

LIFE&WELLBEING HISTORY

# Malta during World War I – snippets from July-December 1917



CHARLES DEBONO

## Quality of bread deteriorates

In early July, 1917, the food supply was in a precarious situation. The bread obtainable was enough to try the hardest stomach. A letter in the Daily Malta Chronicle described the situation: "The complaint is general, but the people are helpless. The sanitary people feed off the same kind of bread, I suppose; unless they are more fortunate in getting a digestible and palatable product, otherwise I cannot understand why such a state of affairs should not only continue, but go from bad to worse."

"I have been getting my bread from different dealers, but it is all the same heavy unpalatable abomination. If kept beyond a day it will turn sour and mouldy. It may be due to the excess of moisture allowed to remain in the bread, but this circumstance should, by itself, engage the attention of the authorities, who should see that the public is not defrauded at any time, but especially in these hard times, when bread forms the staple food of most of the people. I also have my doubts whether our bread is not being adulterated..."

The reader ended the letter by suggesting – in relation to food prices – that every buyer would be interested in the opening of large co-operative stores.

## Aster, Azalea hit mines of Malta

At 8.45am on July 4, 1917, the sloops Aster and Azalea departed Grand Harbour escorting the hospital-ship Abbasheh for Mudros. At 10.10am



Men of the Canadian Expeditionary Force. PHOTO: PROVINCIAL ARCHIVES OF ALBERTA

## Maltese sergeant killed on Western Front

Sergeant Frank Micallef, a Maltese who was serving with the Canadian Expeditionary Force in France, lost his life on the Western Front. He had been in France from the earliest stages of the war and had seen much hard fighting, including the First and Second Battles of Ypres.

the Aster hit a mine eight nautical miles east of Malta. The Azalea approached the Aster in order to tow it to Malta but suddenly a mine was seen and the former hit the mine. The Aster was abandoned at 11.20am and it sank a short while later. The Azalea, though badly damaged, managed to limp back to Malta – steaming astern – and was temporarily beached at Marsaxlokk. There was no loss of life on the Azalea but 10 died on the Aster, and 83 were rescued by the Azalea.

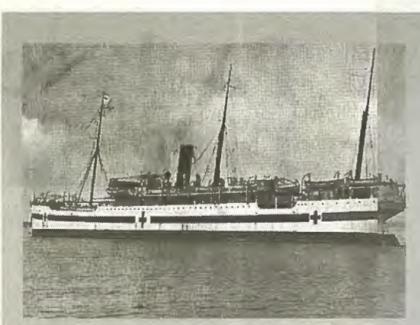
## French Navy moves from Malta to Greece

In the summer of 1917 the French Navy transferred its operation base from Malta to

Argostoli, on the island of Kefalonia, Ionian Islands. It is said that the move was made because Argostoli was much nearer the French operational area in the Aegean. However, the real reason was to distance the French sailors from the prostitutes of Malta, who were causing quite an amount of contagious sex-transmitted diseases to the French sailors.

## Fines for profiteering from foodstuffs

Certain Maltese profited from the lack of foodstuffs and they sold these products at exuberant prices. One case occurred in late October 1917, when the Valletta Police Court disposed of several contraventions of the Food and



The hospital-ship Goorkha.

## Goorkha hits mine off Malta, does not sink and is repaired at dockyard

In mid-afternoon on October 10 the British hospital-ship Goorkha hit a mine 15 miles northeast of Grand Harbour. At the time it was en route to Britain with 345 patients and 17 nursing sisters on board. All passengers were evacuated to the hospital-ship Breamar Castle. The Goorkha did not sink and was towed to Malta, arriving early in the evening. The hospital-ship, which had been damaged on its port side, was repaired at the dockyard.

Prices Control Ordinance. They were caught having sold eggs at an excessive price. Two dealers were fined £5 each. Another case was using sugar in the making of pastry without having previously reported stock in hand. A fine of £10 was imposed.

## Maltese crew rescued from sunken ship become POWs in Germany

Two more of the 10 Maltese reported missing and presumed to be lost after the torpedoing and sinking by the enemy of a merchant ship in the Mediterranean, on October 8, were reported to be prisoners-of-war at Brandenburg in Germany. The two Maltese were cook John Trapani and stoker Spiridione Rapinett. The source did not mention the name of the ship, but during that day four merchant ships and a naval trawler were sunk, namely Aylevarroo, HMT Ben Heilem, Gredon, Memphian and the Richard de Larrinaga.

## Governor sets maximum prices of products

On October 18 a government notice was published, in which His Excellency the Governor made certain orders with regard to purchases of foodstuffs and other articles which are regulated by maximum prices. No person was allowed to buy or offer to buy any article at a price exceeding the permitted maximum price at which the article may be sold.

## KOMRM officer returns from war front

Maltese Lieutenant Charles Muscat, one of the officers of the King's Own Malta Regiment of Militia regiment who had

volunteered for active service, returned to Malta on leave of absence. Lieutenant Muscat had been attached to an English regiment and has been serving at the Western Front where he was awarded the Military Cross.

## Freighter Islandia runs aground at Delimara Point

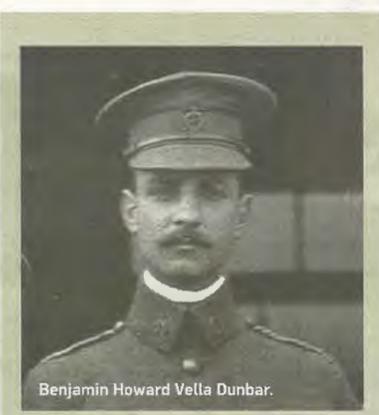
On December 10, the British freighter Islandia ran aground at Delimara Point. In mid-afternoon it had departed Marsaxlokk to go to the Grand Harbour. The seas were stormy, with a strong swell towards the northwest. Just outside Marsaxlokk the engine stopped, so it was anchored. But the anchors failed to hold the ship's drift and the stormy seas pushed it aground, stern to shore. The ship's bottom was holed and it sank in very shallow water so that it was submerged by only about a metre (from shore it appeared to be unharmed). A number of the crewmen jumped in the sea and swam ashore, where they were helped to gain land by RMA soldiers from Fort Delimara. Only, one of the soldiers, gunner Angelo Mangion, lost his life.

## Freighters caught with contraband cargo

During 1917, among the large number of freighters sent to Malta by the Contraband Control Service, a small number were found to be carrying a contraband cargo. This cargo was confiscated and later sold by auction. The ships involved were the Taxiarchi (January 8), an unnamed Greek caique (April 18), Astrapi (June 1), Jessmore (June 16), Barrowmore (June 22), Xiphias (July 10) and Erato (December 28).

The author wishes to thank the staff of the National Library, of the National Archives reading room and Joseph Caruana for their help.

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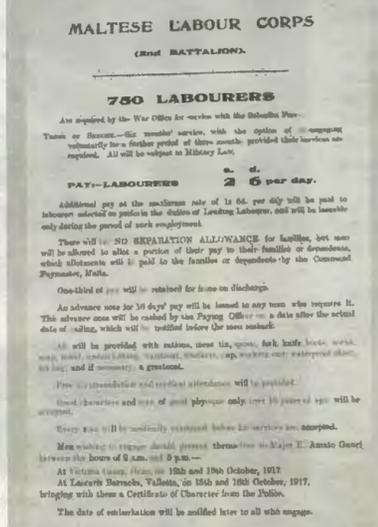
Benjamin Howard Vella Dunbar.

## Recognition of Maltese lieutenant colonel's service

In the London Gazette of November 27, a list was published, containing the names of 29 officers and six warrant and non-commissioned officers serving with the British Royal Artillery in Italy. This list included Benjamin Howard Vella Dunbar. On January 4, 1917, Acting Lieutenant Colonel Vella Dunbar was mentioned in the dispatches of Sir Douglas Haig for distinguished and gallant services and devotion to duty. Five months later he became a Companion of the Distinguished Service Order (DSO). Then, on August 9, Vella Dunbar relinquished the Acting rank of Temporary Lieutenant Colonel. He was also granted the Acting rank of Lieutenant Colonel while holding a special appointment. Between August and December 1917, Vella Dunbar served in Italy as Senior Medical Officer (SMO), British Heavy Artillery, attached to the Italian Army.

## Malta Labour Corps recruits set off to Salonika

In early December, the 2nd Battalion Maltese Labour Corps was paraded in Lascaris Ditch. From the early hours the men began to arrive, equipped and carrying their belongings in bags and boxes. Relatives and friends accompanied them. Afterwards they embarked a ship and proceeded to Salonika, Greece.



A recruiting poster for Maltese men to join the Malta Labour Corps. PHOTO: NATIONAL WAR MUSEUM



An FBA Type C two-seat flying boat. PHOTO: IMPERIAL WAR MUSEUM

## Italian flying boats transferred to Malta

Due to the ever growing number of enemy U-boats, in August 1917, three Italian FBA two-seater flying boats were transferred from RNA Station Otranto to supplement the six Short 184s that had arrived. There were therefore five FBAs at Malta, four of which were numbered N1975 to N1978.

## Anti-submarine kite balloon base set up at Lazzaretto Creek

Due to the destruction of many ships by German and Austrian submarines, even in close proximity of Malta, Commander-in-Chief Admiral Sir Somerset Gough-Calthorpe (1917-1919) proposed the introduction of kite balloons for escort duties with the Mediterranean Fleet. After it was approved, it was suggested that the unit be based in Malta. During November and December, six sheds were erected on the Lazzaretto Creek shore of Manoel Island, each shed accommodating a single kite balloon. By the end of 1917, the nucleus of a Kite Balloons Squadron Base No. 1 was formed at the head of Lazzaretto Creek, Ta' Xbiex. It was decided to employ balloons on anti-submarine patrols in the vicinity of Malta. A gas plant was also constructed in order to fill the balloons with gas.



A kite balloon at the Imperial War Museum. PHOTO: IMPERIAL WAR MUSEUM



HMS Vanguard in Scapa Flow.

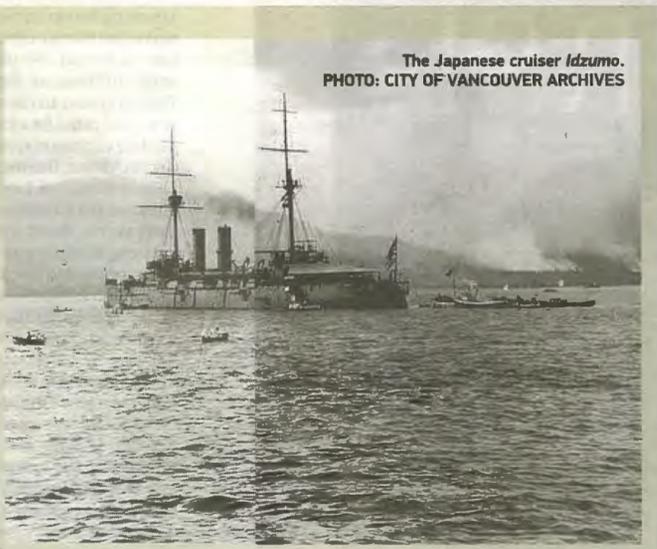
## 843, including 2 Maltese, die as HMS Vanguard blown up

On July 9, 1917, HMS Vanguard was anchored in Scapa Flow. At about 11.20pm an explosion occurred and the ship sank almost instantly. Only three of the crew survived, one of whom died soon afterwards. A total of 843 men were lost, including two Maltese – ward room messman Francesco Schembri and 3rd class cook Angelo Xuereb. Two Australian stokers from HMAS Sydney and a Japanese Captain Kyōsuke Eto lost their life too.

## Honours for Japanese Navy officers stationed in Malta

More Japanese destroyers arrived in Malta on August 10 to operate as convoy escorts: These were the Hinoki, Kashi, Momo and Yanagi. At the same time, the cruiser Idzumo replaced the Akashi. A ceremony took place on board the flagship Idzumo of the Rear Admiral Kōzō Satō, commanding the Japanese Squadron, operating in the Mediterranean. The occasion was the presentation of British decorations and medals awarded by the King to certain Japanese officers and men of the destroyer flotilla. Rear-Admiral G.A. Ballard, Senior Naval Officer in Charge, Malta, accompanied by his personal staff, arrived on board at 11am and was received by the Japanese Admiral and his officers. Captain Paul Metheun, ADC, was present also, representing His Excellency the Governor.

The officers and men about to be decorated were assembled amidships with the crews of the destroyers on the starboard side and the ship's company of the flagship drawn up to port. Unfortunately two officers and four ratings were missing because they lost their life due to enemy action. The insignia was to be forwarded to their relatives.



The Japanese cruiser Idzumo. PHOTO: CITY OF VANCOUVER ARCHIVES