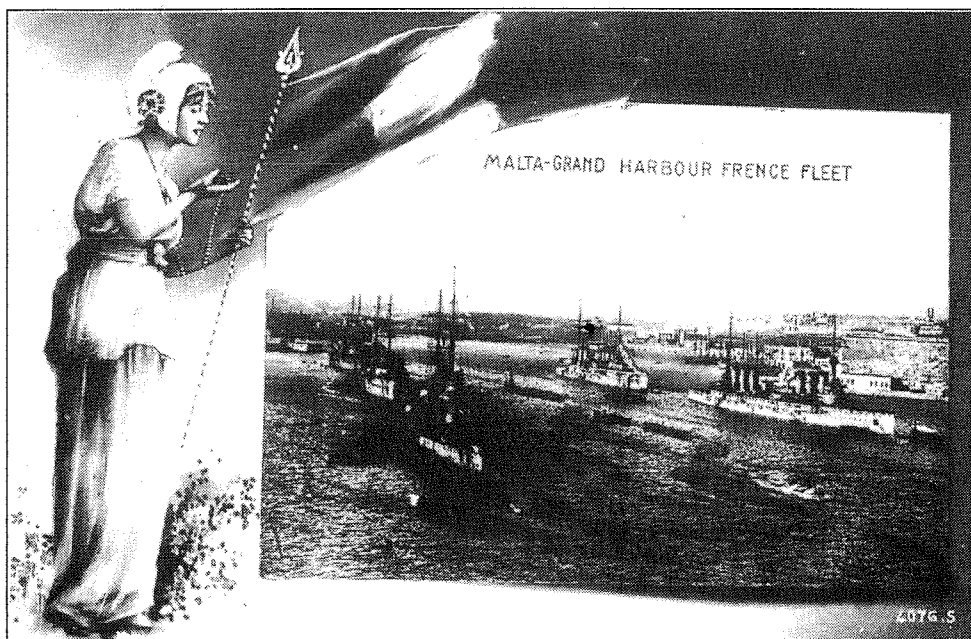


# MALTA AND THE FRENCH NAVAL POSTAL SERVICES IN WORLD WAR ONE

By Giovanni Bonello LL.D.

At the outbreak of World War One, Sir Winston Churchill, First Sea Lord of the Admiralty, invited the French navy "to use Malta as if it were Toulon". This was to be the beginning of a long era of close and turbulent collaboration between the French and British navies in the Mediterranean, in which Malta's harbours played the part of an invaluable fulcrum.

In fact, France requested that its Commander-in-Chief should have overall authority over both fleets, and the British Admiralty complied. That distinction went to Admiral Bouè de Lapéyrère; Rear Admiral Troubridge first headed the British fleet under the French officer.



*Fig. 1 Postcard showing the French Fleet in the Grand Harbour during the First World War, with Marianne holding the French flag. Published by Cortis of Sliema and produced in Italy. Notice the mis-spelling "Frence"*



*Fig. 2 The French military band and sailors marching through Strada Levante, Valletta.  
Real photo postcard*

The French navy concentrated on Malta on August 11, 1914, the day before Britain declared war on Austria. The two fleets sailed together to the Dardanelles to prevent the German warships from breaking into the Mediterranean.

Cooperation between the two navies never reached total perfection. France looked towards preventing the Austrians from attacking her coastal towns; Britain saw as the ultimate priority the protection of its military and commercial sea lanes in the Mediterranean.

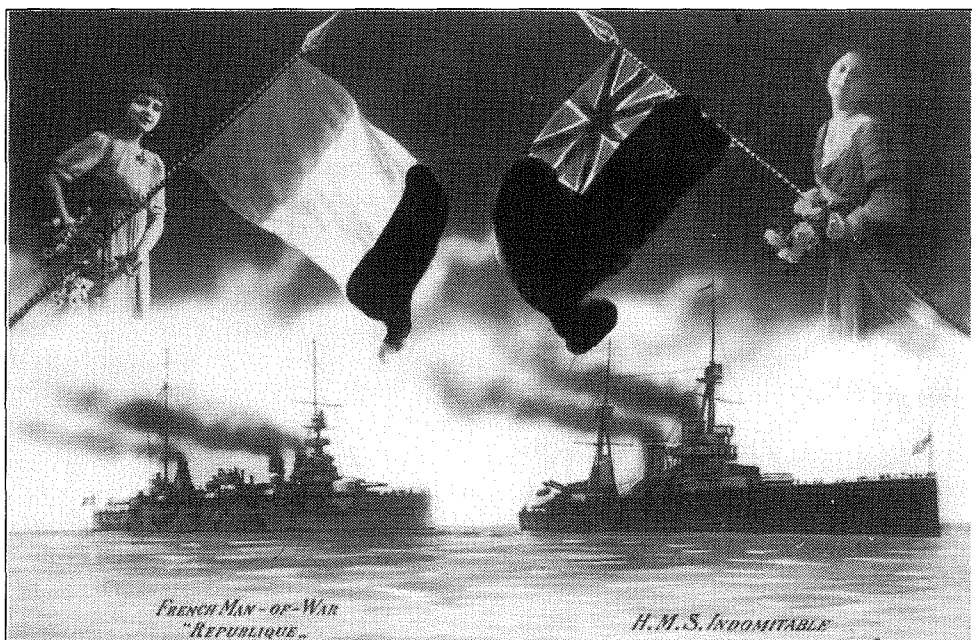
In April 1916, the French battleship *Provence* hosted in the Grand Harbour a round table conference of the British and French Admirals, in an attempt to iron out these differences. The strategy agreed upon turned out to be disastrous. The system of fixed sea routes, only made the Allied ships easy and identifiable prey for the German submarines. Admiral Ballard's request for an armed convoy system to beat the U-Boats was turned down by the French Admiral.

Eventually in 1917, the soaring U-Boat casualties forced on the French and British Admiralties an awareness that fresh thinking was needed. A new meeting of Mediterranean admirals was planned, with Malta being again the natural

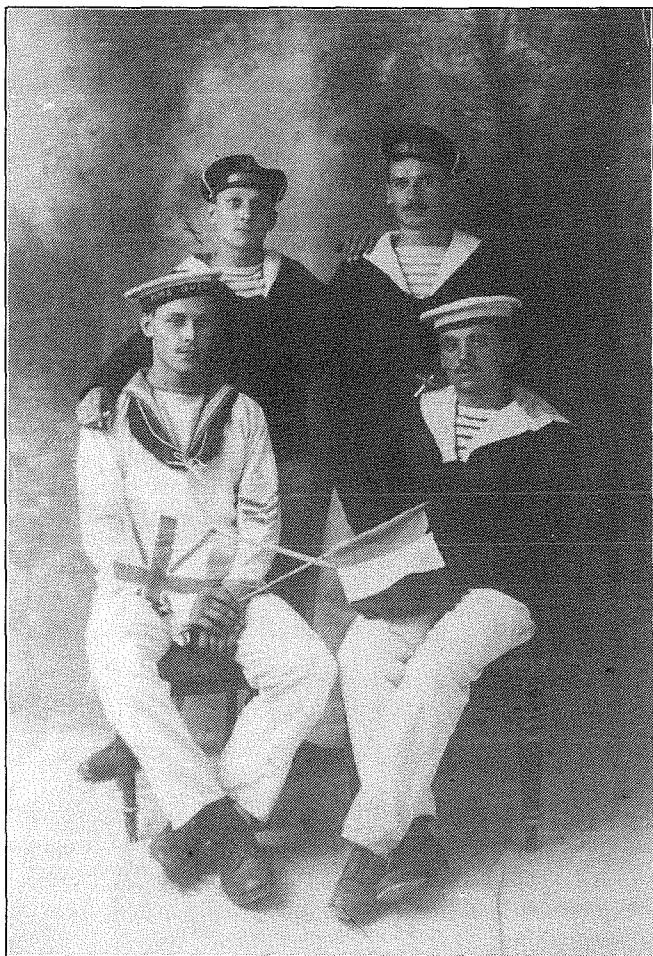


*Fig. 3 A French military band playing at St Andrew's Barracks, watched by British soldiers. Note the ambulance on the left*

*Fig. 4 Postcard, dated May 30, 1915, from the Cortis Series. Shows the French Republique, and HMS Indomitable*



*Fig. 5 Three French and one British sailor, crossing their national flags; posted in Malta in June 1915*



choice. The French naval ministry, however, insisted on Corfu "as they did not like to see the British island becoming the centre of naval policy in the sea".

Malta equally kept its pivotal importance in the battle against the U-Boats, with the convoy concept gaining more general acceptance. Eighteen convoy routes, manned by the British, French, Italian, US and Japanese navies were established in the Mediterranean. All touched on Malta.

The Island was used throughout the war as the French fleet's advanced base and repair arsenal. There was never less than one French capital ship in the drydocks, often two. All the French hospital ships and troop transports called on Malta, whether going to, or returning from Egypt, Palestine, Salonika or the other theatres of war.



Fig. 6 One of the various 'butterfly' cards from Malta, showing the four French ships Courbet, Jean-Bart, Paris and France. Real photograph, hand-coloured

Such was the congestion of allied military and commercial shipping in Malta that usually more than half the ships were turned away from the Grand Harbour and made to anchor in unprotected Marsaxlokk and St Paul's Bay, a perfect prey to German U-Boats which mercifully never realised the easy opportunities offered them.

This spectacular movement of French military personnel in and around Malta obviously necessitated a well organised and extensive postal service. How this functioned has already been competently described in the Malta Study Circle's *Handbook* and in a recent *Circle Newsletter*, both based on a previous French study of the matter. I have no desire to copy or duplicate these good efforts. Rather, my aim is to provide some additional information.

The massive presence of French troops alerted the local postcard publishers to the possibilities of exploiting this unexpected market. A flourishing postcard business, directed specifically at French servicemen, was soon organised. A local editor, D.C. Cortis of Sliema, and possibly others, had photographic hand-coloured cards produced in Italy, mostly having the legends *Souvenir(s) de Malte* or *Malta*, showing French, alone, or with British warships, or Maltese scenes (Fig.



Fig. 7.  
(right) Malta  
1915.  
French  
and  
British  
sailors  
fraternise  
on board  
the  
Monitor  
Nº 16.  
All the  
French  
'matelots'  
belong to  
the  
Voltiguer



Fig. 8  
(left) A  
Saluti da  
Malta  
postcard  
mailed on  
December  
20, 1914  
showing  
the Verité

4, 9). Some of these very French postcards have, unaccountably, English (Greetings from Malta) (Fig. 6) or Italian (*Saluti da Malta*) (Fig. 8) inscriptions.

Other 'French' postcards refer to specific events of military interest in Malta: the French seamen marching proudly behind their band (Fig 2); the military band playing at St Andrews Barracks (Fig. 3); French and British sailors holding hands (Fig. 7); a French seaman clutching the Union Jack, while his English buddy waves the *Tricolore* (Fig. 5). Most were photographically reproduced. One, showing the battleship *Diderot* coaling in the Grand Harbour, was printed typographically in Paris (Fig. 10).

These 'Greetings' cards of French ships published in Malta and other similar issues enable us to reconstruct a far more comprehensive list of French ships which had a strong Malta connection during the First World War, than had been possible so far. Going through these cards one comes across the following ships:

CONDORCET	JEAN-BART	RÉPUBLIQUE
COURBET	JULES-FERRY	VERGNIAUD
DÉMOCRATIE	LORRAINE	VERITÉ
DIDEROT	MACON	VICTOR-HUGO
EDGAR-QUINET	MIRABEAU	VINGLONG
ERNEST-RENAN	MONITOR N° 16	VOLTAIRE
FLAULX	PARIS	VOLTIGEUR
FRANCE	PATRIE	WALDECK-ROUSSEAU

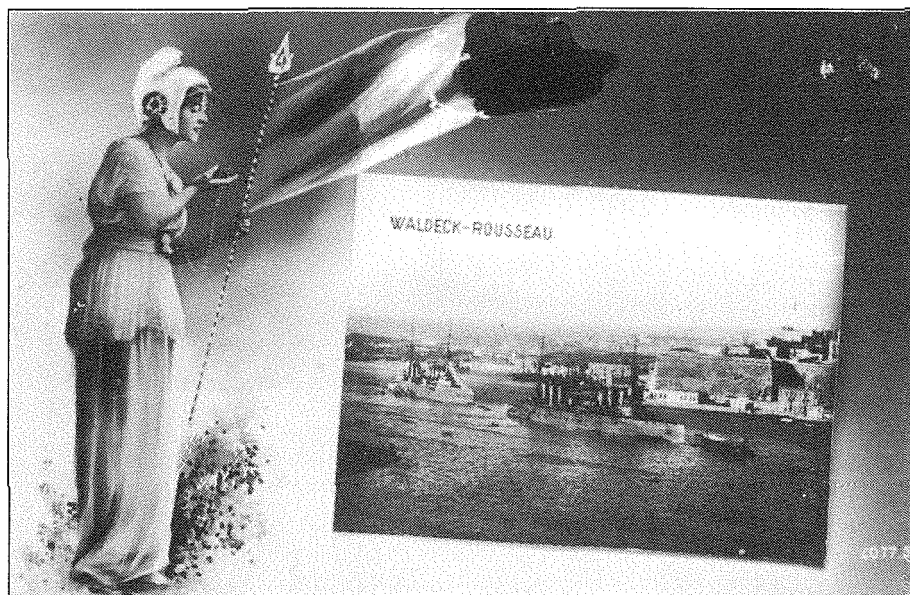
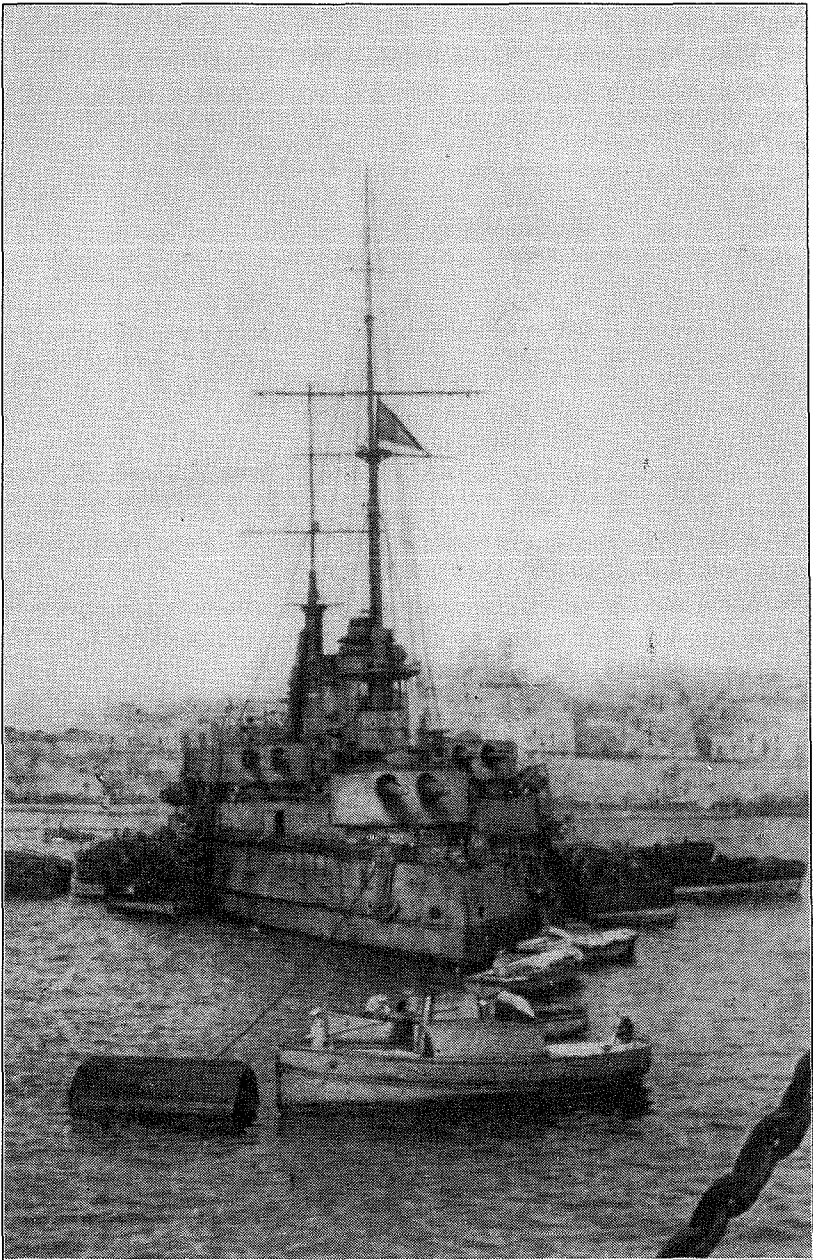


Fig. 9 The Waldeck-Rousseau berthed in the Grand Harbour. Another 'Marianne' card issued in Malta, probably by Cortis



*Fig 10 The battleship Diderot coaling in the Grand Harbour. Postcard printed by the typographic process in Paris*

Another local publisher ingeniously had cards printed with a large bold FM in the boxed space reserved for fixing postage stamps. FM stands for *Franchise Militaire*, i.e. free military mail. French servicemen would mail these cards as they were. Others could equally use them, by hiding the FM under the normal postage stamp.

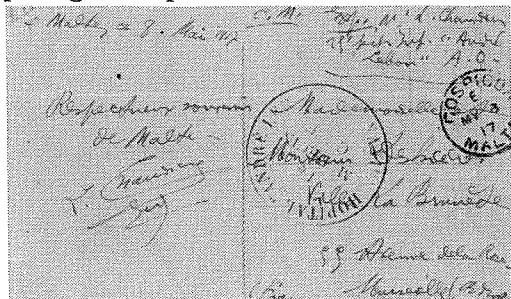


Fig. 11 Card posted in Malta on May 8, 1917, showing rare handstamp HOPITAL 'ANDRE LEBON' and the Cospicua CDS

From postal sources other than the Greetings Cards, the presence in Malta of other French ships can be identified. Here are some hitherto unknown items:

- The ANDRE LEBON, a French hospital ship. A special round handstamp, next to a Cospicua CDS, May 8, 1917 (Fig. 11)
- The AMIRAL-CHARNER appears on a French postcard sent from Malta on November 11, 1917, with one of the most perfect Anchor Handstamps I have ever seen (Fig. 12).

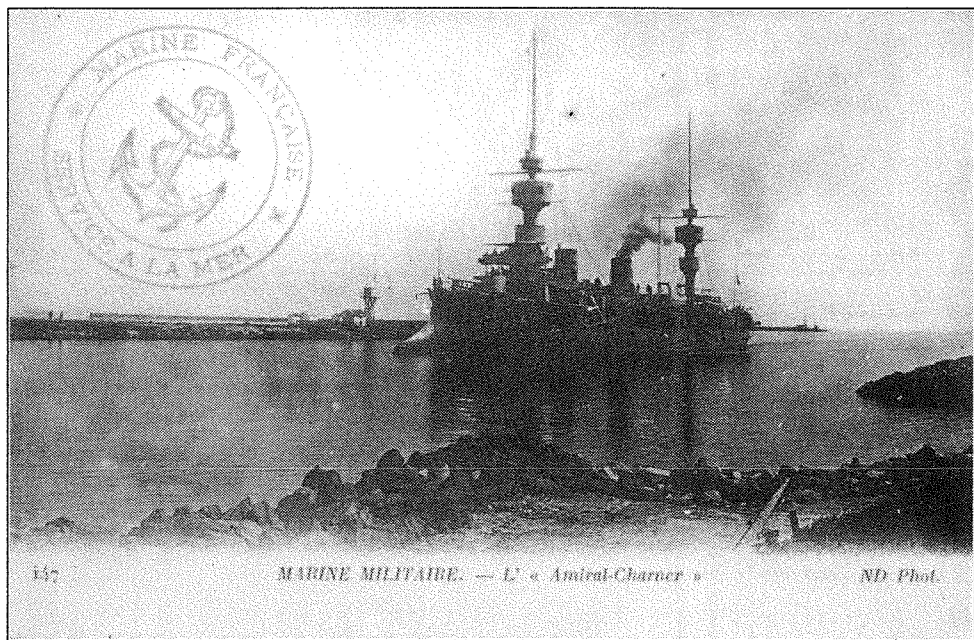


Fig. 12 A perfect strike of the French anchor handstamp used in Malta on November 2, 1917. These strikes are usually faint, smudged or otherwise incomplete

- The JAURÉGUIBERRY, a French battleship, identified by a splendid coloured vignette label stuck on an (undated) postcard from Malta (Fig. 13).
- The JUSTICE (Cuirasse), from an undated Maltese postcard.

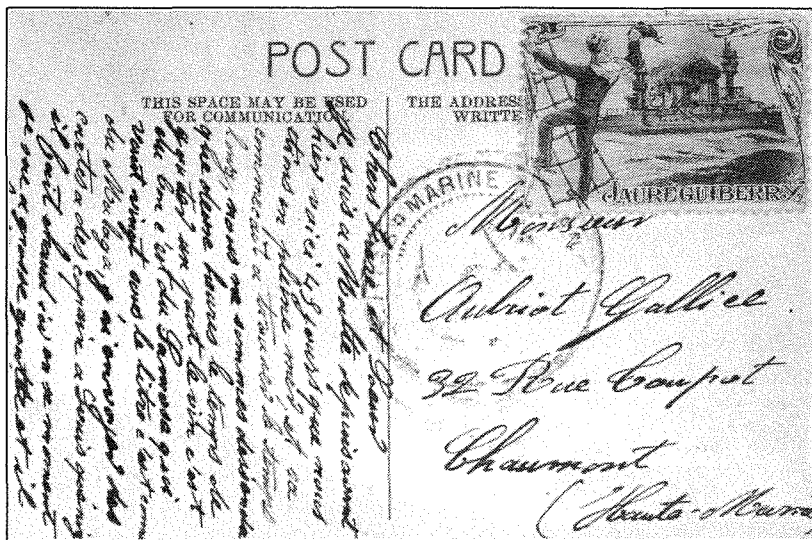


Fig. 13 Postcard mailed in Malta, showing the extremely rare vignette label of the French warship Jauréguiberry, tied by an anchor handstamp

A brilliant strike of an unrecorded French military handstamp used in Malta on an undated postcard has the legend ESCADRIL (...)S LE COMMANDANT unfortunately cut off at its most telling part (Fig. 14 right). Escadrille may refer to a naval unit, but more likely describes an airplane squadron.

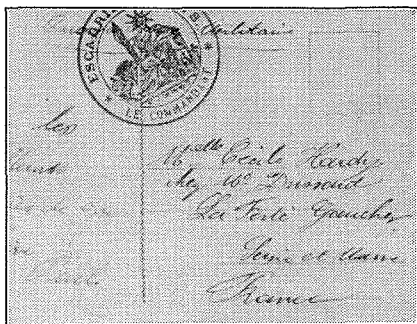


Fig. 14

An enormous amount of research still has to be carried out to complete our knowledge of the French connection. I hope these notes have some value as a modest contribution.

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