

MALTA - 1914 - 1918

NURSING DEPOT and POSTAL HUB

by
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Introduction: The scope of this article is to make known the great efforts of Malta and its people during the most difficult time of World War 1, when the island became the ad hoc medical centre of the Mediterranean Sea for Eastern Europe's battlegrounds. As a result Malta became known as the "Nurse of the Mediterranean". A natural consequence of this role was the additional postal service rendered by Malta, through the Army Post Office, the staff of which was recruited from the the local G.P.O. as well as the G.P.O. itself, to the ANZACs, British soldiers and soldiers of many other Expeditionary forces from several countries that temporarily called Malta home.

Private Roy Howard Denning was born at Marulan, New South Wales joined the AIF on 7 September 1914 and soon sent to Gallipoli where he was severely wounded, evacuated and operated on at the Pembroke Camp, Malta, writing at least two letters to his family. He recovered and went on to fight on the Western Front until the end of the war. He was indeed a lucky man to have survived.

John Walker, while in Gallipoli was transferred by hospital ship to Lemnos suffering from severe septic sores and was admitted at St. Andrews Hospital, Malta, on 8 September 1915 suffering from dysentery and died.

"The Malta Independent" newspaper of Sunday, 8 May 2011, under the banner "Malta and the ANZACs" claimed that the ANZACs suffered a great loss of 2,000 killed on the first day of the Gallipoli campaign and one of the first to be killed was Private Charles Bonavista, a Maltese who joined the 11th Battalion in Perth. "At least six other Maltese were killed in action serving with the Australians and a much higher number serving with British contingents." The paper also states that: "A little known fact about the Gallipoli campaign is the Maltese Labour Corps. This consisted of 1,000 workers under the direction of Maltese officers who unloaded ships and performed other activities at Anzac Cove. Most of the provisions for the 24,000 men in Anzac Cove came from Malta, including the water that was towed in water barges."

Military Hospitals

From the spring of 1915, hospitals and convalescent depots were established on the islands of Malta and Gozo which dealt with over 135,000 sick and wounded, chiefly from the campaigns in Gallipoli (*Gelibolu*), the peninsula on the Dardanelles



British, Australian and New Zealand sick and wounded treated at Bighi Naval Hospital, Malta



The Holy Infirmary's facade and the limestone balcony and balustrades depicted on the 11c value of the set commemorating the Third Centenary of the School of Anatomy and Surgery"

and Salonika, although increased submarine activity in the Mediterranean meant that fewer hospital ships were sent to the island from May 1917.

The indication that Malta might be required to take an active part in providing medical assistance during the campaign was a cable from the G.O.C. Egypt dated 24 February 1915 enquiring the number of hospital beds available over and above normal requirements. Five hundred beds were offered immediately. Though the offer was not taken up, the Island Governor took immediate steps to expand the existing military hospitals and identify suitable buildings to establish new ones in anticipation. This initiative resulted in extending the capacity to 3,000 beds for the sick and wounded in Malta and a further 500 beds for convalescents at Fort Chambray in Gozo, Malta's sister island. Civil medical practitioners and civil hospital orderlies of the local St. John's Ambulance Brigade were also enrolled.

The main receiving hospital station at the time was located at the Sacra Infermeria or Holy Infirmary, a state-of-the-art hospital at the time when it was established by the Order of the Knights of Malta in 1574. It had a capacity for about 600 beds. Their skills in the field of Medicine were the most advanced in Europe at the time and this continued over many years after their departure. Situated very close to the Grand Harbour, where the Hospital ships brought the sick and wounded, it became the receiving and sorting base as well as where dangerously ill or wounded patients were treated.

By the end of March, the first 500 sick (venereal cases) personnel arrived; they were accommodated partly at Forrest Hospital (already designated for such cases) and the rest at Imtarfa Barracks (hastily evacuated by troops). On the April 29, the G.O.C. Egypt cabled a request for 1,000 sick and wounded, and on the 30th a request for a further 600, and then later a further 1,000 cases. The foresight of the Maltese authorities in preparing much more hospital accommodation than requested was rewarded. By June 6, the number of sick and wounded reached 1962, and 2593 on June 12th and by the end of the month, over 4,000, distributed among 14 hospitals. By now Imtarfa hospital (the venereal cases discharged on June 13, cleaned and colour washed) and St. Andrews hospital (expanded later to 1,158

beds), both splendidly located, as well as other hospitals at Valletta, Cottonera, St. Andrew's, Tigné, Floriana, Bavière and Hamrun were opened in June. At the same time a few privately run hospitals, offered beds and their services, and Naval and military beds were pooled too. One must also mention the offer of many private individuals to accept minor sickness and convalescents in their own houses. There is anecdotal evidence that suggests a few who were hospitalised and recovered in Malta, in later years made a return trip to thank the nurses and visit the graves of those they left behind.

Medical staff (doctors, nurses and orderlies) was scarce in April 1915, adequate for peace requirements: 9 Medical Officers, 14 Nurses and 220 R.A.M.C. rank and file. This compliment was obviously unable to cope with the demand and rush in May. By the middle of May, 27 local doctors, 11 nurses and 65 nursing orderlies volunteered their services providing invaluable assistance to the cause. By June the numbers rose to 117 Medical Officers, 300 Nurses (a number of nurses were sent to assist from Egypt) and 752 rank and file.



Bighi Hospital had quite large corridors ideal for large patients from the summer midday sun and inclement weather while the wards had high ceilings. Due to the huge numbers of patients, at one point, they were bedded in corridors and ditches.



Floriana Hospital had a compliment of 600 beds and its location was extremely convenient being close to the Grand Harbour as well as Marsamxetto Harbours where all sick wounded were disembarked.



HMHS Rewa was a steamship that was originally built for the British-India Steam Navigation Company. It was requisitioned for use as a British hospital ship during World War 1. It was hit and sunk by a torpedo fired by the German U-boat U-55. It was carrying 279 wounded soldiers.

This set was issued on 7 November 2014 to commemorate W.W.I

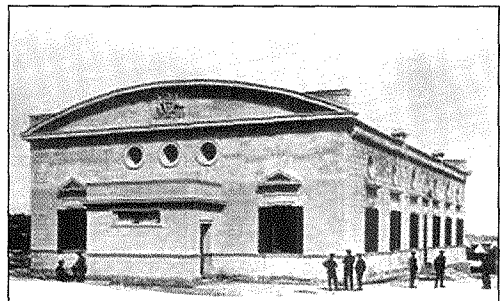
While sick and wounded continued to be landed in Malta, various initiatives were launched to assist in the convalescence of the several hundreds of soldiers. In October the Committee of the Soldiers' and Sailor' Institute, with the assistance of a private donation of £200, a Gymnasium in Valletta was converted into an institute for convalescents for the Navy, Army and Allied Forces. It included a library, reading/writing room, a refreshment bar, a billiard table and a fully equipped stage. It has been estimated that some 80,000 men benefitted from the venue, which had

become one of the most popular places of entertainment in Malta. (After the war, it became the Vernon Institute). One must also recognise and salute the valuable assistance rendered by the ladies of Malta (providing voluntary aid) and the Joint Committee of the British Red Cross Society (organising all the voluntary aid) and the St. John's Ambulance Association of Malta (donating gifts and medical comforts for the wounded). In addition voluntary nurses and orderlies were trained and gave valuable assistance in hospitals.

During the third quarter of 1915, more hospitals were established, namely: St. Davis's and St. Patrick's (both camps), St. Elmo and St. John (both schools) St. Paul's (partly), St. George's became fully dieted, and the Ghajn Tuffieha as a large convalescent camp hospital. During the second half of 1915, apart wounded and sick servicemen, there were several cases of dysentery and other diseases. By then, the number of beds increased from over 6,000 to just under 13,100. One must remember that July, August and September witnessed some of the fiercest fighting on the peninsula, such as the landing at Suvla (see above) and the onset of diseases and sickness. 2,000 sick and wounded were disembarked in Malta to build the hospitalised population in Maltese hospitals to around 10,160 by the end of September. On a positive note, one must record that 3,500 fit personnel were returned to theatre of war.

Malta at the time offered few places on entertainment, except a few bars in the capital city, Valletta and in the town of Sliema and outlying areas which accommodated many of the British residents, mostly servicemen, at the time. So the need was felt for some place of amusement for the thousands of convalescent Australian and New Zealander servicemen from around the St. Andrew's Hospital and other convalescent camps in the vicinity.

Accordingly, £2,000 out of an Australian Red Cross donation were used to erect a fine stone building on a site located between St. Andrew's and St. Paul's Hospitals. The edifice was designed and erected under the supervision of the Royal Engineers; it was capable of seating 2,000 persons and officially opened in January 1916 as the "Australia Hall"(*). In May 1916, it was managed by the British Red Cross Society and the Australia Hall Committee for the first few months, and later, entirely by the latter. (**The property eventually passed over ownership to the Government of Malta, and later sold to a private entity*).



The Gallipoli campaign was in its last days in March 1916 but hostilities

AUSTRALIA HALL

were brewing in Salonika, which meant that the requirements for beds was not abating but ever more in demand. The number of operational beds had been steadily increasing, the availability rising from 13,000 at the end of September 1915 to 20,400 in March 1916. These extra beds were provided in the newly established hospitals at Manoel Island, Spinola, Ricasoli, and convalescent camps at Ghajn Tuffieha, Mellieha and Fort Chamray in Gozo, and convalescent centres for officers at the Governor's Palace at Verdala and San Antonio.

The K. O. M. R. M.

Before closing the military aspect, it is only appropriate to mention that Malta provided also military as well as logistical support. The King's Own Malta Regiment of Militia (KOMRM) was embodied by a proclamation issued on Sunday, 2 August 1914, by the then Governor and Commander-in-Chief, Sir Leslie Rundle. Their assignment was to man the various war stations on the coasts of Malta and Gozo, as well stations dotted around the centre of the Island. This included guarding some 4,000 German, Austrian and Turkish prisoners of war. (Prince von Hohenzollern, nephew of the Kaiser, rescued from the *Emden* was among those prisoners). The KOMRM battalions provided assistance in several of the military hospitals.

On 14 January 1915, a contingent of 560 officers and men from both battalions left the Island to render garrison duties in Cyprus. Later in September, following a call for volunteers, 864 men volunteered for service in Gallipoli. About the same time the half-battalion on service in Cyprus returned and most volunteered for service in Gallipoli attached to British line regiments. On 5 December a second labour battalion was sent to Salonika. A number of Maltese officers were decorated for bravery while quite a few officers and men were mentioned in despatches. The KOMRM was eventually disembodied on 31 December 1921, to be resurrected again as the KOMR before World War Two. In addition to military action, a group of some 1000 Maltese were formed as the Malta Labour Battalion and served with honour and valour in the day to day strenuous task of assisting with carrying the wounded and sick people to various stations for processing.



1990 Maltese Uniforms (4th Issue) featured the Malta Labour Corps on the 10c stamp and the KOMRM on the 25c value. Both establishments contributed in the Gallipoli and Dardanelles campaigns

Postal Arrangements in Malta

During the first world war, British armed services mail was handled by the Army Post Office, a section of the Royal Engineers, Special Reserve. Staff was recruited from the staff of the civil post office. The General Base Post Office in the UK collected all mail from civilian Post Office including all letters and parcels intended for the Expeditionary Forces. After sorting into separate bags for every unit overseas and organised their conveyance to the nearest and appropriate port overseas, mail bags were delivered to the appropriate Base, Stationery or Field Post Offices which were responsible for handling all mail delivery and collection in the field.

Malta was regarded as a home station during the First World War. While British army soldiers based in Malta were required to prepay postage, servicemen (including allied forces, such as the Australian and New Zealand forces) in hospitals were entitled to mail free of postage. During the Dardanelles Campaign, there were three stages of the Postal Services:

1. The initial arrangements which included the early services via Malta, from February to 10 June 1915.
2. Postal Services through Alexandria from 10 June to mid November.
3. Attempts to accelerate the carriage of mail in November and December through direct sailings between Marseilles and Mudros (on the island of Lemnos in the Aegean Sea near Gallipoli).

Following a refusal by the French to carry parcel mails for the British (and Allied) Forces, an alternative route to Mudros was organised coming into effect on December 9 1915. All mail was to be directed to Malta. Two small Royal Engineers Postal Section parties were dispatched on the 24 February and 20 March with great secrecy to two un-named base camps ("Base Z" and "Base Y"). 'Z' arrived at Mudros in early March, but was moved to Alexandria due to military activity preventing the setting up of the postal facilities there. Base 'Y' went straight to Alexandria but was later moved to Mudros where it was set up in April. The Postal Unit from the Royal Engineers (UK) arrived in Alexandria on April 23.

All Mail from home (UK) as well as Australia including New Zealand, for the Mediterranean Expeditionary Forces in the Dardanelles and Egypt was sent to Malta from where it proceeded in bulk to Mudros. Following complaints from the Egyptian end, mails were made up in two bundles, one to Malta for the Dardanelles and the other to Egypt. A small detachment of Royal Engineers Postal Service was stationed on the Island of Malta to process (check and load) mail to the Dardanelles. However, due to irregularity in the availability of transport between Mudros and Malta, it was decided that all mail was to be sent to Egypt and vice-versa. The first mail under this new system reached Alexandria on June 10.

Homeward bound mails, including Australia and New Zealand were at first processed at Mudros from bundles and bags received from the stationery “beach” field post offices. From Mudros, they were usually forwarded by sea transport to Malta, from where they proceeded on their onward shipment by the regular mail steamers to Marseilles, or elsewhere as required, but also sometimes by a direct route to England. In September 1915, the few staff of the R.E.P.S. took over the work of addressing letters from the hundreds of wounded in the M. E. F. hospitals in Malta and transferring them to the local R.E.P.S. for processing. In later years, Malta became an important mail processing station for Mudros and Salonika and the work was taken over by the regular Army Post Office on the Island of Malta. Mails from British servicemen recovering in Malta were sent by the next available mail ship while mail from French personnel was processed generally by the French army post office usually on board ships in port or the Mediterranean sea. Indeed one comes across interesting postal markings from French military authorities.

“ON ACTIVE SERVICE MEDT^N” Handstamp

Since all the wounded and sick hospitalised in Malta and Gozo from the Dardanelles campaign were military personnel, they were allowed to post letters and postcards free of charge. Such covers carry a mandatory manuscript declaration “On Active Service” at the top. The postal markings on these missives included the single ring dated and coded “ARMY POST OFFICE” postmark and generally a circular undated double or triple ring handstamp inscribed “ON ACTIVE SERVICE” at the top and “MEDT^N” or “MEDT” at the bottom. The London G.P.O. Proof Book shows ten versions of this handstamps, eight of which have been recorded. Most had a (solid, outline, crude or none) cross in the centre, while at least one handstamp is known without the “MEDT^N” at the bottom. Some of the handstamps have the superscript “^N” missing. There seems to be some doubts whether only sick and wounded in hospitals personnel were allowed to use this service. The earliest known date of this handstamp is 15 JU 15 (Type 2), which coincides with the arrival of the first sick and wounded from the arena of war. There is no doubt that the “On Active Service” handstamp was used on mail written in the various hospitals; the cross in the centre implies that this was the case, the latest on 17 DE 18 (Type 1).

Various colours of these handstamps have been recorded, some individual handstamps known in at least three different colours used at the same location. For example, Type OAS-3 is known in violet, blue and red-mauve and was used on mail from the Imtarfa Hospital between 26 AU 15 and 18 NO 17. Although all (incoming and outgoing) mail was censored, mail from the hospitals in Malta, though it may have been censored, generally did not receive censorship markings. It has been proposed that since in many cases military personnel had been involved



OAS-1



OAS-2



OAS-3



OAS-4



OAS-5



OAS-6



OAS-7



OAS-8



OAS-9



OAS-5

in writing letters for the sick and wounded, there was no need for a further delay in processing mail by applying a censorship mark.

The “ARMY POST OFFICE” Postmarks

Two Army Post Office postmarks were used during the duration of World War One.

The first, “ARMY POST OFFICE S Z 7”, APO SZ7, was a 28mm single postmark which included a code (*, A, B or D) and the date, shown below. The “S” is an indication that it was a “Stationery” Office rather than a “Railhead” Office; “Z” indicates its “Headquarters” area while the “7” stands for the individual office. Up to July 1916, no code letter was used; after this date, codes “A”, “B”, “D” and “X” have been reported to have been used. The earliest recorded date is 22 DE 15 (no code) and the latest 27 JY 17 (Code A). Examples have surfaced



with the use any code, but from around mid July, the codes mentioned above. Anecdotal evidence claims this handstamp moved to Egypt in the summer of 1917. The Malta handbook “The Stamps and Postal History 1576 –1960”, published by the Malta Study Circle (UK) reports the use of the “ARMY POST OFFICE SZ6” on a “Malta Souvenir Post Card” dated 26 Oct 15. Malta stamps have also been recorded cancelled “BASE ARMY POST OFFICE” (14 JU 15 and 10 FE 18) and

although the Army Post Office number is not known it is thought that it may be “Z” (at least after mid 1917) which was located at Alexandria after its term in Malta

The other type of Army Post Office handstamp, APO H.D.1. was introduced early in 1917. It was used concurrently with APO SZ7 and eventually replaced it.

It has been suggested that the “H.D.” stands for “Home Depot”. Three handstamps of this particular postmark were sent from London on 17 JA 17., and they can be differentiated perusing a table of 5 different dimensions. The earliest recorded date of use is 11 AP 17 and the latest use recorded on 17 JA 19. Codes “A”, “B” and “+” have been recorded, and the significance of the “+” code remains unknown. Generally the “On Active Service” and the “Army Post Office” (H.D.I. / S Z 7) handstamps were applied together on the cover, but this was not always the case .



All sorts of combination of these postmarks and handstamps may be found on mail posted through the hospitals and convalescent camps, but generally the “OAS” handstamp is found in violet as well as other colours as mentioned earlier. In addition other marks may be applied depending on the route and/or channel the postal item goes through, such as Hospital Ships, or base camp. For example, some covers, with regulatory manuscript identification of the individual (generally lower left hand corner of the missive) have been locally posted and received a Valletta G.P.O. (civilian) postmark. Where was the postal item handed in? Was it handed in at a base camp (hospital or convalescent camp) or at the G.P.O. which was relatively centrally located in Valletta, or posted into a pillar box in the streets of Valletta? If it was not handed in at the camp, were there any processes in place that such mail, after receiving a Valletta postmark, is then passed on to the Army Post Office? If so, the missive next page, bottom left, must have been missed or was processed through the normal channels as for civilian mail. Some covers, particularly from non-British military personnel, were processed through the censorship channels (see second cover from top left next page). Other covers received either the “On Active Service” hospital handstamp and no other mark, others serviced through the local postal channels after processing through the normal hospital channels (see first item next page). For students of this interesting phase of postal history, of course, such variations provide the much sought after challenge and point of discussion, which makes this pastime of ours such an exciting and interesting pastime.

The “WOUNDED POST OFFICE - MALTA” Handstamp

This particular handstamp is relatively rare and not much has been recorded in the annals of Malta postal history. Indeed few covers are known bearing this handstamp, often applied in violet ink. A handful of covers have appeared in philatelic auctions over the last 5 years or so, and all fetched quite high prices. Two examples of this handstamp were on offer at Grosvenor Philatelic Auctions Sale 60 of the “Victory” Collection of Malta held on Thursday 21 October 2010. Lot 3405, estimated at



Headed "Valletta Hospital" (*), dated "16-6-15" (the earliest known date for any OAS handstamp is 15 JU 15) he was among the first to land in Malta, postmarked at the "Valletta " G.P.O. (Army Post Office not yet set up?), m/s "On Active Service" at the top and OAS handstamp in violet.



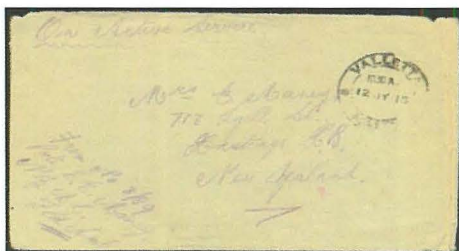
Dated 24 Sept (presumably 1915) with "OAS-7. to Wellington, New Zealand. "I will try to let you know how I am when I get back to Gallipoli. It may not be long because they are hurrying the troops." and ... "they (Turks) are absolutely fighting a clean fight"



Cover endorsed (trans) Expeditionary French Troops of Palestine, and (trans) French Military Hospital in Malta", postmarked by the APO-HD1 (21 JU 18) and OAS-Med handstamp and Passed by Censor No 4182 in green-blue. It also bears an "Opened Under Martial Law" label.



"Am leaving hospital this morning to go to the convalescent Camp, but keep on writing to hospital till you receive word from me am in splendid health hope you are the same, Always yours Herbert" written Dec 7/15. M/s "On Active Service" a fine strike of OAS-10 in cherry red



M/s "On Active Service", "From No 3/89 Pvtte C E Nancy, NZ A C/ Field Amb." to family back in N.Z. No field postmark or OAS handstamp but a fair strike of the 30mm double ring Valletta * Malta postmark dated 12 JY 15



M/s "On Active Service" to the same address from the same C. Nancy to family back home, this time with a strike of OAS-7 and no other local postal marking.

This hospital referred to here is most likely the "Holy Infirmary" Hospital (see earlier), which was the receiving station. In fact the date (16.6.15) is close to the date when the first wave of sick and wounded were being disembarked.

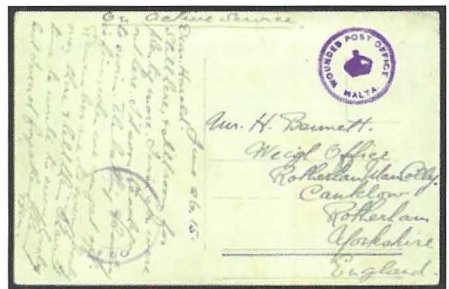


Undated "official" postcard (view of the Grand Harbour, Valletta, Malta at back, thus identifying where he was) to Western Australia, with a strike of OAS-7 (no cross in centre) to Mrs. W Grover in Katanning, Western Australia. "On Active Service" in print.



1915 from Hospital Ship "Dongola" with OAS-9 (most likely); the "A1 FORCES POSTAGE FREE!" Vic" c.d.s. applied on arrival at Melbourne. Message: "I am in hospital to undergo an operation to have a piece of Turkish bullet removed from my left eye"

£600-£800, consisted of a picture post card dated June 26. 15 with manuscript "On Active Service" across the top, addressed to Yorkshire, England with a fine strike of the circular framed "WOUNDED POST OFFICE - MALTA" handstamp in violet, and a faint double ring "ON ACTIVE SERVICE - MEDT^N". The next lot, No. 3406 featured an incoming picture post card from Scotland, addressed to St. Andrew's Hospital, Malta, bearing 1d stamp cancelled by the Prestonkirk circular date stamp, struck on arrival with the circular framed "WOUNDED POST OFFICE - MALTA" in violet; in addition it was also hand stamped "REJOINED UNIT" and "CASE ALEXANDRIA". The postal item had a few creases but still it was estimated as the previous lot.



The Maoris in Malta

The Maori contingent, numbering just under 500 men, under Lieut.-Col. Herbert spent several weeks in camp on Malta before embarking to join the New Zealand Expeditionary Force at Anzac cove. They spent their time in rigorous training at various camps on the Island and participating in field days. At the time there were some two hundred different units of the British Empire and Allies, along with a very large number of troops from the U.K. The order for departure to the battlefields arrived in June 1915. According to author James Cowan, "The Maoris' home letters were often phrased in poetic and touching language: Private Huirua Rewha wrote from Malta to his parents "Come to me, go from me, my letter of love to my parents, Rewha and Mae..."

1 FORCES POSTAGE FREE — VIC—"which was often applied to letters on arrival in Melbourne from Australian warships overseas. The use of foreign postage stamp was unnecessary as postage was free to Australian naval personnel, but apparently they used them to give their relatives an indication of their whereabouts,..." Postcards and letters and other postal items sent from Malta by army personnel (there has also been a suggestion that nurses too) were mostly unstamped, as they were entitled to. It may also be possible that after the Armistice of 1918, the use of the APO was not necessary anymore.

Acknowledgements

"Gallipoli and the Australian Home Front", (<http://www.anzacsite.gov.au/5environment/homefront.html>)

"Malta Military Hospitals 1915-1917" by G. R. Bruce, M.A., M.D., D.P.H., Capt. R.A.M.C. (S.R.), Specialist Sanitary Officer, Malta.

"The Maoris in the Great War", Ch. 3, (1926) by James Cowan

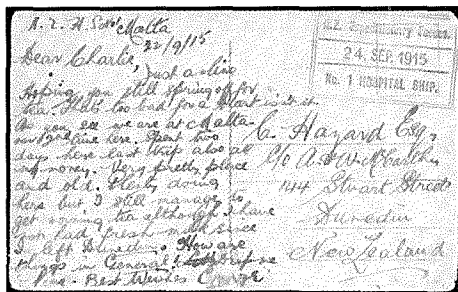
"Malta and the ANZACS", article, 'Malta Independent', Sunday 8 May 2011

"Gallipoli and the Australian Home Front"

"Malta - The Nurse of the Mediterranean", by Albert G. Mackinnon, M.A. (re-published 2010) Prestige Philately Auction, No. 162, "The World at War", Mar 05 2011

Grosvenor Philatelic Auctions Sale No. 60 - The "Victory" Collection of Malta, 21 October 2010

"MALTA - The The Stamps and Postal History, 576 - 1960". Handbook, Malta Study Circle, edited by R E Martin, 1980



Postcard from a New Zealander to Dunedin from a soldier on board the hospital ship, in Malta, dated 22/9/15. The rectangular "N. Z. Expeditionary Force/24. SEP 1915 / No. 1 Hospital Ship." cachet applied on board. Malta described as: "pretty place and old".