**SUMMARY**

The authors of this article have compiled information about the activities of the “Hospital Isla del Rey”, in the harbour of Mahón.

Founded in 1711 during the first English occupation of Menorca, the building went through a series of changes resulting in it being occupied by French, Americans and Spanish. It was used as a Spanish Military Hospital from 1852 until 1964 at which time the hospital was transferred to the town of Mahón and later the old hospital was completely evacuated. The original building was sold in 2003 at public auction.

KEY WORDS: History of Military Medicine, Military Hospital of Mahón.

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INTRODUCTION

A well known medical historian, Comenge wrote:” History is like the atmosphere that surrounds and penetrates into people without being able to establish where it begins and ends, and in the same way that an organism cannot survive without the atmosphere, neither can science be conceived without the air of history.”

This report is based on information gathered about the Hospital from many different publications, which facilitate a complete historical investigation into the place known as “Hospital de la Isleta” or also called “Real Hospital del Ejército y la Marina” and later designated the “Hospital Militar”. Due to its geographical position and the many changes that it experienced in the passage of the years, the hospital can be considered as unique amongst military hospitals in Spain.

In order to provide a deeper understanding of the circumstances in which it developed and what made it so unique, we should look at some of the important events and changes that Menorca experienced at the time.

The island of Menorca, in ancient times the “Minus Insula”, is the most easterly and northerly of the Balearic Islands and also the most easterly part of Spanish territory. Thanks to this privileged situation it has always been considered of great strategic importance. It is in the center of an imaginary circumference which passes from the Spanish Levantine coast, Corsica, the South of France, Sardinia and the North of Africa. It forms a kidney shape with a West to Northeast and East to Southeast orientation.

Being in the middle of commercial and migratory routes it was occupied by various different civilizations, amongst them the Celts, Iberios, Rhodians, Phenicians, Carthaginians, Romans, Godos, Arabs, Catalans, English and French. Some of these stayed to pass the winter with their ships in the harbour of Mahón. The island has also provided refuge for Cubans deported during the wars overseas. It is evident that practically all of these inhabitants have left their mark in some way on the architecture or the local dialect.

Remains of many of these different civilizations have been found on Menorca, including those that never conquered the island such as the Egyptians. Of these, perhaps the Celts are the most significant who arrived around 1,500 B.C. and built the ancient monuments of the Talayots, Taulas, Navetas etc., which are nowadays well maintained and much admired by all who visit them. If we take into consideration their characteristics and the period in which they were constructed it is evident that the Celts possessed an in depth knowledge of mathematics, mechanics and physics (3)

In Menorca is found the harbour of Mahón, “Portus Magonis”, which is the name given by the Carthaginian General Magón and it was considered to be one of the safest harbours in the Mediterranean together with Cartagena.

In 1500 Andrea Doria wrote, the harbours of the Mediterranean are: July and August and the harbour of Mahón (4). This was confirmed in the 1780’s with the message: Everyone knows that the Port of Mahón is one of the best and safest in Europe (5). This, without doubt was the reason why those countries which possessed large fleets and travelled continually in the Mediterranean, sought to control the island. Nevertheless, it achieved its greatest importance when the English conquered Menorca for the first time and established their operational base there.

Within the harbour is the Isla del Rey, the Quarantine Island and some 80 meters away is the island of Lazareto, even though in this case it only became an island in 1900 when a canal was opened between Lazareto and La Mola and hence what had originally been peninsula became an island, It is approx. one and half kilometers long.

Towards the middle of the harbour is the Isla del Rey which is some 41,177 square kilometers. It is a triangular shape and has two jetties. The one most used is on the south, facing Cala Fontanillas, the other on the north coast. The remains of a Paleochristian Basilica was discovered on the island in 1888 and dates back to the VI Century. In fact, on 24th January in 1888 a beautiful mosaic of 32 square meters was discovered while carrying out some agricultural work.

The then Military Governor of Menorca, General Hipólito Llorente realized the importance of the find and ordered that it be protected, although some deterioration took place as it was not covered, which is why a few years later it was transferred to the Casa de la Culture of Mahón. Studies carried out by Dr Palol indicated that the findings came from a Paleochristian basilica while others believed they could have been part of a Roman mansion or Hebrew Temple. The Royal Decree 1243/79 of 20th April declared the Basilica to be a National Historical and Architectural Monument. Nowadays there only remains a few of the building stones since the mosaic, of white, pink and blue is kept in the Museum of Mahón. This was evidence of early habitation of the island(6)

The name of Isla del Rey is from King Alfonso III of Aragon, known as “El Liberal”. He landed there on 5th January in the year 1287 and established his base camp for conquering Menorca, waiting 12 days with his army before completing the conquest of Menorca on 17th January. It had already been decided at the end of 1286 that the island would be taken from Muslim control and united to the Kingdom of Aragon. For this purpose a sizeable fleet was sent, but while sailing alongside the Cape of Artruch near Ciutadella it suffered badly in a severe storm; the King, nevertheless managed to reach the Port of Mahón along with 10 galleys, albeit many damaged. He stepped ashore on an island called “Isla de los Conejos” or Rabbit Island, no doubt due to the abundance of these animals living there. There is a well or a spring that was considered miraculous according to the legends. Apparently the soldiers were very thirsty and there was no apparent drinking water on the island when they landed, and at that point in time there was no possibility of landing on the main island of Menorca. So while waiting for the rest of their forces to join them after the storm, Alfonso III ordered his troops to pray. The King joined them and then struck the ground with his sword whereupon a spring of fresh water immediately appeared and solved their problem. (7)

THE HOSPITAL

In 1708 Menorca was still Spanish, but the English Captain General Stanhope and Admiral John Leake led an attack, landing at Cala Alcaufar and were helped by the locals to conquer the island. It was subsequently annexed in 1712 by the Duke of Argyll. General Stanhope was given the title of Count in 1718 and his descendants carried the title of Lord Mahón until 1905. (5) Shortly after the conquest of Menorca, in 1709 Richard Kane together with Admiral Byng requested the amount of 9000 pounds sterling from the British Admiralty to build a hospital on the Isla del Rey. The request was refused. (4)

Clavijo (1) provided some information on the care of sick in the ships in the year 1642 which demonstrated the lack of a hospital in the harbour of Mahón and could be in some ways considered the first recognition of the need for one.

Clavijo explained: During the war with France the fleet of 30 ships commanded by the Duke of Ciudad Real had to disembark 350 sick men on a beach who were looked after by men and women living there and took them into their homes. The ship’s log reflects this story. On entering Mahón the rest of the sick and injured were taken ashore and with the presence and support of the Governor, Pedro de Santacesilia, two houses were taken over to provide shelter for the 672 sick and injured. The Administrator General of the Fleet, the doctor and all the surgeons ensured that they regularly received their food supplies.

There was one famous person of great importance to the development of the island of Menorca and consequently of the Hospital of Isla del Rey. That person was Richard Kane, made Governor of Menorca in 1712 and remaining for 24 years; after his death he was buried in the Chapel of the Castillo de San Felipe. Among his many achievements the Cami d’en Kane still remains which unites San Felipe with Ciutadella; in 1986 part of this was rebuilt and reopened.

Not long after the occupation of Menorca by the English, on Richard Kane’s initiative, the existing buildings on the Isla del Rey were prepared to take in the numerous sick and injured that arrived on Menorca, for which purpose a rent was agreed with the owners; it was in 1722 when the Isla del Rey was expropriated with the idea of building a Naval hospital to care for sick seamen.

The story of the expropriation is told by Diego Pons. The Isla del Rey was the property of Don Gabriel Xerés and in 1722 the process of expropriation began for the price of 269 pounds sterling which at that time was 6,300 pesetas, but the years passed and no money was received. The story is continued by Sr Simón Gual. Nobody wanted to know anything about the matter until in 1779 (el Sr Xerés “had died broken hearted and distraught with his humiliation”) the heiresses, Maria and Catalina, renewed their efforts against the Administration and drew their attention to the fact that 57 years had passed during which time despite multiple attempts, letters and requests, nothing had been received. This time the local authorities took up the case and made the English Government aware, who then ordered the payment of the debt, including interest in an order that was signed in Saint James’s Palace on 5th August in 1779. The money arrived on Menorca but was withheld by the Governor.

An interesting person now enters the story, his name is Pedro Coca, and he was instructed by the daughters of Sr Xerés to travel to the Court of King George III. According to the story told by Sr Gual, he made the journey by carriage and on foot, arriving at the British capital in such a poor state that he needed hospital treatment. His journey however was worthwhile since he met the Spanish Consul who then wrote to the Conde de Floridablanca explaining the situation and ordering the money to be handed over. This finally took place on 6th May 1786, just 63 years after the beginning of the negotiations. (7)

In 1711, Admiral John Jennings, Commander in Chief of the English Fleet in the Mediterranean, was aware of the huge amount of shipping in the harbour of Mahón and reapplied for the grant that Admiral Byng had previously requested, but this also met with a refusal. Nevertheless, the project was begun even before receiving the negative reply, the reason being that there were builders from the Fort of San Felipe who had finished their work there and were unemployed. When the reply was received it was decided that the costs of construction would be paid for by the Admiral himself together with the officers under his command. A few years later in 1714, the expenses were reclaimed and 468 pounds was paid back.

Mr Griffith was the Agent of the Commission of Sick and Injured Sailors who was chosen for the contracting of the building. The hospital was built on some barracks and sheds already in existence when General Stanhope arrived, and the island was called Bloody Island (a alarming name but coming from the “Blood Hospital” which was a name given to front line care posts). Accommodation was available for the Naval Official, Surgeon and others including sometimes a room for the Commodore of the Fleet.

In 1713, the Treaty of Utrecht conceded Menorca and Gibraltar to England and the hospital was able to continue to function.

The building was of poor quality and it wasn’t long before it started to collapse and the patients were evacuated to the Convent of San Francisco in Mahón, after moving out the monks who lived there.

Having recently arrived on Menorca, Vice Admiral John Baker became aware of the situation and repeatedly wrote to his superior in the Admiralty, Secretary of State, Mr Burchett until finally getting approval for the rebuilding of the hospital in 1715.

The work was contracted to Antonio Segui with a budget of 800 pieces of eight payable in 3 parts, according to a document signed on 4th August 1715 and where the contractor agreed to finish the work before October. Admiral Baker agreed to supply sailors to help with the construction.

The hospital was an elegant one-storey building forming a “U” shape which was typical of the Wren style. At the entrance were four columns supporting the dome. Long, covered walkways along the building formed by solid arcs allowed access to all the wards. The slope of the ground made it possible to have two floors at either end of the side buildings and the access was via a forecourt; there were 14 rooms, all well ventilated and the patients had individual beds. It could accommodate some 336 patients as well as rooms for officers and hospital staff; the surgeon’s and the doctor’s rooms were close to the bedrooms. Some of the lower level rooms on the north side were used for storerooms and those to the east and west were reserved for the surgeon and Director of the hospital. The latrines were behind the principal part of the building.

The Admiral had always shown considerable interest in the hospital, even to the extent that in 1716, shortly before his death he sent a report to the Secretary of State to comment that after spending 3 months in the Hospital it was evident that the sick recovered quicker than when in the Monastery of San Francisco in Mahón. He put it down to the fact they didn’t have access to the abundant and indigestible local wine, as well as the fresh island air.

There is evidence also that he took good care of his men’s needs; an example of which is that he managed to get unusual concessions for the men in hospital. They were given three pennies a day and a person made responsible for the care or each patient, having to serve them their water, their plates and spoons and a diet approved by the Chief Surgeon, besides providing candles and matches, as well as the nurses who were responsible for the hospital hygiene.

Another quality of Baker was that he was a practical man and considered the precinct of the hospital had sufficient space to be used for storage of the valuable provisions and by doing so saved the cost of renting houses and patios where they had previously been kept. This gentleman died in November of 1716 but soon after all his work was rewarded when the hospital was used for the injured from the Battle of Passaro. (8)

During the time of the battles for Sicily, King George III’s fleet of some 7000 men regularly used the harbour of Mahón and the “Naval Hospital on the small island” for the sick and injured which could have been as many as 400 or 500 men.

The hospital continued to function until 1770 at which point part of the building collapsed and it had to be temporarily closed. It was rebuilt a little later during the time of Governor Mosty and then a first floor was added.

Near to the Isla del Rey is a quarantine island, known as Isla Plana which was the first Lazareto in 1490. In 1564 another Lazareto was set up in the caves of Cala Figuera. The latest work was begun for Carlos III in 1793 and finished in 1817. The quarantine island did not have any direct relation to the Hospital, being used by ships personnel when there was reason to suspect there might have been plague on board. In his letter of August, 1740 Armstrong tells an anecdote: I had the opportunity to observe recently how two Algerian galleys (at a time when the plague was present in their capital) having been refused entry to various harbours and sent out of others, came into the harbour of Mahón despite coming under fire. They preferred any risk rather than die of hunger at sea. Having spent a long time at sea it was then confirmed that they were free of infection and there were no repercussions, but having run out of food, the crew were suffering from hunger. (9)

In front of the Isla del Rey, on the left side of the harbour is a pass where there is to be found a cemetery known as the “jans” cemetery, a name which could be from a corruption of the word “young” or could also be from the name “johns”, this could have been a site for cremation of those who died at the hospital.

In 1756, on 18th April at two o’clock in the afternoon, the French troops of the Duke of Richlieu and supported by the Marqués de Gallisonier landed, took Ciutadella and marched towards Mahón, taking advantage of the the fact that the English troops had retreated to Mahón. (10) The English Governor took refuge in the Castillo de San Felipe to wait for reinforcements from Admiral Byng, but his fleet was defeated by the French and the help never arrived. Governor Blakeney had to surrender after two months and nine days of siege and the French troops took over the island of Menorca for the next six years. The French occupation ended the work on the hospital which Blakeney had begun.

With the Treaty of Paris, in 1763, the French left Menorca so once again it came under English control and in 1766 Blakeney’s reconstruction of the hospital was restarted, although it wasn’t until 1771 that the final rebuilding was undertaken under the instruction of the island Governor, General Moystin. The first stone of this new building was laid on 30th October in 1771 by Sir Peter Denis Baronet, Vice Admiral and Commander of the Fleet in the Mediterranean (according to a copper plaque found in 1906 when the building was being demolished before it’s subsequent restoration). The Hospital that was built from 1771 to 1776 had two floors and kept the same “U” shape surrounding a garden and positioned in the highest part of the island, orientated towards the east. The façades which look towards the sea are solid with small openings whilst those facing the inside are much more open, the ground floor has a wide corridor. The center of the building was and still is crowned by a square tower which gives the building a certain elegance and probably had a useful function, that of announcing the arrival of ships. At that time, the hospital had 40 wards for the sick as well as other rooms for the medical personnel, a pharmacy, stores, kitchen and bathrooms. In the garden there were three cisterns to supply the necessary water (6).

The name of Bloody Island lasted throughout the English domination but later when Menorca became Spanish again it recovered the name of Isla del Rey, the name that has lasted to the present day.

The fact that the rebuilt Hospital had a capacity of 1,200 beds indicates how important it was, and reflects the huge amount of maritime traffic present in the harbour at that time.

In the year 1781, Spain was allied with France and in dispute with Great Britain. The Conde of Floridablanca, then Secretary of State for King Carlos III, though it was a good moment to recover Menorca, still dominated by the English; to this end an expedition was prepared under the charge of the Duque de Crillón, who was given his orders on 14th June in 1781.

Terrón Ponce (11) tells the details, that as the Duque of Crillón was French, there was a great deal of bad feeling amongst the Spanish, but despite a number of leading authorities complaining that this choice put the Spanish in an inferior position, the decision made by Floridablanca remained firm. The French origin of Crillón and his contacts in France had a decisive influence on that country authorizing a French Expedition comprising of an Infantry Division to join forces with the Spanish troops. Besides, with this official decision, Crillón managed privately and secretly to get the help of certain French professionals who were specialists in the art of warfare or military engineers to help with the planned attack in the Castillo de San Felipe, the fort were the English were expected to barricade themselves in, as indeed they did. So in July some Marine specialists and later land specialists joined the expedition in Cádiz where they were preparing the expedition. It was considered a political as well as military operation. Crillón said: “this project is as much politics as military, in all the aspects which I have reflected upon”. (11)

There were 52 ships prepared for the expunction, which set sail on 20th July and on 19th August landed 8000 men at Cala Mezquida.

The English retreated into the Castillo of San Felipe, considered an impregnable fortress. The Duque de Crillón then called for reinforcements and the numbers rose to 14,000. As a direct consequence there were not enough health personnel and help was requested from the Royal College of Surgeons in Barcelona. The first expedition sent a contingent of a Latin surgeon and 16 students. Later another contingent arrived with 13 students, which resulted in not only a good service for the troops but also health care for the English prisoners, who were in many cases suffering badly from scurvy. These health workers had accepted willingly their enrolment with only 48 hours notice.

In the report that General Murray, Governor and Military Commander of Menorca sent to his government he commented “The garrison of less than 900 men was more like a hospital,……and he emphasized that the French and Spanish surgeons helped in our hospitals and spared no effort in assisting with our recovery”. (12)

Special mention should be made on one significant event. On the night of 26th and 27th December in 1781 during the siege of the Castillo of San Felipe by the Spanish troops, a shot from the Castle gravely injured a “soldier called Carlos Garain”, from the Swiss Regiment of Betfchart and broke his right leg close to the calf. Transferred to hospital, he managed to hide his injury and persuaded the doctors and surgeons not to look at it. The day passed and feeling very ill asked to have confession and received the sacraments. He died that same night and on taking out the body it was discovered that it was in fact a woman. This fact was acknowledged by the authorities, and it was also found that she was a virgin. When the Duque of Crillón was told, he stopped the burial and arranged for the body to be interred with full honours on 29th in the Iglesia del Carmen and dressed in the habit of the Virgin of Corona and Palma. It was established that she was the daughter of a Catholic couple, Pedro and Carlota Willie and was 17 years old. She was born in S. Gengu, in the Wallay republic in Switzerland. She had been so determined to enter the army that she overcame every obstacle in her way. The only doubt is about which was her greatest virtue, her courage or her chastity, as she avoided being recognized as a woman. She even had a close friendship with a soldier in the same company and sharing a bed during two months with him without him ever discovering her secret. (13)

During the battle for the re-conquest, the Spanish partly destroyed the Hospital on “Bloody Island” and took away principally the tiles, doors and windows to use for the building of the barracks in the San Felipe camp. While the fighting took place, the General in charge of the expeditionary forces occupied one of the barracks in the town of Villa Carlos, known as the Engineers Barracks, as a Military Hospital for the treatment of the injured. (14)

The end of the conflict arrived on 4th February 1782 and with it the end of the second English domination of the island. The King honoured Crillón with the title of the Ducado de Mahón. The barracks used as a hospital was given the name of “Duque de Crillón”.

A few days later, on 16th February, His Royal Majesty King Carlos III ordered a series of measures, somewhat drastic and incomprehensible, including the demolition of the Castillo de San Felipe and blocking the entrance to the harbour of Mahón. Fortunately the latter did not take place. (15)

The Treaty of Versailles in 1783 conceded Menorca once again to Spain.

When Spain recovered the island, it was found that the English had two hospitals, one for the Army and also one for the Navy located on the Blood Island, a name which replaced the old name of Isla del Rey.

The Spanish Governor immediately ordered the repair of the Hospital on the Isla del Rey; he increased the capacity and added a Chapel dedicated to San Carlos. Once completed, the Hospital was re-inaugurated on 5th April of 1784 and the Chapel blessed on 1st August (6).

While the work was being undertaken, the Spanish Military Hospital was established at the Convento del Carmen and then moved to the Isla del Rey until 1791 when it was evacuated to the neighbouring Villa Carlos to make space for the expected victims of an epidemic in Orán. In this city there had been several earthquakes with a lot of victims and the Conde de Cumbre Hermosa, Alfonso de Alburquerque, foreseeing a possible epidemic requested the main hospital be relocated in the town of Mahón, the reason being that the boats arriving with food and supplies were carrying sick on board. Fortunately the feared epidemic never happened and the Hospital at Mahón didn’t receive any sick so once again the Military Hospital of the Isla del Rey could be used. However, there was some reluctance to return due to the inconveniences of the location. In fact, having to travel by boat was an expensive business….besides which, in stormy weather, the hospital became isolated, sometimes even for days and this constituted a serious inconvenience if there were urgent cases and a special boat had to be chartered each time. For nighttime emergencies, since the doctor and surgeon slept in Mahón, there were four beds reserved and available in the civilian hospital of the Hermanas de la Caridad in Mahón. These costs were very high. Furthermore, the principal doctor, José Gil and the second doctor José Portella thought that the being in the Hospital on the Isla del Rey was bad for the patients since some of them went down to the beach to bathe and this constituted a serious risk to their health. For all these reasons, the general opinion was that the hospital should stay in Villa Carlos despite the building being inadequate. The Coronel of the Regiment of the Swiss of Saint Gall was totally against this since he feared the unhealthy air from the hospital would reach his nearby barracks. (12) The hospital returned to the Isla del Rey.

Although it has no direct relation to the Military Hospital, perhaps it’s worth making mention of the creation of Lazareto.

In 1785, a peace treaty was signed between Spain and the Algerian Regency which meant that some 300 Spanish prisoners were repatriated, but as they came from a county with the plague they were sent to Menorca and accommodated on the Isla de Colom. This situation necessitated the construction of a Lazareto in the harbour of Mahón and it was intended to locate it between Cala Taulera and the port itself. An ambitious project was started in 1786 after an in –depth study which included a great deal of interesting observations. The work began in 1793 and was interrupted in 1798 with the return of the English for the third occupation of Menorca but restarted in 1803 when the island was returned to Spain; a decision influenced by the appearance of an epidemic of yellow fever. Lazareto was in use from 1817 (1).

England was probably closely watching the good relationship between Spain and France. After the war finished with the Treaty of San Ildefonso in 1796, an alliance between them was the reason behind a series of important misfortunes that befell Spain such as the defeat at the Cape of San Vicente on 14th February of 1797. The idea of conquering Menorca again began to develop.

A fleet of 28 sailing ships under the command of Carlos Stewart departed Gibraltar on 7th November 1798 and landed the troops at Calamoli and Addaya. The conquest was easy thanks to the sloth of the Government and to the support from the locals, and so began the third English occupation. (It’s an interesting observation that despite some writers calling it the “third domination” this is not correct and no international treaty conceded this as an English domain).

On 15th November, General Stewart wrote to the British King. Your Majesty’s forces are in possession of the Island of Menorca without having suffered one single loss of life.

The Naval Hospital of the Isla del Rey continued in use being a transit area for the majority of ships which were able to enter easily into the port of Mahón. There are records confirming that in 1805 there were 1,165 ships that entered in the port of Mahón, indicating the importance of the Naval Hospital.

The last English Governor, General Henry Clophane arrived on Menorca on 22nd October 1801 and received shortly afterwards, on 8th November, the order to suspend all work on the reconstruction of the Castillo de San Felipe. It was the first sign of an impending return of the island to Spain. This occurred on 25th March in 1802 with the Treaty of Amiens and on 16th June 1802 the English General handed over the island to Capitán General of Baleares, Don Juan Miguel Vives who had arrived at Ciutadella on 14th June for the ceremony. This was as agreed in the Treaty of Amiens, thus ending the third English occupation and returning the island for the last time to Spain and converting the hospital into a Spanish Military Hospital.

However, the ups and down of the Hospital didn’t finish there. During the War of Independence around 1808, the economy was suffering and the Hospital experienced serious financial problems without any state funding. The situation was bad enough for the employees there to abandon the small island and put the building up for sale in the hope of recovering some money. The patients were moved again to Villa Carlos. Thanks to intervention from the Capital of the Province the sale of the building was stopped, but it was not possible to avoid renting the land of the Isla del Rey and it was given over to animal grazing with the building providing animal shelter. (17)

In 1812 the average monthly movements in the hospital was 61 admissions and the same number leaving, with three deaths. Another curious fact is that on 26th December in 1817 the sum of 3,942 reals were assigned for the anatomical amphitheater that would be a learning center on anatomy for the medical staff.

In 1821 the installations were once again prepared and the sick transferred from Villa Carlos. However, due to the saturation of the other health centers in Mahón with a yellow fever outbreak, it was impossible to take anyone into quarantine , so the Hospital of the Isla del Rey was partially converted into a Lazareto. In this way the contagion was kept away from the Menorcan population.

Something similar occurred in 1832 with the colera epidemic when the Lazareto was unable to cope with the numbers of patients. Clearly a great service was done for Spain and for other parts of the world by the Harbour of Mahón.

A new event for the Hospital occurred in 1830. As a result of the war nicknamed the “Golpe de Abanico” (14) when the French conquered Algiers, they experienced some major difficulties with health care and the transfer of sick to the city, so they reached an agreement with the Spanish Government to use the Hospital on the Isla del Rey. So this is why the Spanish Military Hospital went back to Villa Carlos. At this time Villa Carlos was also the protagonist of another event. Diego Pons tells the story “ The War of the Fly-Swatters and its repercussions in Menorca (1999)”, the Government of Charles X requested the preparation of the barracks in the center of Villa Carlos for a hospital whenever they could be made available. Once the building was prepared, part of the main square was also given over for the convalescents to walk and enjoy the fresh air. Consequently the area was sectioned off with stonewalls. When the war ended, the installations were gradually vacated but the walls remained. There followed a long legal battle between the civil authorities and the military until it was finally resolved in 1836 with the decision to remove the walls. It is estimated that Menorca received 2,500 sick and injured French.

The French doctors soon became highly regarded by the local population in Mahón and they were being consulted more and more by them. This caused a noticeable jealousy amongst the town doctors and there arose a certain hostility between the French and Spanish, making it necessary to forbid the French doctors to look after the civilians of Mahón.

A new situation presented itself in 1833 when the United States used the little island as a store deposit for their Mediterranean Fleet; a great deal of stores were deposited there as well as a workshop for making uniforms.

In 1835, there was a colera outbreak on the American ships anchored in the Harbour of Mahón so a part of the building on the Isla del Rey was used for care of the sick.

In 1839 the hospital was in good condition and able to accommodate some 600 sick. During the winter of 1839 to 1840 a French commission arrived in Mahón comprising of a doctor, a surgeon and an engineering officer. Their mission was to prepare some 500 to 600 beds in the installations of the Hospital to receive the sick and injured from Algiers. As soon as the patients were in condition to be moved they were transfered to Toulon and the beds made available for others. Many of the patients from Algiers were suffering from dysentery and some died even before reaching Mahón.

The main desire of the sick was understandably to return to the country and in Africa they begged to be taken on board the steam ships that covered the route to France, convinced that they would recover once they left Africa. Also on the Isla del Rey there were coal deposits for the steam ships. The fact that they were so sure they would get better was a positive factor in their recovery on the island and their excellent response to the treatment they received. There is no doubt that the Hospital of the Isla del Rey was an appropriate place for saving many lives. (18)

The French presence lasted until approx. 1843 when something significant happened. Certain activities by the French raised suspicions amongst the rather jealous English that the French might be considering occupation of Menorca. They warned the Spanish Government and the English Consul in Mahón that French spies were gathering information on the harbour of Mahón and other strategic points of the island. As a consequence of this, Spain ended the agreement with France and the French left Menorca.

Captain E.M. Don José Muriel wrote some papers titled Description of the Isla del Rey in 1844 which are currently kept in the Military Archives of Geographic Studies in Madrid. In this document he described the principal characteristics of the Hospital at that time as follows: The Isla del Rey is found in the Harbour of Mahón, so named after King Alfonso III landed there in 1287 when he conquered Menorca; this island is further down from Cala Figuera, the widest part of the port at almost one mile, it’s has a surface area of 525,000 square feet, it is said it has an accessible water supply. There is on this island a beautiful Hospital building where the many changes and alterations that have taken place can clearly be seen from the days when the English were owners.

In the year 1711 Mr John Jennings, Commander in Chief of the English Fleet in the Mediterranean, had a new hospital built to replace an anterior one, the cost being 3,600 pounds sterling, equivalent to 335.964 reals and 24 maravedis de vellón. In 1773 the present hospital was built and completed in 1776. It could accommodate between 700 and

800 sick and cost 400,000 reales de vellón and 120,000 in repairs. This Hospital that served the troops and sailors had space not only for these patients with all their belongings, but also rooms with glass windows for the Governor, Doctors, Phamacists, Nurses and others, also with their suitable separations an anatomy room, morgue etc. a small garden, sea bathing, the whole clean and well prepared; the position is agreeable in summer because it enjoys the sea air.

This building that was so perfectly suitable for its purpose was abandoned, unfortunately the isolation didn’t please the doctors who worked there. To be able to treat eight to ten patients a day which was the normal, they had to maintain one or two boats to provide transport to the towns and this proved difficult in times of limited resources. The result was that the benefits of the situation began to be forgotten, even though the Treasury had reported the advantages of having the sick there; so much so that in 1830 following the blockade of Algiers by the French Navy, the Spanish Government had no hesitation in making the Isla del Rey available for their Fleet, which meant that it continued to be maintained as far as possible until 1831. At this point the French left and the Anglo-American Fleet began to make use of it while they were in the Port until 18th February of 1835; this arrangement ended when a French ship arrived declaring cholera on board amongst the crew. The captain requested and obtained from the American Commodore permission to use the island and it was handed over. With the French Navy installed there, their Government soon saw the advantages of this building not only for storing coal for their steam ships en route to Algiers, but also for boat repairs and rigging, so they asked the Spanish Government to lease part of the building and this was agreed for a period of two years for the small amount of 300 reals de vellón a year. When the time came to renew the lease they requested a lease of the whole building for two more years for the same amount to use it as a Hospital. This was accepted and the contract terminated on the third of September 1841 when it was handed back to the Spanish Government in whose possession it has remained.

Signed and dated in Palma 30th December 1844 by José Muriel.

After 1834 the Hospital was in disuse until 1852 when the General Captain of the islands ordered an immediate preparation of the Hospital and the sick together with the equipment were transferred from Villa Carlos to the Isla del Rey, converting it once again into a Spanish Military Hospital and so it continued through to 1964. Then came the final transfer to a new purpose built building located in the town of Mahón on the San Clemente road, receiving the name of “Cuesta Monereo”. This was eventually closed at a later date and no longer exists. The building was recently sold at auction.

We have already commented on the inconveniences that arose from the island location, that logically continued. On one occasion in 1865 the Hospital was isolated for 48 hours due to a bad storm that made access almost impossible, any attempt to reach it was highly dangerous and guaranteed being soaked by the waves, it was only just possible to get there and although weather like this was not frequent, it happened from time to time. Remember that the journey over was by rowing boat, taking the patient from the jetty in front to take them to the jetty of the hospital, the distance was short but in stormy weather it could be dangerous.

On one occasion, due to a sudden high wave, a patient in his stretcher fell into the sea while being transported over to the island. He knew how to swim so it was easy to rescue him, but it proved much more difficult to save one of the nurses who didn’t know how to swim. This situation of being isolated continued until the final transfer to the town of Mahón, although the problem had been greatly alleviated with a motor boat which could carry over the patients as well as medical staff. The economic problems of the Hospital continued for some time more, Massons made the following comment as an example:Don R Torras Morell in 1927 was admitted as a soldier suffering from gastric ulcer, there was no electric lighting in that hospital. (12) Oil lamps were still being used.

It’s interesting to note that on 14th August in 1903, the first body of a Spanish soldier from the Hospital was buried in the Cemetery of Mahón, due to the fact that in the Island Cemetery there were no more niches available. The Military authorities reached an agreement with the local authorities to use the Cemetery of Mahón.

During the Spanish Civil War the Hospital continued to function normally and gained a good reputation. In the Second World War it looked after the injured and burned sailors from the ship Roma which sank after being torpedoed.

About the 1940´s, a beautiful statue of “Corazon de Jesus” was installed in the gardens thanks to the initiative of Dr Echevarría, the then Director and Surgeon.

A sad event occurred on 26th June 1953 when an ammunition explosion during firing practice at the Military base of Llucalari resulted in numerous wounded being taken to the Hospital.

EPILOGUE

The medical care of the patients in hospital was during many years helped by the Sisters of Charity, who had their own living area in the Hospital itself and who carried out their work impeccably. They were also a great help to the other staff, not only in nursing and surgery but also keeping the wards well organized and maintained. Without doubt, the good reputation of the Hospital was thanks to the work of these nuns.

The spiritual care was originally by the priests of Villa Carlos and later by a priest contracted to live in the Hospital.

As testimony of the interest that the Villa Carlos Authorities had towards the Military Hospital, a copy of Obligations of a Doctor at the Military Hospital, rules and procedures of 1739,

for anyone who found themselves sent by chance to work there, is still kept at the Municipal Archives and was kindly lent to me by Sr Diego Pons.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to express my appreciation to the people who have helped and provided interesting details. Amongst them Antonio Segui, ex-boatman of the hospital. Diego Pons, from the Town Hall of Villa Carlos. Luis Mestres Gorrias. Colonel Francisco Fornals. To all of you, thank you!

Note: As readers may have noticed, there are some small differences in dates and facts between one or another document consulted.

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