

THE CLIMACTIC BATTLE AT THE 1565 SIEGE OF MALTA

# THE LAST DAY OF ST ELMO'S

After the fall of the island of Rhodes, the Order of the Knights Hospitaller of St. John were bequeathed the island of Malta by Emperor Charles V. From there, the knights raided Ottoman strongholds, intercepted fleets, and strangled the Turkish dominance of the Mediterranean, as pirates and privateers from both sides ravaged the region.

By Robert Sadler and Andrew Barclay

**S**ultan Suleiman the Magnificent prepared to launch the largest amphibious invasion of the age and attack Malta. He was determined to end the depredations of the knights, and to open a path of conquest to southern Europe.

Warned of impending attack, the Knights of Malta worked feverishly to strengthen and prepare their fortifications and gather reinforcements from all over Europe. The response was tepid at best, but some contingents of troops, predominantly Spanish and Italian, arrived to bolster the defenders. Most of Europe was represented in some unit by volunteers.

The Knights of Malta were led by the very capable Jean Parisot de Valette. Under his unified authority, the Hospitallers organized a highly cohesive defence of Malta, with around 500 knights, a couple of thousand soldiers, including Spanish, Italian, German, and French troops, and perhaps 3000 Maltese volunteers, along with some other units mostly drawn from ships' crews (and even prisoners); Valette gathered around 6000 defenders in total. A relief force of Christian troops was also being mustered on Sicily, but these only arrived towards the end of the siege. De Valette's strategy was to hold out and wear down the attackers until this relief force could arrive.



The Ottoman command was fragmented between Admiral Piyale, a naval commander, and Mustafa Pasha, a renowned commander of the land forces. Both, however, were nominally subordinate to Dragut, the famed corsair. Under their command was an army of some 40,000 troops drawn from across the empire, from North Africa to the Asian Steppes, with around 200 ships.

After some hesitation and exploration, the Ottoman forces eventually landed in the south, around Marsa Sirocco Bay, about 10 km from the main Christian defences around the Grand Harbour. The huge army began moving north, and attempted to surround the fortified towns of Birgu and Senglea, on the south of the Grand Harbour. Despite some disagreement between the Ottoman commanders, a decision



Dating from the late sixteenth century, this depiction of the capture of St Elmo by Ottoman forces is the third of eight paintings dedicated to the 1565 Siege of Malta by artist Matteo Perez. © Public domain



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was made to try to seize the Fort of St Elmo, guarding the harbour entrance to the north, and thereby open up the harbour for the Ottoman fleet. Batteries of heavy artillery were moved into place on the Sciberras Peninsula, on raised ground overlooking the fort, and a large portion of the best Ottoman troops moved into position. The attack began on 27 May 1565.

Following heavy and sustained bombardment, Ottoman armies repeatedly stormed the beleaguered fortress of St Elmo, which was gradually ground down to rubble. Despite some early successes against the outer defences, the defending garrison, which was eventually reduced to under 300 men, managed to hold the breaches against overwhelming odds. Reinforced at night by boats rowing



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across the bay from Birgu, days turned into weeks and the invaders' casualties soared. Christian artillery from across the bay continually harassed the Ottoman lines as well. Dragut was mortally wounded by cannon shrapnel, either from this or from one of his own guns misfiring.



Finally, on Friday 23 June, a final mass assault swept against the battered fort. As legend has it, the commander of the garrison, badly wounded as he was, had himself strapped to a chair in the main breach, where he fought to the last. Just after the fall of the fort, a small Christian relief force

slipped into the bay. It was also after the fall of St Elmo that mounted troops from Medina launched attacks on the Ottoman rear. The main relief force from Sicily arrived considerably later, despite promises of imminent aid. The first Christian citadel of the Great Siege of Malta had fallen...

## CHRISTIAN ORDER OF BATTLE

### Fort Elmo defence force

LANFREDDUCI							3 card general						
Name	Type	Training & Formation	Quality	Armour	Impact Weapon	Melee weapon	SHOOTING		SPECIAL CHARACTERISTICS			No. of bases	Points per base
							Weapon	Firepower	A	B	C		
Maltese Shot	PS	DC	Avg.	A	-	-	Arquebus	HIGH (HFP)	Steady	-	-	6	114
German Shot	PS	DC	Avg.	A	-	-	Arquebus	HIGH (HFP)	Steady	-	-	4	114
Knights	CAV	FL	Sup.	FA	Lancer	Expert swordsman	-	-	Ferocious	Combat shy	Shoot & charge	4	244

LA MAS							4 card general						
Name	Type	Training & Formation	Quality	Armour	Impact Weapon	Melee weapon	SHOOTING		SPECIAL CHARACTERISTICS			No. of bases	Points per base
							Weapon	Firepower	A	B	C		
French League	OF	DF	Sup.	UA	-	Expert swordsman	-	-	-	-	-	4	13
French Arquebusiers	OF	DF	Sup.	UA	-	Swordsmen	Arquebus	HIGH (HFP)	-	-	-	6	13
Heavy Artillery	A	FL	Avg.	UP	NA	NA	Medium cannons	AVE (AFP)	Combat shy	-	-	2	160
German Pike & Shotte	PS	DC	Sup.	UA	-	-	Arquebus	AVE (AFP)	Ferocious	-	-	6	133

### Naval relief force

FRA STARKEY DE LA LANGUE ANGLAIS							3 card general						
Name	Type	Training & Formation	Quality	Armour	Impact Weapon	Melee weapon	SHOOTING		SPECIAL CHARACTERISTICS			No. of bases	Points per base
							Weapon	Firepower	A	B	C		
French Mercenaries	PS	DC	Sup.	UA	-	-	Arquebus	AVE (AFP)	Steady	-	-	6	108
Spanish Tercio	PS	DC	Sup.	A	-	-	Arquebus	AVE (AFP)	Steady	-	-	8	125
Guns fo St Angelo	A	FL	Avg.	UP	NA	NA	Heavy cannons	AVE (AFP)	Combat shy	-	-	4	200

PIERRE D'AUGUSTIN							3 card general						
Name	Type	Training & Formation	Quality	Armour	Impact Weapon	Melee weapon	SHOOTING		SPECIAL CHARACTERISTICS			No. of bases	Points per base
							Weapon	Firepower	A	B	C		
German Pike & Shotte	PS	DC	Sup.	UA	-	-	Arquebus	AVE (AFP)	Ferocious	-	-	6	133
German Mercenaries	PS	DC	Sup.	UA	-	-	Arquebus	AVE (AFP)	Ferocious	-	-	4	133
German Pike & Shotte	PS	DC	Sup.	UA	-	-	Arquebus	AVE (AFP)	Ferocious	-	-	6	133

### Knights of Medina

MATTIAS TANSHAUSER							3 card general						
Name	Type	Training & Formation	Quality	Armour	Impact Weapon	Melee weapon	SHOOTING		SPECIAL CHARACTERISTICS			No. of bases	Points per base
							Weapon	Firepower	A	B	C		
German Mixed Knights	CAV	FL	Avg.	FA	Lancer	Expert swordsman	-	-	-	-	-	6	182
German Heavy Knights	CAV	FL	Sup.	FA	Lancer	Expert swordsman	-	-	Ferocious	Fanatic	-	4	276

PIETRO D'ANGELO							3 card general						
Name	Type	Training & Formation	Quality	Armour	Impact Weapon	Melee weapon	SHOOTING		SPECIAL CHARACTERISTICS			No. of bases	Points per base
							Weapon	Firepower	A	B	C		
French Heavy Knights	CAV	FL	Sup.	FA	Lancer	Expert swordsman	-	-	Ferocious	Fanatic	-	4	276
French Heavy Knights	CAV	FL	Sup.	FA	Lancer	Expert swordsman	-	-	Ferocious	Fanatic	-	4	276
French Mounted Sgt.	CAV	FL	Avg.	A	Light lancer	Expert swordsman	-	-	-	-	-	4	156

**ABBREVIATIONS: (Type)** PS - Pike & Shotte; OF - Other foot; A - Artillery; CAV - Cavalry **(Training & Formation)** DC - Drilled close; FL - Formed loose; DF - Drilled flexible; **(Armour)** A - Armoured; FA - Fully armoured; UA - Unarmoured; UP - Unprotected



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## WARGAMING THE BATTLE

While the Great Siege of Malta would make for an excellent campaign, we decided to run a one-day multi-player battle centred around the last assault on St Elmo. The battle would be a 'what-if' scenario, had the Christian reinforcements from Medina arrived earlier. We decided to use *Mortem et Gloriam*.

The battle was refought in 28mm on a 12' x 8' table (four standard 6' x 4' gaming tables pressed together). The fort was so big we had to extend the rear by another 3' to hold it all. Ottoman figures were sourced from Warlord, with Foundry for the defending Christians. It was a little challenging to manoeuvre troops in the centre of the table, but we made do. Paul Gregson built the fort.

The battlefield was relatively open, with the fortress itself taking up the bulk of it. However, the knights had not been able to complete construction of the outer defensive walls, leaving large gaps in the north and south curtains. These gaps were filled with makeshift barricades but provided a tempting target for flanking cavalry.

The centre left outer wall started the game with a large breach, which counted as a barricade. It was here that the main assault was to take place. To the south, just beyond the walls, was a beach that had to be held to allow reinforcements to land by sea, with three galleys bringing reinforcements ashore. In total, twelve players participated, and the game took about six hours to reach a conclusion, with a host of surprises to come through the day. We were on FB live every hour through the day updating people on the battle. It was amazing to be playing Malta, in Cape Town, and sharing it with people in California!

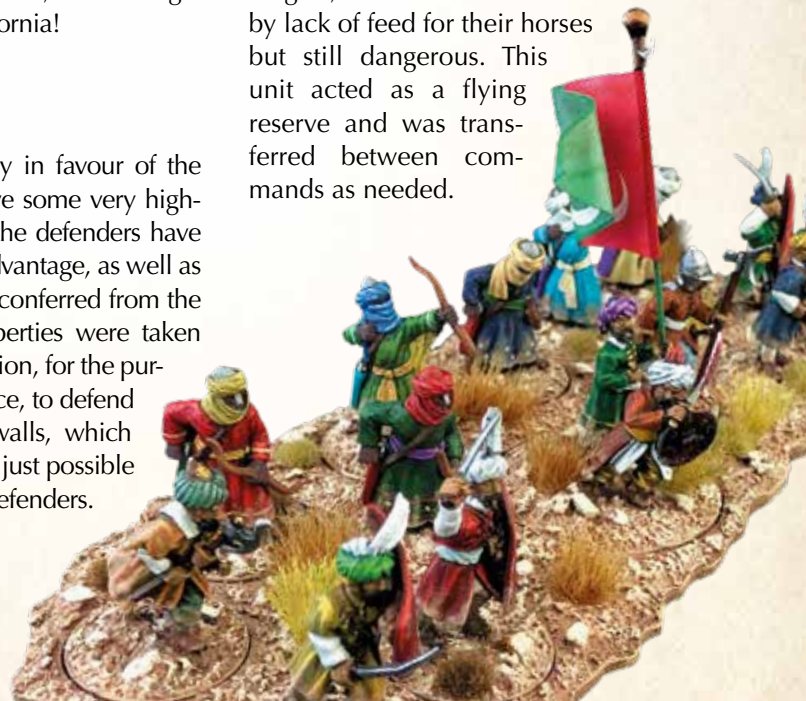
## THE ARMIES

### The Christians

Numbers are clearly in favour of the Ottomans, who have some very high-quality troops, but the defenders have an overall quality advantage, as well as significant bonuses conferred from the defences. A few liberties were taken with army composition, for the purpose of game balance, to defend the whole of the walls, which we worked out was just possible with thinly spread defenders.

The Christians started with two main commands holding the fort, with a third command holding the beach landing area for reinforcements from Birgu. The Christian relief force needed to land, form up, and move to the defence of the fort. Players had some flexibility to move units between commands and position them as needed.

The northern sector of the fort was commanded by Lanfredduci and consisted of average-quality Maltese and German pike & shotte troops. He also had a unit of mixed mounted knights, who were weakened by lack of feed for their horses but still dangerous. This unit acted as a flying reserve and was transferred between commands as needed.



The central and southern sectors of the fort, where a huge breach had been opened in the outer walls, was commanded by the Commander-in-Chief, the knight Le Mas. This consisted of a mix of French swordsmen and arquebusiers and some German pike & shotte. It also incorporated the last of the defenders' artillery.

Defending the beachhead, was Fra Starkey de la Langue Anglais, the sole English knight, who held the beach with some veteran Spanish tercios and French mercenary pike & shotte troops. He was also able to call on off-table heavy artillery from across the bay.

In the bay itself were some light galleys with reinforcements from Birgu. This force was commanded by Pierre d'Augustin and consisted mainly of German pike & shotte units.

Somewhere to the north, and not revealed to any players until halfway through the game, was the relief cavalry force from Medina. Historically this force only played a role later in the campaign, but they were a 'surprise' element thrown into the game by the organizers. This force is commanded by Mattias Tanshauser and Pietro D'Angelo with French and German knights and mounted serjeants.

### The Ottomans

The Ottomans had six commands, all starting on the table. Due to their fragmented command structure, troops



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had to be deployed within specific command zones, allowing less flexibility. Most of the cavalry deployed on the left flank and had to await a breach in the walls before they could contribute meaningfully to the battle. Troops on the extreme right flank were a better mix, but these found themselves in a race to secure the beachhead and prevent further Christian reinforcements from Birgu arriving; they also ended up facing the elite Spanish troops, a formidable foe and very difficult to break through. In the centre, the huge Janissary corps amassed, ready to assault the pre-existing breach in the walls, held by a thin screen of French and German swordsmen and hand-gunners, with what remained of the defenders'

artillery. Two massive siege batteries on the two flanks battered away at the fortress walls, attempting to expand the breaches in support of the assault.

The centre of the line was commanded by Mustafa Pasha, nominally the overall commander of the battle. He commanded half the Janissaries including their elite guard, tribal Azabs and Ilyar units, three batteries of light artillery, and the massive siege guns. To his right was Admiral Piyale who commanded the rest of the Janissaries and a unit of armoured Wallachian bowmen.

The far-right flank was commanded by Turghout Reis. The left flank of the army was divided into two commands and consisted almost entirely of cavalry under Dragut and Ibn bin Brahimon commanding the far-left flank.

A single Ottoman galley had also snuck in under the guns in the bay and threatened to interdict the Christian reinforcements from Birgu. As a final surprise, the Ottomans had a mine under the fort, which they could attempt to blow at any time. Overall, the Ottoman commanders were classed slightly better than the Christians, with one extra initiative card each, allowing them more actions. However, the defenders generally had slightly better troops in very defensible positions.



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## VICTORY CONDITIONS

The Christians were required to hold as much of the outer wall as possible, as

well as the main section of the fort itself. They also needed to keep the beaches clear until reinforcements had landed. The Ottomans generally had to seize

the walls and get their troops into the fort itself, as well as destroying the defenders.



## OTTOMAN ORDER OF BATTLE

MUSTAFA PASHA							5 card professional army commander					
Name	Type	Training & Formation	Quality	Armour	Impact Weapon	Melee weapon	SHOOTING		SPECIAL CHARACTERISTICS		No. of bases	Points per base
							Weapon	Firepower	A	B		
Janissaries Guard	OF	DC	Sup.	UA	Polearm	Expert swordsman	Arquebus	HIGH (HFP)	Ferocious	-	8	149
Janissaries	OF	DL	Sup.	UA	-	Expert swordsman	Arquebus	HIGH (HFP)	Ferocious	-	8	80
Janissaries	OF	DL	Sup.	UA	-	Expert swordsman	Arquebus	HIGH (HFP)	Ferocious	Combat shy	8	80
Azabs	OF	FL	Poor	UA	Polearm	-	-	-	-	-	6	4
Ilayar	OF	TL	Avg.	UA	-	Expert swordsman	-	-	Aggressive	Fanatic	8	50
Ilayar	OF	TL	Avg.	UA	-	Expert swordsman	-	-	Aggressive	Fanatic	8	50
Siege Artillery	A	FL	Avg.	UP	NA	NA	Heavy cannons	AVE (AFP)	Combat shy	Barricades	4	260
Light Artillery	A	FL	Avg.	UP	NA	NA	Heavy cannons	AVE (AFP)	Combat shy	Barricades	4	260
Light Artillery	A	FL	Avg.	UP	NA	NA	Heavy cannons	AVE (AFP)	Combat shy	Barricades	2	260
Light Artillery	A	FL	Avg.	UP	NA	NA	Heavy cannons	AVE (AFP)	Combat shy	Barricades	2	260
PIYALE							4 card general					
Janissaries	OF	DL	Sup.	UA	Polearm	Expert swordsman	Arquebus	HIGH (HFP)	Ferocious	-	8	80
Janissaries	OF	DL	Sup.	UA	-	Expert swordsman	Arquebus	HIGH (HFP)	Ferocious	-	8	80
Janissaries	OF	DL	Sup.	UA	-	Expert swordsman	Arquebus	HIGH (HFP)	Ferocious	-	8	80
Janissaries	OF	DL	Sup.	UA	-	Expert swordsman	Arquebus	HIGH (HFP)	Ferocious	-	6	80
Wallachians	OF	FC	Avg.	A	Polearm	-	Bow	LOW (LFP)	-	-	8	89
DRAGUT							4 card general					
Sipahi of the Porte	CAV	DL	Sup.	A	Light lancer	Expert swordsman	Bow	AVE (AFP)	Aggressive	-	4	235
Delhis	CAV	FF	Sup.	UA	Light lancer	-	Bow	AVE (AFP)	-	-	4	154
Arab Light Horse	CAV	FF	Avg.	UA	Light lancer	-	-	-	-	-	4	115
Arab Light Horse	CAV	FF	Avg.	UA	Light lancer	-	-	-	-	-	4	115
Arab Light Spear & Shield	CAV	FF	Avg.	UA	-	-	Bow	LOW (LFP)	-	-	4	110
IBN-IN-BRAHIM							4 card general					
Anatolian Sipahi	CAV	FL	Avg.	A	Light lancer	-	Bow	AVE (AFP)	-	-	4	142
Anatolian Sipahi	CAV	FL	Avg.	A	Light lancer	-	Bow	AVE (AFP)	-	-	4	142
Delhis	CAV	FF	Sup.	UA	Light lancer	-	Bow	AVE (AFP)	-	-	4	154
Arab Light Spear & Shield	CAV	FF	Avg.	UA	-	-	Javelin	AVE (AFP)	-	-	4	110
Arab Light Spear & Shield	CAV	FF	Avg.	UA	-	-	Javelin	AVE (AFP)	-	-	4	110
TURGHOUD REIS							4 card general					
Wallachians	OF	FC	Avg.	A	Polearm	-	Bow	LOW (LFP)	-	-	9	89
Wallachians	OF	FC	Avg.	A	Polearm	-	Bow	LOW (LFP)	-	-	9	89
Ilayar	OF	TL	Avg.	UA	-	Expert swordsman	-	-	Aggressive	Fanatic	8	50
Arab Light Horse	CAV	FF	Avg.	UA	Light lancer	-	-	-	-	-	4	115
Tartars	CAV	FF	Avg.	UA	-	-	Bow	HIGH (HFP)	-	-	4	120
Adjinkis	CAV	FF	Avg.	UA	-	-	Bow	AVE (AFP)	-	-	4	115

**ABBREVIATIONS:** (Type) PS - Pike & Shotte; OF - Other foot; A - Artillery; CAV - Cavalry (Training & Formation) DC - Drilled close; FL - Formed loose; DF - Drilled flexible; TL - Tribal loose; FF - Formed flexible (Armour) A - Armoured; FA - Fully armoured; UA - Unarmoured; UP - Unprotected



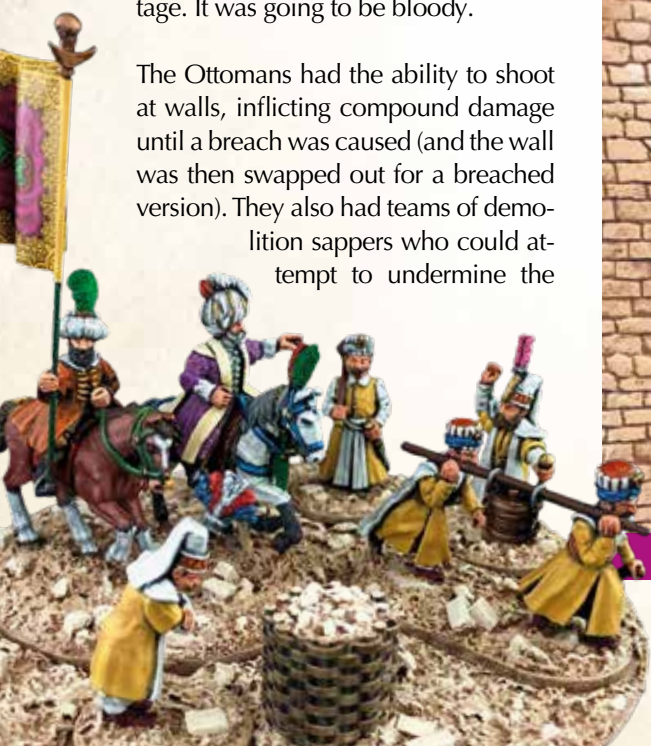
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### MORTEM ET GLORIAM SIEGE RULES

Defenders were not required to maintain base-to-base cohesion; instead they could spread out the bases along the walls. Each base protected a perimeter of three times its frontage. This allowed small units to man large sections of wall, though only bases in contact with enemies could inflict hits.

Defending on a wall also gave a huge (+3) bonus in combat, as well as providing hard cover to defenders and giving shooting bonuses. Attackers could only assault if equipped with ladders, which limited the number of units that could storm intact walls. So even good troops trying to get through with ladders would usually be at a disadvantage. It was going to be bloody.

The Ottomans had the ability to shoot at walls, inflicting compound damage until a breach was caused (and the wall was then swapped out for a breached version). They also had teams of demolition sappers who could attempt to undermine the



fort and demolish a random structure (which could cause a breach, if lucky).

When a wall was about to collapse, the defenders received one turn's warning, during which they had to abandon the wall or take serious damage. This forced defending commanders to keep initiative cards in reserve should a sudden evacuation be required. In a breach the defenders had only a +1 advantage and things would be difficult, but small breaches could be defended by small numbers of inspired troops.

Naval reinforcements required a high initiative to arrive. This became easier

as the battle progressed, however. The Medina reinforcements from the north arrived after a fixed number of turns, as dictated by the game organizers, and unknown to the players. Reinforcement army lists were kept secret and players were kept guessing as to the strength and type of reinforcements they might receive.



### REFLECTION ON THE GAME

In general, the battle followed a very similar path to the original, apart from the arrival of reinforcements, which didn't happen in reality. The special defence rules made the fort very tough to penetrate. Without the arrival of the knights, the fort would indeed have fallen as it did in history, and even with that assistance it was a very close thing indeed. A few heroic moments such as the guns on the wall and Le Mas in the breach, and the rebellion of the Janissaries with the subsequent death of Piyale, were all necessary for the Christians to hold. Without these, the fort would likely have been taken by the Ottoman foot, leaving the Ottoman cavalry to deal with the knights without the need for them to stand and fight.

Terrific fun, some very tense gaming moments, and a great spectacle. **WS&S**

*The authors are members of the Provincial Wargames Group, Cape Town. This article is dedicated to the memory of Craig Nicholsien, who painted the Ottomans we used.*



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