



AFM commander Brig. Carmel Vassallo discusses the past, present and future of the armed forces

CHRISTOPHER SCICLUNA

I first met Carmel Vassallo in 1981. The general elections had just been held and both of us ended up watching over the arrival of ballot boxes at Lyster Barracks. He was a Captain and I was a reporter for *The Times*. That was the calm before the storm which followed the most contentious election outcome ever, and we spent a long time talking on practically everything.

Twenty-four years on, Carmel Vassallo is a Brigadier and Commander of the armed forces. But he remains as forthcoming as he was then.

“This anniversary was as important for the AFM to recall its roots as to look ahead,” Brig. Vassallo said in an interview.

“We started off from a robust position, with a strong element from the RMA and the Royal Engineers who had the discipline, experience and training of the British army, one of the most professional armies in the world. Growth and change had been practically non-stop since then,” he said.

The Maritime Squadron was formed within a few months of the creation of the Force in 1970. Then the helicopter flight was set up and the Malta Land Force became the Armed Forces of Malta in 1973. The same year saw the establishment of the Italian Military Mission in Malta.

Along the years, the army assumed various tasks alongside its core military role, including responsibility for air traffic services, revenue security, search and rescue and involvement in infrastructural projects, with labour corps put under its wing. 1980 saw important sections transferred to the Task Force in what Brig. Vassallo said was a traumatic period for the AFM, which ended in 1988 with amalgamation.

The present finds the AFM struggling with the problems of illegal immigration as it adjusts its emphasis to new priorities, such as counter-terrorism, sea border control, preparing a company for overseas humanitarian work and setting up a rapid reaction force.

“With funding being a perennial problem, over the years the Force had to rely on varied equipment transferred or financed by several countries. Standardisation was a headache. But matters have improved considerably, especially with regard to light infantry weapons,” Brig. Vassallo said.

“At one time we had as many as eight different types of pistol and associated ammunition, now we have two, principally the Beretta FS and some Makarov. The army has also bought Heckler and Koch

sub-machine guns and, thanks to Chinese assistance, all infantrymen now have their own individual AKM rifle.

“The Maritime Squadron too has been modernised. While the original two former US Swift class patrol boats continue to give sterling service for inshore patrols, much work is done by two new Bollinger Protector Class boats. A new 52-metre offshore patrol vessel, built by Fincantieri and based on the Diciotti design, enters service this month.

“This offshore patrol vessel was acquired thanks to funding under the Italian financial protocol in a project which, with crew training included, will cost Lm7 million.

“Deciding what to do with the money made available to us was a bit of a problem and a decision had to be taken quickly,” Brig. Vassallo said.

“Clearly, maritime patrol is a priority for the AFM in view of added border control responsibilities since Malta joined the EU, growing fishery protection duties and possible oil exploration, as well as rescue and illegal migration duties. We needed to replace the three aging Kondor offshore patrol craft but the money available was not enough for two large modern boats. So the question was whether to buy two smaller boats which could do some of the coastal patrol tasks all the time, or one large boat which could properly meet offshore patrol requirements most of the time, but would not be available for some time because of maintenance. We eventually opted for one large boat.”

The Air Squadron, which Brig. Vassallo once headed, has also seen considerable improvement, having two Islander twin engined aircraft for medium-range patrol along with its small Bulldog planes, Alouette helicopters and Agusta-Bell 212 helicopters deployed by the Italian Military Mission.

Brig. Vassallo admitted that air defence posed particular problems because of the passage of time on the Bofors guns, built in the early 1950s. His dream is that Malta will find foreign help for the acquisition of shoulder-held anti-aircraft missile launchers, a development which will mean more effectiveness while requiring fewer men than for the heavy guns.

For while equipment procurement and funding are a problem, as indeed is the case in most armed forces, it is manpower which is the biggest issue. At 1,600 men and women, the AFM is well below the establishment level laid down in a White Paper in 1997. And there is the added concern that well-trained technicians, ►

particularly those specialised on aircraft and patrol boat maintenance, are moving to better paid private sector jobs.

“Finding the right people for the army is already difficult, then we invest a lot of money on training only to lose them to the private sector.”

Brig. Vassallo said the roles of the AFM have changed even since the 1997 White Paper. While the AFM now has more to do, especially in view of illegal migration, border control, fisheries protection and counter terrorism, it no longer has responsibility for air traffic services and the airport fire service. For some months, he has been having talks with the Office of the Prime Minister on fresh proposals on the organisation of the AFM. Since then, the government has approved the engagement of officer-cadets and recruits.

“Clearly we need more people, an establishment of around 2,000, but perhaps not as much as laid down in the 1997 report. Much depends on a number of factors. For example, are we to continue assigning people to watch over illegal immigrants?”

Illegal immigration, he said, was straining the AFM in many ways. Nearly all maritime patrolling is now concentrated on illegal migration and then there are the problems of accommodating the migrants. At present, over

1,000 migrants are being accommodated by the AFM, equivalent to almost two-thirds of the AFM’s manpower strength. Housing them has meant the AFM having to turn over major parts of Safi and Lyster Barracks and warehouses. Some troops have ended up working out of nissen huts instead.

The recent creation of the Detention Service was a step in the right direction, Brig. Vassallo said, but he hoped it would be followed up by further action aimed at relieving the burden from the AFM over the short term. The new service has absorbed 124 officers and soldiers from the AFM, eight per cent of the Force. Other soldiers are employed in catering and maintenance duties with the immigrants’ centres.

“I hope that the detention service will now engage new people from outside the military so that the soldiers can return to their normal military duties.”

Brig. Vassallo said he understood the frustration the migrants felt.

“They left their country seeking freedom and a better life and they have ended up here, initially deprived of freedom, often for months. We have had incidents, including incidents between the migrants themselves, but we have learnt to live together as best we can in difficult circumstances.”

In its purely military role, much emphasis is being placed by the AFM on C (Special Duties) Company within the 1st Regiment.

The company is being trained and equipped to be able to contribute a platoon for overseas humanitarian and rescue missions attached to an Italian regiment on missions mandated by the UN or the OSCE.

“We have to ensure that the troops are adequately trained and equipped up to Italian army standards for seamless integration within an Italian regiment, able to tackle any foreseeable problems for up to a year,” Brig. Vassallo said.

Much progress has been made with regard to training but equipment procurement is a slower process. For example, a command vehicle has been bought, but still has to be equipped with communication equipment. C (Special Duties) Company is also being geared for a quick reaction role, ready for action at a moment’s notice should an emergency, such as terrorism, arise. “This is a very important role for the army. It means these troops have to be available for training as regularly as possible,” Brig. Vassallo said. That work is being complemented by advanced UK training for the Explosive Ordnance Disposal Unit, which has just commissioned a new bomb disposal robot. ●