

Anglo-Japanese Naval Cooperation in the Mediterranean during WWI

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Introduction

Nick Colley's account of the Japanese Navy at Malta during WWI and the Maltese postcard which he described in the Winter 2008 Journal made me look for an article I wrote some five years earlier on the same topic for the Malta Study Circle. My quest for finding out the Japanese involvement in the European theatre started when I learnt about the display of another Maltese postcard by Keith Tranmer, another member of the Forces Postal History Society, some years ago. At the time he was kind enough to send me a photocopy and a description of this card. Later I was able to get hold of the Egyptian card myself and the research took off. So what made the Japanese to engage in the European theatre?

Japan rendered vital, worldwide naval support to Great Britain during the First World War, culminating in the service of Japan's first and only Mediterranean squadron. This long-forgotten Japanese flotilla fought alongside allied warships throughout the most critical period of the struggle against German and Austro-Hungarian U-boats in 1917 and 1918. Japanese naval assistance in the Mediterranean Sea in 1917 boosted the strength of allied naval escorts during the darkest days of the war.

The Origins of British Naval Dependence on Japan

How did the Imperial Japanese Navy cooperate with the Royal Navy during the First World War? The Anglo-Japanese alliance of 1902 resulted from the threat that Russia presented to both states by its moves toward India, Korea, and Manchuria. As the alliance matured, Winston Churchill (from 1911), like his predecessors as First Lord of the Admiralty, pursued a naval policy envisioning that the outbreak of a general war in Europe would require Japanese assistance in the Pacific and Indian Oceans. As tensions between Great Britain and Germany increased with the Russo-Japanese War of 1905, British naval strength underwent a reorganization that saw the Channel, Atlantic, and Mediterranean forces' battleship strength increased at the expense of those in the Pacific Ocean. What had been an anti-Russian disposition of British naval forces tilted decisively toward an anti-German alignment after the Russo-Japanese conflict.

Although the Anglo-Japanese alliance of 1902 did not require it, Japan declared it would support Britain in the war against Germany and sent an ultimatum to Berlin on 15 August 1914 demanding withdrawal of German warships from Japanese and Chinese waters. The Germans made no response, and Japan formally declared war on 23 August 1914. Faced with worldwide responsibilities defending British trade and possessions, the Royal Navy sought direct Japanese involvement in the European theatre of operations from the beginning of the war. The first formal appeal for Japanese naval assistance was issued on 6 August 1914. It resulted in the deployment of Japanese naval units to Singapore.

On two further occasions in 1914 British appeals for deployments of Japanese naval forces to the Mediterranean and the Baltic met with rejection. The Japanese Army vetoed the deployment of naval units to the European theatre of operations in November 1914. Internal politics gave the Army greater political power in government than the Navy ever enjoyed. Conflict between Great Britain and Germany, which had trained, respectively, the Navy and Army, led to a difference of opinion between the two services. The Prussian-trained Army sympathized with the German-led Central Powers, while the Navy, trained by and modelled after the Royal Navy, supported Britain and the Entente. This conflict of loyalties dogged the Japanese government throughout the war in its attempts to aid Great Britain.

Churchill almost from the day he took over office accelerated the withdrawal of battleships from the Mediterranean and China seas and their redeployment against the growing naval power of Germany in the North Sea, so producing a growing naval dependence on Britain's allies. France took up the slack in the Mediterranean, and Japan assumed correspondingly larger role in the defence of the China Seas. Japan helped establish control of the Pacific and Indian Oceans early in the war by seizing the German fortress and naval base of Tsingtao in China and Germany's colonies in the Pacific (the Carolines, Marshalls, and most of the Mariana islands); Japanese naval forces also aided Great Britain in driving German warships from the Pacific.

British requests for naval assistance in the European theatre and the South Atlantic grew more insistent in late 1916 and early 1917 as the naval situation deteriorated in the Atlantic and the Mediterranean. A positive factor was that Italy had entered the war on the British-French side in 1915. The German and Austro-Hungarian submarine menace in the Mediterranean was opposed from Malta, an opposition accomplished partly by aircraft supported by three seaplane carriers, HMS Ark Royal, HMS Manxman and HMS Engadine, and partly by the new Malta Naval Air Station. From those no fewer than 106 seaplanes were operating air patrols by 1918. Moreover, a shortage of convoy escorts was made up for by direct Japanese naval assistance in the Mediterranean in 1917 and 1918 when the allied navies faced the prospect of abandoning that sea in the face of the Central Powers' increasingly successful submarine operations.

Operations in the Mediterranean

In early 1917, Japan finally deployed forces to the European theatre of operations. The lead Japanese warships departed Singapore under the command of Admiral Sato Kozo for the Mediterranean on 11 March. Sato sailed for Malta with the cruiser Akashi and the Kaba class destroyers Ume, Kusunoki, Kaede, Katsura, Kashiwa, Matsu, Sugi, and Sakaki, which collectively constituted the Tenth and Eleventh Destroyer Flotillas. The task force hunted German raiders while crossing the Indian Ocean, arriving at Aden on 4 April. On 10 April Sato agreed to an urgent British request to escort the Saxon, an English troop transport; she sailed from Port Said to Malta guarded by Ume and Kusunoki. The remainder of the Japanese squadron quickly followed and commenced operations against German and Austro-Hungarian submarines threatening allied shipping in the Mediterranean. They were to be stationed at Malta for almost two years. Of the approximately twelve million British registered tons of shipping lost during the war, 3 million tons fell prey to mines and submarines in the Mediterranean. Allied losses in the Mediterranean in April 1917 totalled 218,000 tons, 7 percent of the total sinkings there during the entire war. Desperately short of escorts, the allies seriously considered the idea of reducing the number of ships transiting the Mediterranean by sending them on the safer passage around the Cape of Good Hope, and of evacuating the British contingent at Salonika.

The arrival of Sato's cruiser and eight destroyers did not by itself tip the scales toward the allies in the Mediterranean. Nonetheless, the task given the Japanese squadron was an important one - protecting troop transports shifting vital reinforcements to France after the bloody offensives at Arras, Chemin des Dames, and in the Champagne. The appearance of Japanese escorts at Malta permitted the allied command to speed the passage of transports. Japanese vessels escorted the transports directly from Egypt to France without stopping at Malta except when convoys formed at Grand Harbour.

The destroyers Sakaki and Matsu and other Japanese warships participated in the dramatic rescue of troops from the torpedoed transport Transylvania on 4 May 1917. Some 413 men died in this tragedy off the French coast, but Japanese, French, and Italian naval forces saved most of the three thousand troops despite the danger of further torpedo attack.

The destroyer Sakaki suffered a full hit near Crete on 11 June 1917 when she was torpedoed by the Austro-Hungarian submarine U-27. The torpedo ran true, striking the destroyer between the forward stacks and severing the vessel's bow. The unlucky crew, packed into the crowded mess for the noonday meal, suffered horrific losses. The explosion and consequent inferno claimed sixty-seven members of the ship's company and her commander. Despite heavy damage, however, the battered warship survived and later reached port in Piraeus, Greece. The men were later buried in the Kalkara Military Cemetery, Malta.

The Japanese navy relieved the Akashi in August 1917 with the armoured cruiser Idzumo and reinforced the Malta squadron with the Momo class destroyers Kashi, Hinoki, Momo, and Yanagi of the Fifteenth Flotilla. As the tempo of antisubmarine operations in the Mediterranean accelerated, Japanese sailors temporarily manned two British gunboats, which they designated the Tokyo and Saikyo, and two British Acorn class destroyers HMS Minstel and HMS Nemesis, renamed the Kanran and Sendan. At peak strength in 1917, the Japanese Mediterranean flotilla numbered seventeen warships.

By late summer of 1917 British doubts about the competence and value of the Japanese warships had vanished. On 21 August Admiral George A. Ballard, Senior Naval Officer-in-Charge at Malta, reported to the Admiralty that the Japanese had rendered invaluable service in escorting troop transports since their arrival at Malta. He reminded the Admiralty that until the Imperial Japanese Navy destroyers had arrived the allies had been short

of escorts for this vital duty. Ballard praised the operational capacity of the Japanese:

“French standards of efficiency are certainly lower than British, however, and Italian standards are lower still. With the Japanese it is otherwise. Admiral Sato’s destroyers are kept in a highly serviceable condition and spend at least as large a proportion of their time at sea as our own, which is far from being the case with the French and Italian vessels of any class. The Japanese moreover are very independent in all matters of administration and supply whereas the French will never do anything for themselves if they can get it done for them.”

Japanese efficiency meant many more days spent at sea than the warships of other British allies, multiplying the impact of the Japanese contribution to the Mediterranean war effort. The importance of Japanese escorts dramatically increased when in 1918 the Germans launched their spring offensive on the western front. The British responded with further large movements of troops from the Middle East to Marseilles. Japanese units escorted more than 100,000 British troops directly across the Mediterranean during the critical months of April and May. After the crisis ended, Japanese warships convoyed troops from Egypt to Salonika in support of the allied autumn 1918 offensive. By the end of the war the squadron had accompanied 788 allied ships across the Mediterranean, including transports conveying 700,000 troops to the fighting fronts. In thirty-four engagements with German and Austro-Hungarian submarines the Japanese suffered damage to two destroyers, Matsu and Sakaki.

Japanese naval forces remained in European waters until May 1919. After the armistice, units of Admiral Sato’s Second Special Mission Squadron helped supervise the Central Powers’ surrendered fleets. The cruiser Izumo and destroyers Hinoki and Yanagi sailed from Malta to Scapa Flow to help guard the German fleet and prepare for the return to Japan of seven surrendered German submarines.

Sato dispatched the destroyers Katsura, Matsu, Sakaki, and Kaede to Brindisi to aid in supervising German and Austro-Hungarian ships surrendering in the Mediterranean. He then rode the cruiser Nisshin, with the eight remaining destroyers, to Constantinople in December 1918. Detaching the destroyers Kashiwa, Kanran, and Sendan (the latter two would be returned to the Royal Navy in 1919) to superintend enemy warships at Constantinople, the balance of the squadron returned to Malta, where it received new orders from Japan to escort German submarines from England back home as part of Japan’s war spoils. Sending the Ume and Kusunoki to the Adriatic for patrol duty, Sato left for England, gathering the remaining Japanese escorts on the way.



The Japanese squadron made Portland, England, on 5 January 1919. The Izumo, Hinoki, Yanagi, and the seven German U-boats joined Sato’s fleet, which then returned at the end of March to Malta, where the Ume and Kusunoki rejoined it. The tender Kwanto serviced the U-boats at Malta then joined the cruiser Nisshin and two destroyer flotillas in escorting the submarines to Japan. All reached Yokosuka without incident on 18 June 1919. The Izumo and the last destroyer detachment left Malta on April 10 for various ports, including Naples, Genoa, and Marseilles, and a final trip to Malta on May 5. The warships left ten days later for the voyage to Japan, reaching Yokosuka on 2 July 1919.

Very little is known so far concerning the postal arrangements of the Imperial Japanese Navy detachments based in the Mediterranean. Two viewcards are discussed here showing examples that were unfranked and received military handstamps.

The first viewcard (*left, Egyptian view*) was sent from the Suma in September 1917 at Suez with red boxed Japanese gunji yubin ken’etsu-zumi (censored military mail) handstamp and Nagasaki 16 November 1917 postmark.

The second viewcard (*right, reduced, Maltese view*) was sent from the Kanran (ex British H.M.S. Nemesis on loan). The Kanran and another Japanese destroyer attacked the Austro-Hungarian U-28 when she was sighted by a British seaplane out of Cattaro operating off Malta in January 1918. The viewcard was sent by Isamu Matsunami, 2 Special Service Fleet, Destroyer Kanran, c/o Yokohama P.O. (pmk 7.1.1 = 1918) to Kyoto. Message reads 'From ten thousands of waves of Mediterranean, a Happy New Year with modesty, 1st. day of January 7 years of Taisho era.'

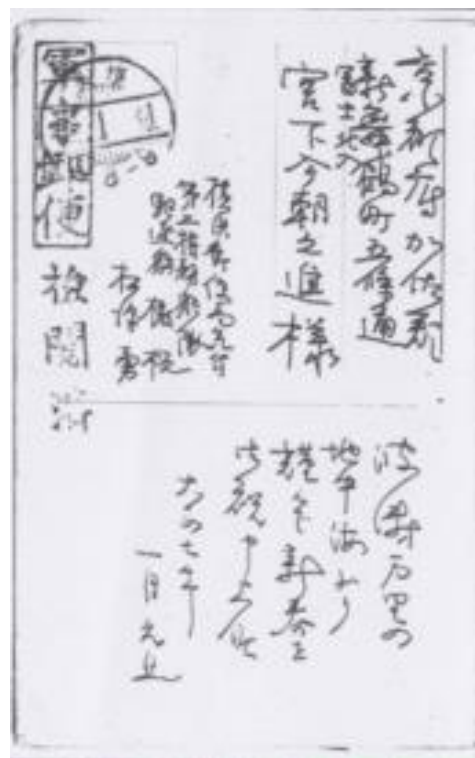
What is noteworthy is that all three items identified so far related to the Japanese involvement in the Mediterranean are viewcards depicting scenes in the region. Most likely any covers would be hard to identify as originating from the Mediterranean as the general gunji yubin ken'etsu-zumi (censored military mail) handstamp would be applied and nothing else would allow it to be identified to originate from the Mediterranean, if not for a sender's address in Japanese characters.

Conclusions

British leaders had nothing but praise for the Japanese Mediterranean squadron before it sailed for home. Winston Churchill voiced the general high opinion when he said he "did not think that the Japanese [squadron] had ever done a foolish thing." The governor of Malta, Lord Methuen, who reviewed Japanese warships there in March 1919, also lauded the Japanese navy for "its splendid work in European waters" and expressed the hope, "God grant our alliance, cemented in blood, may long endure."

The Japanese warships' performance in the Mediterranean certainly merited high praise. Japanese destroyers' ratio of time at sea to time in port was the highest of any allied warships during the war: Japanese warships were under way 72 percent of the time. The British record was 60 percent, the Greek and French only 45 percent. British officers credited the Japanese warships with excellence. The commanders of several Japanese warships are reported to have committed hara-kiri when ships they were convoying were lost.

The Anglo-Japanese alliance lapsed in 1921. The lack of a common foe removed the main justification for the alliance. The severing of the Anglo-Japanese alliance in fact steered Japan toward cooperation with Germany. The arrival of the seized German submarines began a new long-term relationship between the Japanese and German navies. German influence and technology quickly supplanted those of the British. The two services began to exchange personnel. Numerous Japanese officers received training in Germany in the 1920s and 1930s, facilitating the Imperial Japanese Navy's ultimate break with its British mentors. Thus began the breach between East and West that led to the Japanese attack upon British (and American) possessions in the Far East as part of a true two-ocean conflict, just twenty-three years after Japan, Great Britain, and the United States had been allies in the "war to end all wars."



Japanese Flag amongst those of the other victorious Entente Powers.



Japanese destroyer Kaede at Malta

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