

## Rolling back time

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People attending today's re-enactment of the George Cross medal award ceremony, held in 1942, are likely to spot a man with a camera attached to his four-wheel pusher, manoeuvring through the crowd to film the scene.

That man is Jack Vowles, the same person who, 66 years ago, filmed the original ceremony.

He may not have had the four-wheeler contraption back then, and his camera is by far more hi-tech as he has moved with the times, but the rest of the scenario should be pretty much the same... and Mr Vowles recalls it well.

In fact, it is not only his camera that had recorded the images, but also his lucid mind, as is confirmed by the fact that he indicates exactly where he was standing in St George Square on that day, using a notebook to pinpoint everyone's position back then. He plans to be standing in the exact same spot today.

"I was not supposed to be there, but I knew it was going to happen, so I went along," he relates.

Having a camera on a tripod would be a nuisance to others and a problem getting around, he maintains.

So he has attached it to the pusher and the camera to that. With his hands firmly on the handles, he feels it is easier to manoeuvre, rather than having to push his way through, he explains, detailing his "cunning plan" and claiming to be inconspicuous behind it.

Despite the fact that he never goes anywhere without his camera, which he has changed several times along the years, and that he even has his own editing suite at home in Stroud, Gloucestershire, filming has always remained only a hobby for Mr Vowles since he picked it up in 1933 when he started using his dad's.



Ready to roll... Jack Vowles, camera in hand, is about to travel back in time.  
Photo: Matthew Mirabelli.

His footage has been used to help the organisers, the Malta Tourism Authority, get today's re-enactment as close as possible to the actual day... And Mr Vowles jokes that he intends to check that it is as authentic as can be - relying on his infallible memory and not only the film.

In Malta, Mr Vowles was an engineer in the Royal Air Force, working on the plane of Wing Commander Adrian "Warby" Warburton, considered to be the greatest RAF reconnaissance pilot.

"I was, basically, looking after him," he says of the legendary man for his role in the defence of Malta.

Mr Vowles would have loads of stories to tell, but a tattoo, which is fading out on his right arm, says a lot. It reads: The Fighting 69. And Mr Vowles explains the story behind it: It was done in Strait Street, Valletta, with the "ace reconnaissance man" for 69 Squadron.

"Although it was for defence, Warburton's Maryland had shot down several enemy aircraft. That's how Squadron 69 became known as Fighting 69," he explains.

The tattoo was done by a certain "Yorkie" down in "the Gut" - as Strait Street used to be called.

"Explanation: It was full of restaurants, cabarets and ladies of the night. When the naval guys got their wages, they would spend all their money there, returning to the ships saying they were gutted!"

Unfortunately, "the Gut" is not as lively as it used to be, but he can still remember the good restaurants.

And how could he forget Malta anyway? His life was spared as many as nine times when he was on the island during World War II - "by the grace of God" - and he is eternally grateful.

On one occasion, Mr Vowles recalls that he was "about to walk onto the bridge into Valletta when a little sense inside me told me to dive down... A bomb fell and the lady ahead was killed, as well as three horses under the bridge. I could return to the exact spot where it happened any time," he states, so clear is his memory.

But clearer still is the image on the "lady" ahead of him, whom he went straight towards to "tidy up" after she was killed.

"She was wearing lovely silk stockings, with a black seam down the back. I had come 'by walk', as the Maltese say, from Luqa, and I heard the click clack of high-heeled shoes behind me. (Most of the women wore sandals, or were barefoot.) She walked briskly past; she was well dressed; and I was puffing away behind her...

"I never knew her name and I must try to find out who she was..."

Mr Vowles has been returning to Malta since 1992 as a member of the George Cross Island Association, but cannot commit for next year: "I don't know. We get older; that's the trouble..."

"I shouldn't be here, really," he says, recalling his close encounters with death in wartime Malta.

"I'm fortunate I still am," he continues, not willing to push his luck further, though, when asked if he would be returning next year...

"I go to the Bighi cemetery every time I return to say hello to my buried friends, and in my mind, I can hear them talking exactly as they did all those years ago. Then, I tell them saḥḥa until next year..."