SELECT MALTA MAIL
OF THE FRENCH NAVY IN WW1

Giovanni Bonello

When the first world war loomed inevitable in 1914, the two main Allies, Great Britain and France, agreed to share and divide their maritime spheres of responsibilities. France would be the foremost actor in the Mediterranean, while Great Britain would assume military leadership in the Channel, the Atlantic and the North Sea. For the duration of the war, the British Mediterranean fleet acted under the supreme command of a French Admiral, and the French navy followed British orders in the North. The cooperation between the two navies was fraught with major difficulties, misunderstandings and rivalries, but survived the duration of the war.

The powerful French warships moved base from Toulon to Malta, and arrived, to great popular excitement and festivities, in the Valletta harbours on August 11, 1914, just before the formal declaration of war.

One aspect that distinguished the two fleets in Malta was censorship. While the British authorities enforced a total ban on photographing British shipping in the harbours for fear of security breaches, no such restrictions seem to have hit French warships in the Malta harbours. Photos of British ships in Maltese waters taken during the war are almost impossible to find, while images of French warships in the Malta harbours abound.

The stationing in Malta and its harbours of thousands of French naval personnel for a protracted period impacted the postal services in considerable ways, mostly in two directions: the commercial possibilities of a new postal market were no way overlooked. Publishers seized the opportunity to flood Malta with literally hundreds of new postcards designed exclusively to attract maritime buyers: French patriotic images, messages in French – some publishers actually pre-printed FM (Franchise Militaire, roughly the equivalent of On Active Service) in the stamp corner on the back of the postcard. French-dedicated war postcards form an especially attractive niche in the Melitensia collectors' world.

But, besides the commercial bonanza for publishers and retailers, the massive presence of thousands of foreign seamen anxious to correspond with their far-away families and friends created logistic problems and called for new practical solutions in the mail systems. The French postal authorities rose to the occasion.

Plenty of valuable research has already been devoted to these new challenges and how they were met. It seems the unexpected, and massive, workload did not disrupt unduly the smooth workings of the French and Maltese postal services operating from Malta. Although the island was pivotal to the Entente Cordiale

powers in WW1, it remained far from the frontline theatres of war, and was thus spared the impact and horrors of actual destruction and death. For how the French postal system worked in Malta at the service of the French naval forces in WW1, I recommend a number of studies.[1]

This feature is meant to illustrate a few items (there are thousands!) representative of the philatelic collecting interests relating to that period. No way does it claim to be exhaustive.

The French fleet rather suddenly left Malta half-way through the war, in the summer of 1917, and relocated to Argostoli in the Ionian islands. No official explanation was given as to why Malta could no longer be considered a safe or welcome port. But something decisive must have prompted such a drastic move. Some incidents of violence and disharmony between French personnel and Maltese inhabitants are recorded, but nothing unduly serious.[2] A source attributes this decision to leave Malta to the alarming rate French sailors were succumbing to venereal disease transmitted by Maltese prostitutes.[3]

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[1] R(obert) E(dward) Martin, *Malta, The Stamps and Postal History*, London, 1980, pp. 205 – 206; Giovanni Bonello, "Malta and the French Postal Services in World War One" in *The PSM Magazine*, Vol. 22 no 2/3, August/December 1993, pp. 6 – 15; Giovanni Bonello, "Malta and the French Navy" in *Histories of Malta*, Vol. 4, Malta, 2003, pp. 145 – 163; Alan Green et, *Malta in World War 1, Postal History*, Malta Study Circle, 2013, pp. 169 – 193; Roger G. Evans et, *Malta in World War 1, Photographic Postcards*, Malta Study Circle, 2014, pp. 89 – 112.

[2] Giovanni Bonello, "French Sailors in Malta during WW1", in *The Sunday Times of Malta*, June 11, 2017.

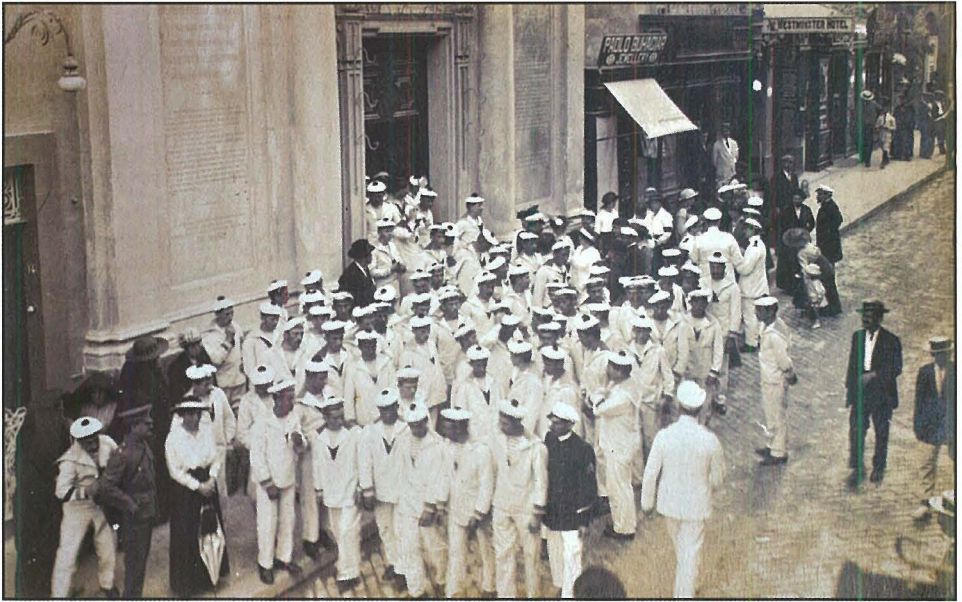[3] Charles Debono, "French Navy moves from Malta to Greece" in *The Sunday Times of Malta,* September 24, 2017.

Fig. 1
French sailors and officers leaving Mass service in St Barbara's church, Republic Street, Valletta. This was the official church of the French armed forces for the duration of WWI. A marble plaque inside commemorates this French connection.
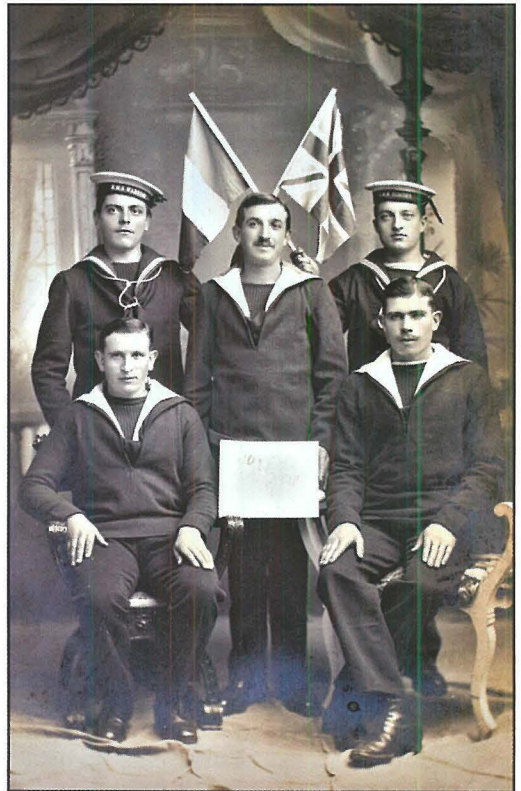

Fig. 2
French and British sailors share a group photo under the Union Jack and the Tricoleur. This photo was taken by Chritien & Co, at the Empire Studio in Republic Street, Valletta. This spirit of fraternity between the two allied services recurs in scores of war photos taken in Malta.
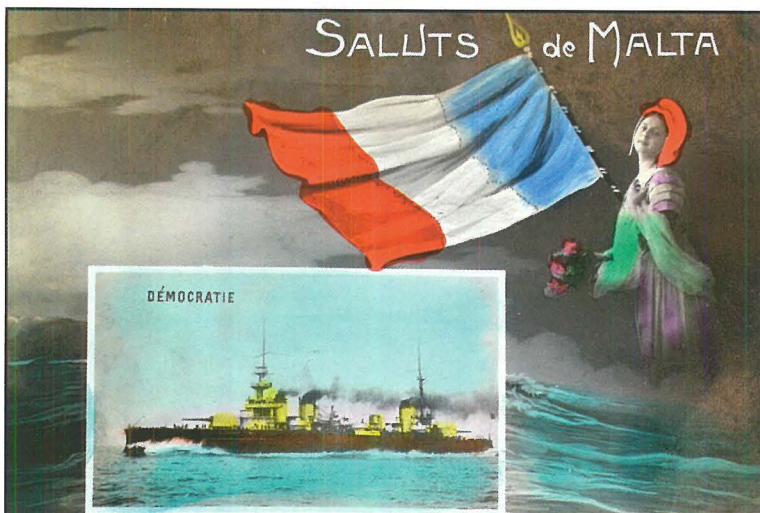
Fig. 3

Patriotic postcard "*Saluts de Malta*" showing Marianne waving the French flag over an inset of the warship *Démocratie*. Dozens of this type of real photo postcards targeting the French naval forces and printed in Italy were issued in Malta during WW1. Some are signed by the publisher Cortis & Co, but most have no publisher's imprint. I have good reason to believe they were produced by Umberto Adinolfi (b. 1870) a prolific Italian photographer and publisher from Senglea who in 1934 became a British subject in Malta by naturalization.[4]
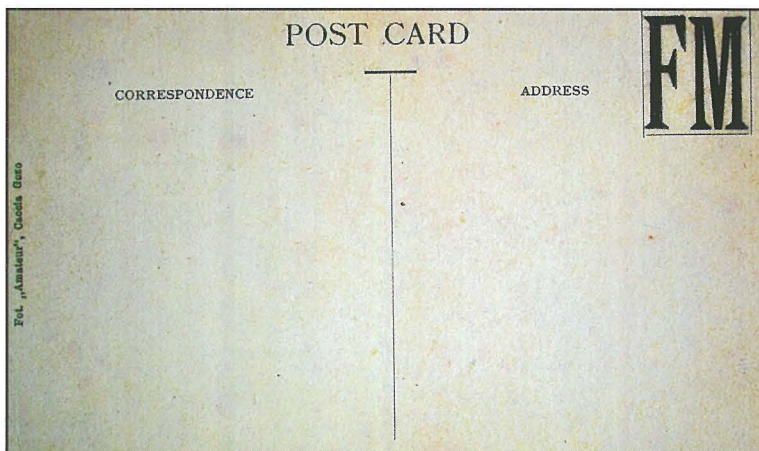
Fig. 4

The back of a Gozo postcard by Fot. 'Amateur' Casal Caccia (Mikiel Farrugia *l-Badiku*), pre-printed for use by the French naval personnel in Malta with the FM initials (for *Franchise Militaire*) in the top right-hand stamp corner. This indicated that the card would not require a stamp if used by seamen on active service.

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[4] Giovanni Bonello, "More notes for a history of Photography in Malta" in *The Sunday Times of Malta*, August 2, 2015.

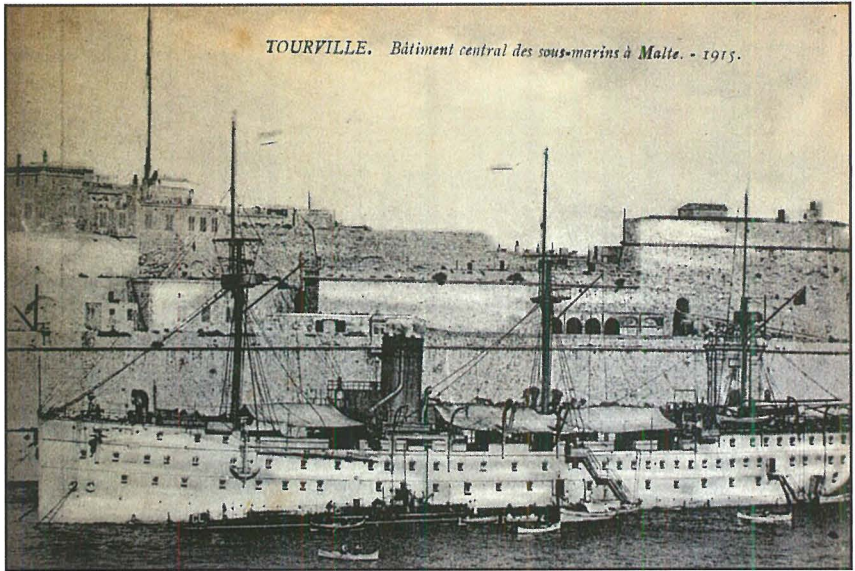TOURVILLE. *Bâtiment central des sous-marins à Malte. - 1915.*

Fig. 5

The French troopship *Tourville* berthed in Grand Harbour during the war. This ship served a double purpose in Malta – as a submarine depot ship (one is seen berthed alongside) and as the central post-office for the French naval forces stationed in Malta Their mail generally arrived in and left from the *Tourville*.
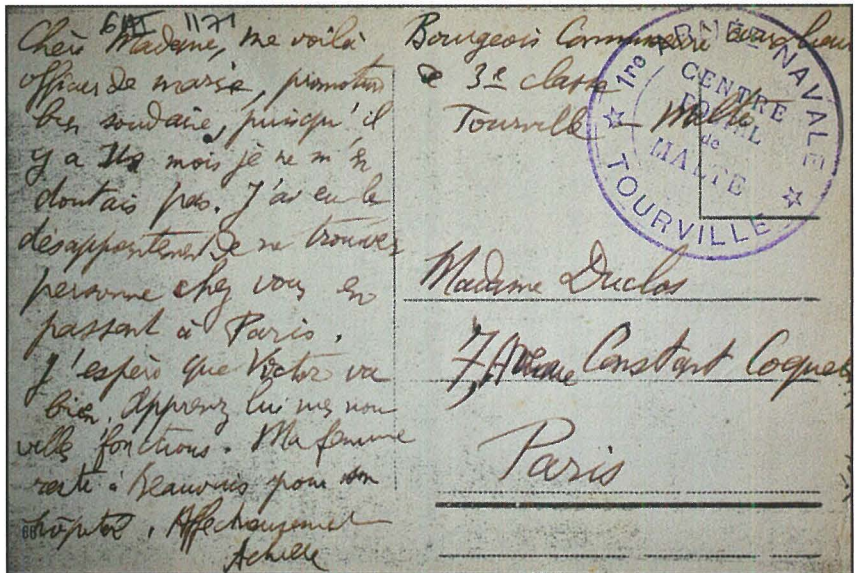

Fig. 6

A Malta postcard that passed through the *Tourville*. The large circular hand-stamp has the inscription * 1re ARMEE NAVALE * TOURVILLE * round the rim and CENTRE / POSTAL / de / MALTE in straight lines in the centre.

Fig. 7
A pre-printed official postcard for use by the French armed forces, sent from Malta on May 23 1916 and handstamped POSTES NAVALES and MALTE.

Fig. 8
A Malta postcard stamped with a GV farthing brown stamp cancelled by the French circular handstamp in use by the French fleet in Malta * MARINE FRANCAISE * SERVICE A LA MER * enclosing a large fouled anchor. Many sub-types of this handstamp exist used in Malta.
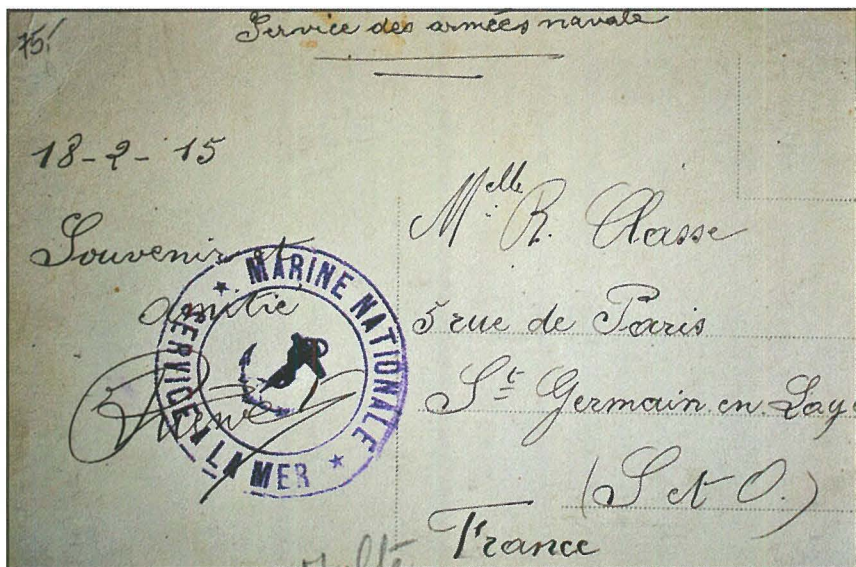
Fig. 9
A Malta postcard sent on February 2, 1915 from Malta to France stamped with the other standard circular handstamp * MARINE NATIONALE * SERVICE A LA MER * enclosing a smaller fouled anchor. Several sub-types of this handstamp are found used in Malta.
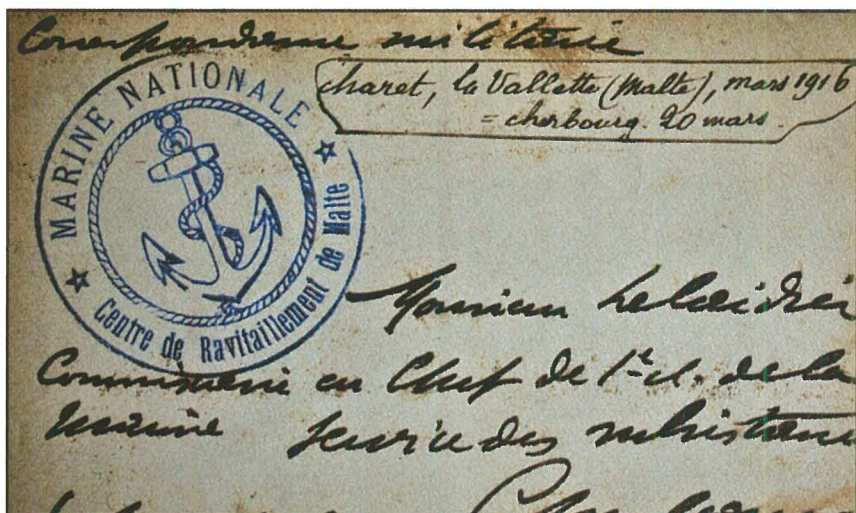

Fig 10
Visiting card envelope sent from Malta to Cherbourg in March 1916. It bears the circular handstamp * MARINE NATIONALE * Centre de Ravitallement de Malte * round a large fouled anchor.
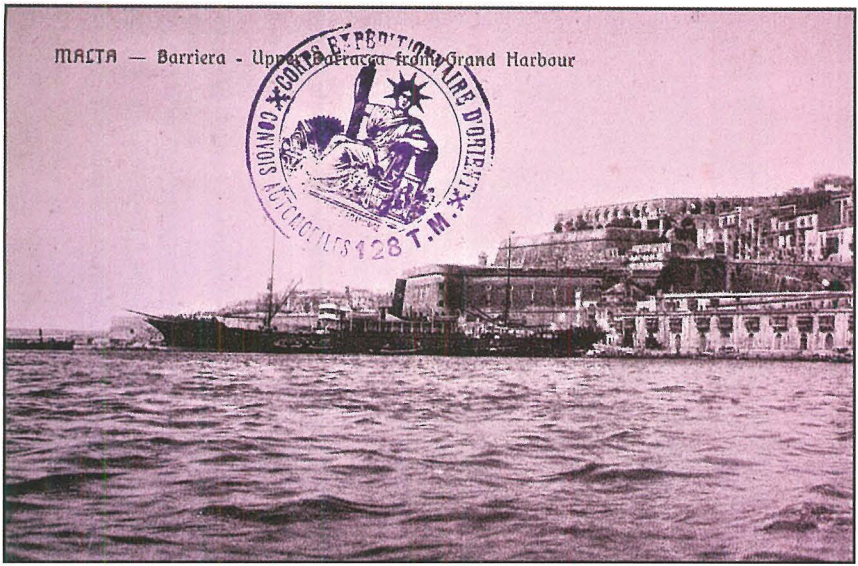
Fig. 11

Malta postcard stamped by a large circular * CORPS EXPEDITIONNAIRE D'ORIENT *
CONVOIS AUTOMOBILES 128 T.M. * surrounding a seated figure of Republican liberty.
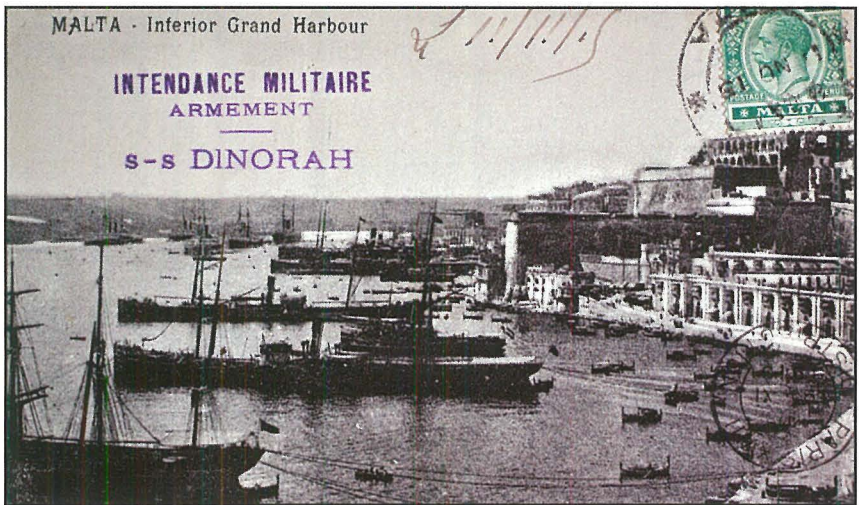

Fig. 12

Malta postcard dated November 11, 1915, addressed to Paris, bearing on front and back a straight-line handstamp on three lines: INTENDANCE MILITAIRE / ARMEMENT / s – s DINORAH.
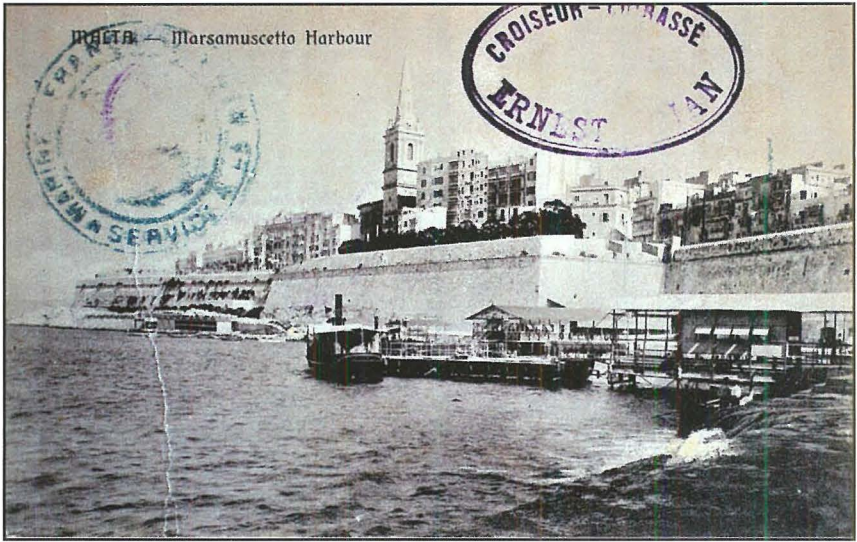This cargo ship was sunk by German U Boat SM UC – 63 on September 25, 1917 in the Atlantic.

Fig. 13
Named warship. Malta postcard with oval handstamp CROISEUR – CUIRASSE' – ERNEST
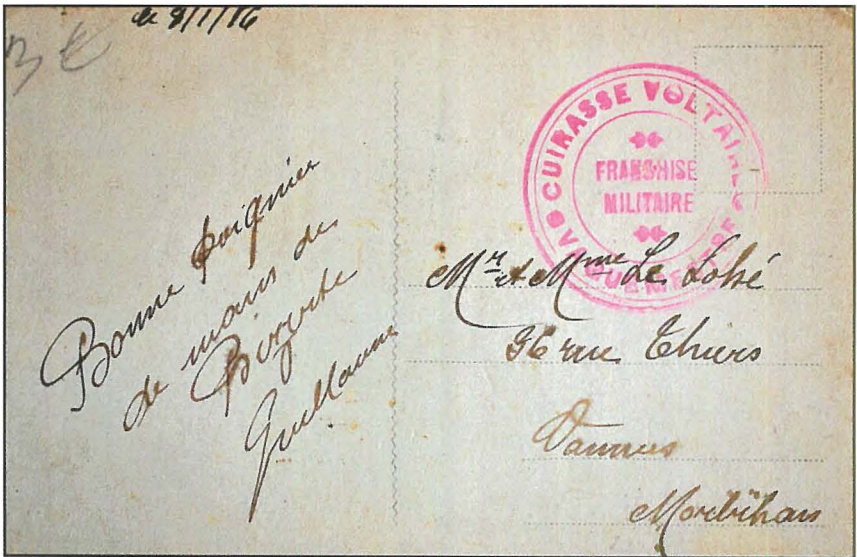RENAN dated December 14, 1914.

Fig. 14
Named warship. Malta postcard dated January 8, 1916, with circular handstamp in red, *
CUIRASSE VOLTAIRE * VAGUEMESTRE * (postal agent) round the rim and horizontal
FRANCHISE MILITAIRE at the centre.

Fig. 15
Named warship. Malta postcard
dated September 14, 1914, stamped
in straight line with the name of the
cruiser * JURIEN de la GRAVIERE
* commissioned in 1903.

MALTA — National Costume.

Fig. 16.
Named warship. Malta
postcard published
by John Critien dated
October 7 (no year)
stamped front and
back with an oval
canceller in red * AVISO
AUXILIARE * NORD
CAPER *.