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Captain Fernando Salgueiro Maia, the Hero of the Carnation Revolution

A recent newspaper report suggests that if the Carnation Revolution had been a revolution in America, or perhaps in any other Western country, the world would already be full of films and books about the successful military coup which took place with scarcely a shot fired.



Most famous portrait

Those who heard my last presentation on the Carnation Revolution may remember the crucial role played by Captain Fernando José Salgueiro Maia on Thursday, April 25, 1974.

Who was Captain Salgueiro Maia? The recent anniversary of the Carnation Revolution saw a number of newspaper articles about this man, who has been dubbed the purest of the revolutionaries of that day.

He had joined the Movimento das Forças Armadas only in September of 1973, following his return to Portugal after war service in Guiné. From dozens of eligible candidates, he was chosen by his colleagues to spearhead the revolutionary advance into Lisbon because they must have seen in him the necessary qualities of leadership.

The Carnation Revolution was inspired by the captains of the Portuguese army, and several hundred young men took part, the vast majority of them in all districts of Portugal, and in less conspicuous roles than that of Fernando Salgueiro Maia.

Captain Fernando Salgueiro Maia

This man was transformed into the icon of the Revolution because of his outstandingly courageous action on that spring day of 1974. The most prominent of the army rebels, he had the most public role in the revolution.



On the megaphone at Largo do Carmo

After the two radio signals had been broadcast (the two songs “E Depois do Adeus” and “Grândola Vila Morena”), junior officers at Santarém initiated the actions which led to the revolution.

Fernando’s colleagues ensured that their commanding officer was unable to warn his superiors, while Fernando himself gathered in a large hall the men under his command at the barracks.

He addressed them like this: “Gentlemen, as you all know, there are various forms of state. The socialist states, the capitalist states, and the state we are in. Now, in this solemn night, we are going to end this state. So, anyone who wants to come with me, we go to Lisbon and we finish it. If you volunteer, go outside and form up. If you do not want to go, stay here!”

He had an immediate selection problem, since the 800 men formed up outside, and the column could take only 240.

It was Fernando who led and commanded this revolutionary column of 240 men of the Escola Prática de Cavalaria from Santarém. The detachment consisted of 10 armoured cars and personnel carriers, 12 troop transports, two ambulances and a command jeep, and it set off from Santarém at 03:20, travelled 60km and arrived in the centre of Lisbon at 05:45.

On its way into the city, the lead vehicle stopped at a red traffic light, and Fernando was irritated by the ridiculousness of the situation. Government forces were sent to oppose this column, but after conversation with Fernando, most went over to the rebels.

Memorial in Lisbon

Soon after his column arrived at Terreiro do Paço, using his code name Charlie Oito, he radioed to the command post: "We have occupied Terreiro do Paço, and are in control of the Bank of Portugal and Radio Marconi." He told the only journalist on the spot: "We are here to overthrow the government", and there is a famous picture of a policeman saluting Captain Fernando Salgueiro Maia on that early morning.

The frigate Gago Coutinho in Lisbon harbour was ordered to fire on Fernando's column in Terreiro do Paço, but the ship's gunners refused to obey this order. Similarly, troops under the orders of loyalist senior officers refused to fire on Fernando and his men.

At about 11:00, Fernando was ordered to take his column to the GNR barracks at the Largo do Carmo, where the President of the Council had withdrawn with other Ministers. More government forces were joining the rebels and, by 12:30, the barracks was surrounded. Standing on an armoured carrier, Fernando using a megaphone ordered the government ministers inside the barracks to surrender.

An eyewitness later reported: "I was there, right in the middle of the crowd in Largo do Carmo; I heard all his orders, and his appeals for surrender. He seemed quite calm and radiated confidence. He was there to fulfil his destiny. In the midst of so many people and so much tension, it seems impossible that he imposed silence on the crowd, but it happened. I heard perfectly the noise of the cannon elevating as it aimed and prepared to fire at the façade of the barracks. He gave 15 minutes' warning, then 10, then five and finally ordered the first burst at the ground floor, then others further up the building. At that time, there were M47s [tanks] of Cavalaria 7 who were not part of the coup, and they were preparing to advance in support of the besieged ministers, and there was also a helicopter overhead; these were moments of tension, but Salgueiro Maia, megaphone in hand, was calmly in control. When it was all over, he thanked us and asked us to withdraw. He displayed neither hatred nor revenge, he was just the same as always."



The Clock of the Arco in Lisbon

Captain Fernando Salgueiro Maia

Fernando entered the building to negotiate the surrender of its occupants and, in an office, he came face to face with President of the Council Marcello Caetano, who refused to surrender to a mere captain, saying that it would be like throwing power into the gutter. Undaunted, Fernando arranged for General Spínola to be contacted – he had the seniority to accept the surrender.

Coming out of the barracks, Fernando urged the crowd back so that an armoured carrier could reverse into the barracks, and then drive away with the enemy inside.

Within 20 hours of the beginning of the coup in his barracks at Santarém, Captain Salgueiro Maia and his men had peacefully forced the resignation of the then ruling dictatorship, and it is in large part due to his brave intelligence, humble and sensitive character and strategic and social genius that bloodshed was avoided.

In a recent interview, Fernando's widow Natércia talked of her husband and of his actions on that day. She said that her husband had told her that his experience in the African Wars had taught him that, in combat, friendship was invaluable. On the morning of April 25, he had looked in the eye a lieutenant of the opposing forces at 10:00 and had not moved one millimetre. Holding his handkerchief in one hand, and with his arms spread wide, he had exposed himself to opposition gunfire. Looking through the visor of an armoured car 45 minutes later, he had faced down the driver of that vehicle in the same way.

Natércia said that he had taken white handkerchiefs in his pocket, and that he was carrying a live grenade and was prepared to sacrifice himself.

Pressed to declare which moment that Fernando had thought the most important, Natércia said that advancing towards Rossio, Fernando had looked back and believed that the clock on the Arco had stopped, that the city was holding its breath, that he could think only of the next step. People were cheering his column, but he heard nothing except the clock being rewound.

As the troops of Infantaria 1 surrendered in front of the National Theatre in Rossio, he heard the clock start to work again. The tick-tock inside his head gave him the calmness, patience and ability to calm the crowd; the certainty to give the order to open fire on the Carmo Barracks; the nerve to enter and face the President of the Council.



Memorial in Santarém

Five thousand fellow conspirators were at that moment turning the hands of not only the clock, but of history. Natércia said that future generations might not understand that a few men had risked their lives to re-start the Arco clock.

History records three quotations from Salgueiro Maia. First: “When I became involved in the planning of this mission, I swore on my honour that I would see it through to its end. For this, I would give my soul, my life.” Second: “I came to see a mass of people all raising their voices, placing flowers in the muzzles of the rifles. No-one needed to kill or to be killed. No-one needed to order an assault, or even the arrest of the king and his vassals.” Third, when he knew that his life was about to be claimed by his cancer: “Do not worry about where to bury my body. Rather concern yourselves with those who want to bury what I have helped to build.”

One of the reasons for Fernando’s enduring popularity is that, following the Revolution, he declined the positions which were offered to him as a consequence of his actions on that momentous day. He merely wanted to pursue his army career, and he was duly promoted to Major, and later Lieutenant Colonel. Sadly, he was able to enjoy only another 18 years of life before he succumbed to cancer in 1992.

Two poems have expressed admiration for Salgueiro Maia, and his refusal to take personal benefit from his fame. The first is by **Sophia de Mello Breyner Andresen**:

**Aquele que na hora da vitória
Respeitou o vencido
Aquele que deu tudo e não pediu a paga
Aquele que na hora de ganância
Perdeu o apetite
Aquele que amou os outros e por isso
Não colaborou com sua ignorância ou vício
Aquele que foi “Fiel à palavra dada à ideia tida”
Como antes dele mas também por ele
Pessoa disse**

He who at the time of victory
Respected the vanquished
He who gave everything and didn't ask to be paid
He who in the hour of greed
Lost his appetite
He who loved others and therefore
Did not collaborate with their ignorance or vice
He who was Faithful to the promise and to the idea
As Pessoa said before his time but also for him.

The second is by the left-winger **Manuel Alegre:**

**Ficaste na pureza inicial
Do gesto que liberta e se desprende.
Havia em ti o símbolo e o sinal
Havia em ti o herói que não se rende.**

**Outros jogaram o jogo viciado
Para ti nem poder nem sua regra
Conquistador do sonho inconquistado
Havia em ti o herói que não se integra.**

**Por isso ficarás como quem
Vem dar outro rosto ao rosto da Cidade
Diz-se o teu nome e saís de Santarém
Trazendo a espada e a flor da liberdade.**

You stayed in your initial purity
Of the gesture that frees and releases.
There was in you the symbol and the sign
There was in you the hero who does not surrender.

Others played the corrupt game
For you neither power nor its rule
Conqueror of the unconquered dream
There was in you the hero who remains independent

For that you will remain as the one who
Comes to give another face to the face of the City
Your name is announced and you leave Santarém
Bearing the sword and the flower of freedom.

This Captain of April was at the sharp end of the Revolution for the whole of that fateful day, and he is nowadays a part of the History of Portugal. His face represents the collective memory of Portuguese values, of liberty, of justice, of solidarity and of courage.

Read more from [Peter Booker](#) about [Opposition to Salazar's Regime](#) or [Three women, Tavira and the Carnation Revolution](#).



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