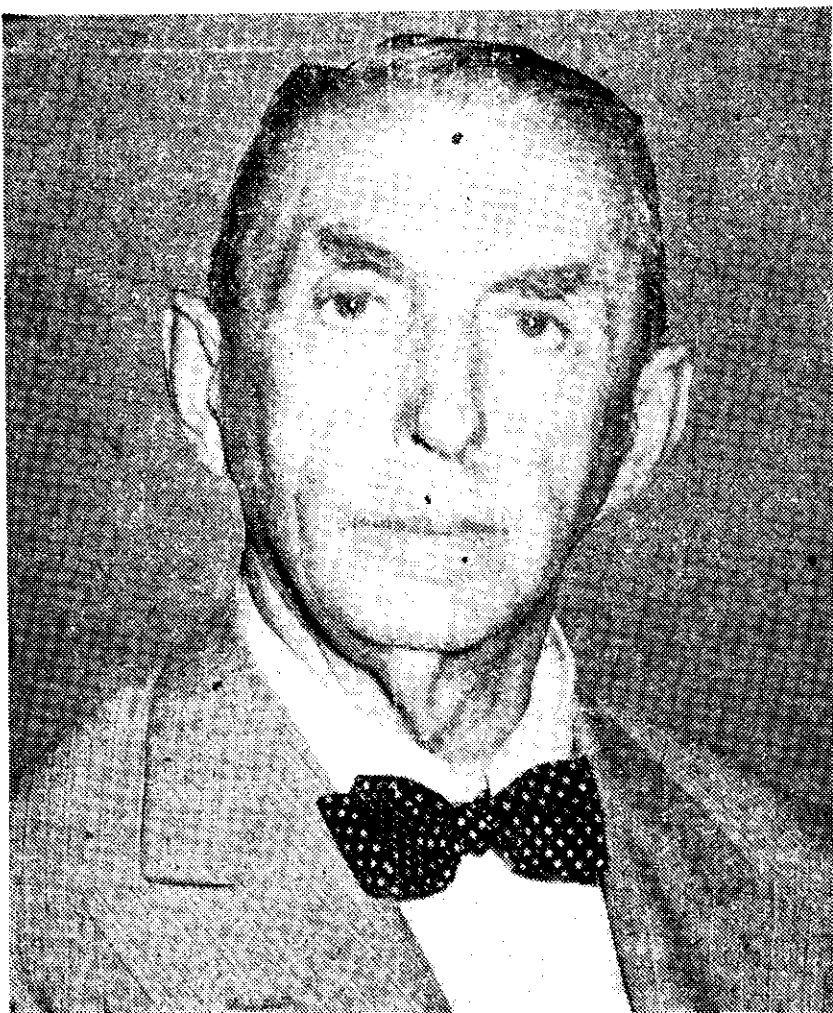


# DOBBIE OF MALTA

## *He Trusted God—and Kept His Powder Dry*



LT.-GEN. SIR WILLIAM DOBBIE: At a week's notice, Governor and Commander-in-Chief, Malta

BELOW: "We were still extending tunnels when the war ended." Illustration shows Maltese air-raid shelters in the ancient catacombs



AT first encounter, Lieutenant-General Sir William Dobbie probably gives most New Zealanders a curious momentary sensation of Colonel Blimp. But that is because we antipodeans know his sort of appearance, speech, and manner only in Low's cartoons. After three minutes in the General's company you are permanently aware that you have met the real thing—the quite unbrilliant, sterling and capable character who embodies "integrity" among alien peoples and of whom Blimp is—in real life as well as in literature, alas!—the caricature.

"I've been in the Army since last century and since my 'teens," General Dobbie replied to a question. "I was just in time for the South African War, and since then I've seen service in most of the garrisoned parts of the Empire—Egypt, Bermuda, and Palestine mainly, and, of course, France from 1914. My last purely military post was Malaya."

"... Where you were governor."  
"Oh, no. I was only Commander-in-Chief. However, as such I was a member of the Government and sat on the Council. It gave me an insight into civil administration that was almost invaluable in Malta."

"But you were Governor in Malta?"

### Surprise Assignment

"Yes, and in military charge. Being a key military position as well as a partly self-governing colony, Malta has its governors always chosen by the War Office and the Colonial Office in consultation. I still feel somewhat surprised at being picked upon. As a matter of fact I was just walking out of the dining-room of my club in London early in 1940, having only recently returned from Malaya, when General Sir Edmund Ironside (now Field-Marshal Lord Ironside) came up and said 'Dobbie, will you go to Malta next week?' It was as sudden and as simple as that. Lady Dobbie and I flew out over France to Tunis. Then in only a matter of weeks France was out and Italy in: Tunis was a potential danger instead of being friendly soil near at hand; Sicily, even nearer, was already an active danger: Malta felt quite alone."

"And how did the Maltese feel? Didn't they sympathise with their fellow Italians?"

"Oh dear no, the Maltese are not Italians. They are descended from the Phoenicians, and you remember how Hannibal put the wind up the Italians of his day. Besides, they came into the British Empire of their own choice nearly a century and a-half ago. Someone has called them more Catholic than the Pope and more loyal than the King. During the 'thirties Italian propaganda had been furiously busy. But in the event we found only a very few people, nearly all very humble folk, perhaps a hundred in all, who had been misled. Actually the Maltese were furiously angry when the bombing began because

they had never expected the Italians to hit at them. Later on, however, they would look out of their shelters during a raid and if they saw the planes were only Italian ones they came up and went on with their work. The Italians, from my observations, didn't have their hearts in the war from the start and never really tried."

### The Maltese Underground

"But on a little, thickly-populated rock like Malta—and only a few minutes' flight from Sicily—how could the people carry on working at all?"

"Well, the raids were not continuous, you know. Radar gave us 20 minutes' warning when planes went up in Sicily and the sirens started five minutes before they arrived. There were lots of caves ready made—including the Hypogeum, an immense place that was dug out in prehistoric days when Malta may still have been joined to both Africa and Europe, and the Mediterranean was two lakes. Then if your house did come down on you it made your cellar a better shelter. We were still extending tunnels in the softish rock when the war ended. The dockyards, powerhouse, and oil stores, too, were underground. But unfortunately the rock wouldn't hold a wide enough span to make hangars for planes."

"Then they just sat about on the 'dromes for anyone to bomb?"

"It was not as bad as that. We had runways built, connecting the three aerodromes, and off them we built dispersal areas with concrete walls running across to minimise blast. Our anti-air defences were pretty good, too, by the end. One third of our infantry were Maltese. It was the Maltese Royal Artillery (a regular British Army unit) who were on duty in Valetta when the big E-boat attack was made. But the garrison could not watch everything. We had, for example, to leave Gozo—the smaller island off Malta—quite undefended, though it could have been made a bridgehead against us. Very strangely, the only time it was attacked we had a regiment there, on manoeuvres."

### Fed by the Royal Navy

"And who kept you fed?"

"The Royal Navy—when they could get things through—and the Maltese women, who ran the farms. The bread ration fell to 10½ ounces, which may sound a lot in New Zealand but really is inadequate to support strength for people who practically live on bread and macaroni. Kerosene—for cooking—was such a dangerous cargo to bring that only a pint a family could be spared. We solved that problem by establishing community kitchens."

"Then how did health take the strain?"

"With the people living so largely underground we always feared an epidemic. But we can thank God for His goodness: Our death rate, apart

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