose, but Charles nominates the proud moments of 13th September 1942. On the Palace Square in Valletta he led the combined bands of the Regiment as the Lord Govt. V.C., Governor and Commander-in-Chief presented the award of the George Cross to the Chief Justice, the Rt. Hon Justice George Borg. There were other moments far too numerous to list.

Demobbed in 1946, Charles, once again a civilian, picked up where best he could and, with a family to sustain, "he played on". In or out of uniform, Charles had music to which to turn.

One of several appointments he took up was that of Band Master at the Salesian School, St. Patrick's in Sliema.

Migration fever

Like so many of us, Charles Xuereb could not resist the temptation, and though he may not quite remember what actually made him do it he set his sights on Australia.

In 1957 accompanied by his wonderful wife Pauline, two sons and two daughters, the family Xuereb boarded the *Aurelia* bound for Sydney. Here they were reunited with a son and two married daughters, who had nicely settled down.

Like the rest of us, the family Xuereb brought some of their treasured household possessions, those very personal mementos, to their new home in Australia. But Charles brought with him more than that. With Charles came his large and valuable collection of military uniforms, badges, buttons and campaign medals, carefully packed and nursed all the way on-board *Aurelia*. Not forgetting his own decorations, Charles treasured his Coronation Medal (1937) and his Territorial Efficiency Medal (with Bar), along with the Africa Star and the rest. There were also certificates of appreciation from Governors, and there were military swords and rifles he had collected from visits to foreign ports in his days in the Royal Navy.

There were Testimonials from various European Musical Colleges, awarded to Charles for musical compositions. There were photos, certificates of merit, of services and various others. There were also large collections of sheet music and books. All these came with Charles on the ship to Australia and would become the pride and joy of the family home in the suburb of Yagoona.

In the blood

And so in the year 1957 Charles Xuereb was in another world, but one which he had visited as a young bandsman on board *HMS Delhi* in 1926. It was not all that strange after all. But this time Charles had a family to sustain and, once more a civilian, facing still a decade or so of employment.

A lifetime of leadership in the British Army and years imparting musical knowledge to others prepares a man for any situation So, it was no big deal for Charles to find suitable employment. Old soldiers do not just sit at home and brood.

In fact, Charles did more. As a sideline to his full-time job, he played trumpet with the Elizabethan Theatre Orchestra. And as if that was not enough, seeing that two sons had enlisted in the Citizen Military Forces and a third was serving as a gunner in Malaya with the Royal Australian Regiment of the Artillery, Charles did the right thing, again. He joined up!

Once more Charles Xuereb, one time of the King's Own Regiment of Militia, late of the Royal Navy and the K.O.M.R., went along to NSW Regiment and signed up. Once again Charles was in uniform. Once again Charles was in the music which he loved. Long may he enjoy the memories of a wonderful life.

