

The Knights Hospitallers or the Knights of St John

As we go through the order of the Mediterranean Pass and the Order of Malta, we become Knights of the Order of Malta. In our ritual we are informed that St. John the Baptist is the Patron Saint of the Order and that we are now a Knight Hospitaler of St. John of Jerusalem, Palestine, Rhodes and Malta. We learn through the various Banner Guards about the orders history in Jerusalem, Palestine, Rhodes and Malta but what happens after the Knights take possession of Malta?

We learn through these lessons about the defeat of the Knights in Rhodes in 1522 after being besieged by Suleiman. After this defeat, Emperor Charles V of Spain came to an agreement in 1530 with Pope Clement the VII and granted the Maltese islands as well as Gozo and Tripoli to the Order as a perpetual fiefdom of the order for a fee: a single Maltese Falcon. The Order was reluctant to accept the offer of Malta, Gozo and Tripoli.

Malta was a small desolate island which was a far cry from the majesty of their former home in Rhodes. They soon set up creating forts on the various islands and set up a naval base on Malta. Pope Clement the VII wanted the Order stationed on the Maltese islands as a defensive perimeter against the Ottomans. It was not long before this strategy paid off. In 1551, Commander Dragut and the Ottoman Admiral Sinan and a force of 10,000 attacked and took control over the base in Gozo. Next, they turned their attention to Tripoli which they were able to overrun quickly.

Grand Master of the Order Juan de Homedes ordered the strengthening of Fort Saint Angelo as well as the construction of two additional forts, Saint Michael and Saint Elmo in 1552. This caution proved prudent as the forts were crucial in the Great Siege. In 1565, the Suleiman the Magnificent launched an assault upon Malta to gain control over the Mediterranean. This was known as the Great Siege of Malta. The roughly 500 Knights, who, together with roughly 6,000 foot soldiers held off and repelled the invasion force. The Ottomans had amassed an invasion force of roughly 30-40,000 in all including 193 vessels, Siege Towers and sharpshooters. The defenders had concealed artillery loaded with chain shot behind the masonry of the forts, so the invasion force was unaware of its existence. The Knights had also preemptively harvested all food supplies and poisoned wells with bitter herbs and dead animals so as there would be nothing for the Ottomans to use for their advantage.

This battle that the Knights fought was so crucial that even word from as far away as England came. "If the Turks should prevail against the Isle of Malta, it is uncertain what further peril might follow to the rest of Christendom." - Queen Elizabeth I I believe it is fair to say that all of Europe was holding its breath to hear word of on the outcome of this Siege. In the end, some 25-30,000 Ottoman invaders had perished and roughly 2000 of the 6000 defenders had perished. The siege lasted more than 4 months and the defenders withstood nearly 130,000 cannonballs before relief was finally able to land on the island. Some 8,000 men from Spain came to drive off the last of the Ottomans. Malta had held the onslaught. Celebrations were held across Europe after news of the Victory was spread. This battle would be the last large battle involving Crusader Knights.

This victory was the turning point in the expansion of the Ottoman Empire and it became so well known that even Voltaire said, "Nothing is better known than the siege of Malta". Prior to this defeat, there was a perception that the Ottomans were invincible and this helped to shatter that perception. This Siege was the culmination of an escalating contest between Christian alliances and the Islamic Ottoman Empire for control over the Mediterranean.

After their Victory, the Knights permanently set their headquarters there and started to build the city Valletta, which is now the capital of Malta. They built aqueducts, hospitals, schools and cathedrals. The Order thrived for over 200 years until its decline started in the late 1700s. In 1798, Napoleon invaded Malta and expelled the Order. They never regained control over the island and instead it became a British colony.

The Knights Hospitallers or the Knights of Malta for which we take the namesake for our Order was one of honor, duty and chivalry. So be proud of the namesake we take on. Let's try to live up to the sense of duty those knights had when facing such odds against them.

Treavor Wilkinson

Golgotha Commandery No. 7