

Mysterious correspondence to Paris from British destroyers in the Mediterranean during WWI

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Introduction

Recently I obtained two covers addressed to the same address in Paris, both franked with GB adhesives and with ship censorship marks, of which one was cancelled in Valletta. British sailors did not enjoy the privilege of free postage, like the other armed forces, until late in 1918. There was no cancelling of mail carried out on any of HM ships afloat. The ship's office collected the mail and sealed it in bags for onward transmission. Once ashore, the mail was handled exclusively by the civilian post offices as the naval mails were taken directly to the town's post office. Censorship was carried out by officers on board ships, or in shore bases, before the mail was bagged for onward transmission. Each ship probably possessed one or more handstamps which did not come standardised. The interest now is to find the relationship with Malta and what ships were involved.

Censorship of destroyer *HMS Scourge* in the Mediterranean

The first cover is cancelled in Valletta on 18 September 1915 and shows an unframed straight line naval censor mark 'PASSED SHIP CENSOR' measuring 58 x 5 mm (Fig. 1). Gould (1998) list this as belonging to the destroyer *HMS Scourge* and allocated it Type number 4D0.

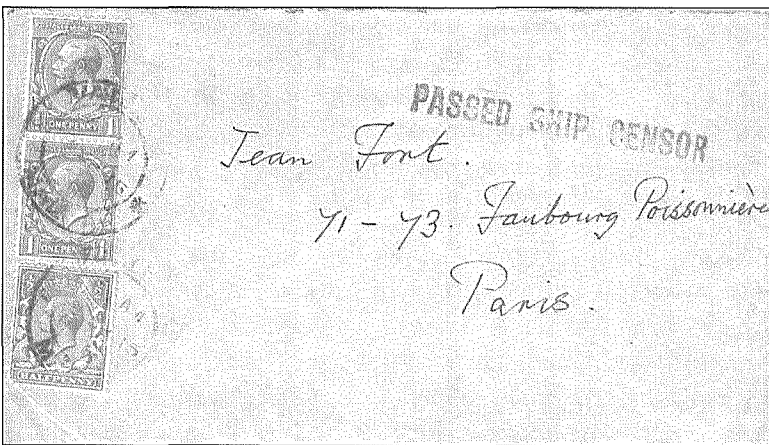


Figure 1. Cover franked GB 2½d while posted on board the destroyer *HMS Scourge* and censored on board by Gould type 4D0 and cancelled 18 September 1915 Valletta.

Destroyers were sent to the Mediterranean in 1895, and ever since then there have been from 1 to 4 flotillas on the station. Various boats of the 27- and 30-knotter types served there but in 1911 the older boats were withdrawn and relieved by 'River'-class. In 1913, the 'G'-class of 16 boats went to the Mediterranean and formed the 5th Destroyer Flotilla. They remained there until 1917 when most of them returned home. By this time a number of the 'H' and 'I'-classes had arrived on the station. A few of the 'River'-class had been in the 5th Destroyer Flotilla since early in 1915. This flotilla is very difficult to follow as destroyers were attached to the Adriatic Squadron from time to time and, in the autumn of 1917, a Malta Flotilla was formed which, a few months later, was merged into the 5th Flotilla until July 1918 when the main flotilla was moved to Brindisi.

HMS Scourge (Fig. 2) was a Beagle-class destroyer built by R. W. Hawthorn Leslie & Company in Hebburn, and launched 11 February 1910. The Beagle-class (officially re-designated as the 'G'-class in 1913) was a class of sixteen destroyers of the Royal Navy, all ordered under the 1908-1909 Programme and launched in 1909 and 1910. The Admiralty had concern over the availability of oil stocks in the event of a war, so the Beagles were coal-burners, the last British destroyers to be so fueled. While coal was more readily available than oil, the small amounts carried, 205-236 tons limited their range, particularly when operating at high speed. The Beagles served during World War I, particularly during the Dardanelles Campaign of 1915 and then

as minelayers later in the war. Unlike their predecessors, the Beagles had a more-or-less uniform appearance, with three funnels, although thicknesses varied between ships according to builders' preferences. Although designed to carry five 12-pounder guns, they had the 4-inch (102 mm) gun and only three 12-pounder guns, and the 21-inch (533 mm) torpedo fitted as standard.

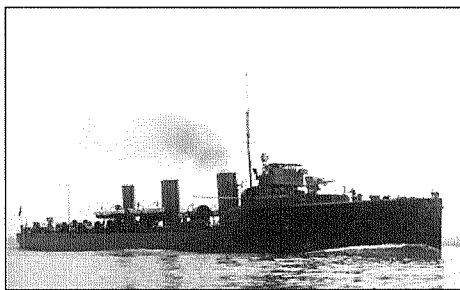


Figure 2. Photograph of *HMS Scourge*

HMS Scourge took part in the Gallipoli landings on Z-beach, later known as Anzac Cove, with 2nd Squadron (Rear-Admiral Thursby). The landing of four thousand men of 3rd Australian Brigade started at 4.30 am on Sunday 25 April 1915. The destroyers came under heavy machine gun and rifle fire resulting in many troops killed on the decks, while crews suffered casualties. Held on the *SS Minnewaska*, the 1st Battalion lined the rails seeking the progress of the force. At about 7.00 am, troops began to make out the forms of men digging and walking upon the high ridges ahead. The 3rd Australian Brigade was established ashore.

Shortly afterwards, the 1st Battalion embarked on the destroyer *HMS Scourge* and then into the tows; 30 officers and 943 men. By the time it landed however, the Turks had counter-attacked and the Australians had retired about 150 yards. The Turkish counterattacks failed to push the allies into the sea, but the allies in turn could not progress far beyond the beachhead nor capture the commanding height of Achi Baba. Barbed wire and machine guns proved as difficult to overcome at Gallipoli as they were on the western front. The result was a stalemate and the Royal Navy had the major obligation of supplying the army over open beaches from island bases 50 to 60 miles away, providing artillery support, and the added worry that intelligence indicated German submarines were on their way (Halpern 1994).

The army, reinforced by five new divisions, made a final major attempt to break the deadlock with a renewed offensive combined with a landing by fresh troops at Suvla to the north of the original beachheads. On Saturday 7 August 1915 *HMS Scourge* was one of ten destroyers taking part in the Suvla landings, each one carried in 500 troops on deck with another 500 in a towed X cr motor lighter. *HMS Scourge* landed her men on C-beach, south of Nibrunesi Point. Now trying to get some of the lighters off the ground, it got a hit in the engine-room by Turkish shell around 8.30 am and had to retire for repairs. So it might have been that after this mishap the *HMS Scourge* had to go for repairs at the Malta Docks as the first letter at hand was landed in Valletta for further despatch (Fig. 3).

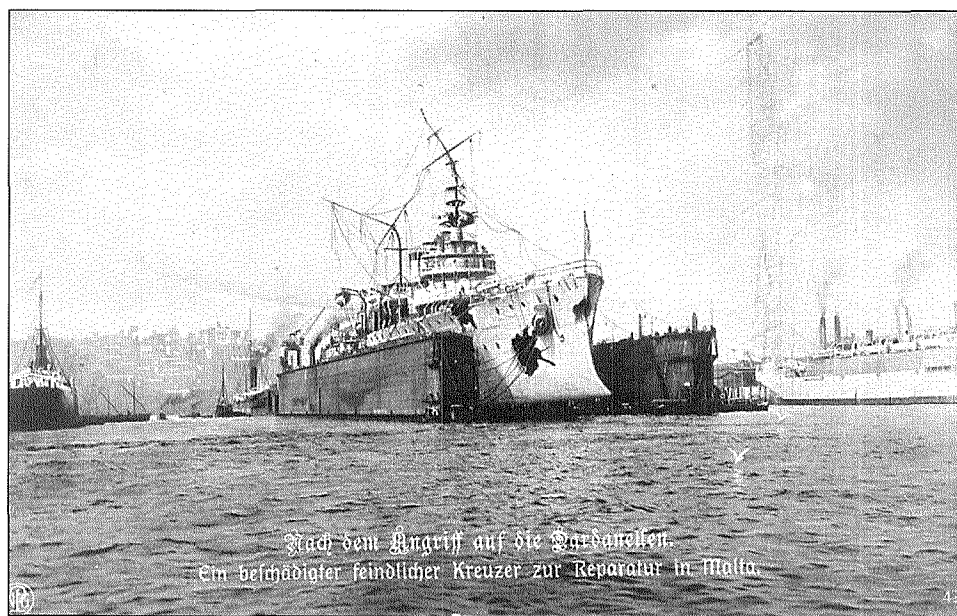


Figure 3. German propaganda viewcard showing a damaged allied cruiser for repairs in the Malta Drydocks after forming part of the Dardanelles Campaign.

Censorship of destroyer *HMS Usk* in the Mediterranean

The second cover is cancelled a couple of months later in London 16 February 1916 and shows a double oval censor mark reading 'PASSED BY/ SHIPS CENSOR' dated 29 JAN 1916 measuring $38\frac{1}{2} \times 28\frac{1}{2}$, 32×15 mm with a double rim of which the outer is thicker (Fig. 4). Gould (1998) list this as belonging to the destroyer *HMS Usk* and allocated it Type number 7C35.

HMS Usk was a River-class destroyer built by Yarrow Shipbuilders in Poplar, London, and launched 25 July 1903. The River-class (officially re-designated as the 'E'-class in 1913) was a class of thirtyfour destroyers of the Royal Navy, all ordered under the 1901-1904 Programme and launched in 1903 and 1905. The River-class destroyer marked the break between torpedo boats and true destroyers, they had the typical raised forecastle and a balanced armament of guns and torpedoes. With a general increase in size and more solid construction, the Rivers became the first truly ocean going and useful torpedo boat destroyers in Royal Navy service. All ships were coal fired and had triple expansion steam engines. Despite making only 25 knots (previous classes had made 27 to 30 knots (56 km/h) under the most favourable conditions), the increased seaworthiness meant that they could maintain this speed into a sea and that they remained workable and fightable at the same time. As for armament they had four 12-pounder guns, and two 18-inch (450 mm) torpedoes fitted as standard.

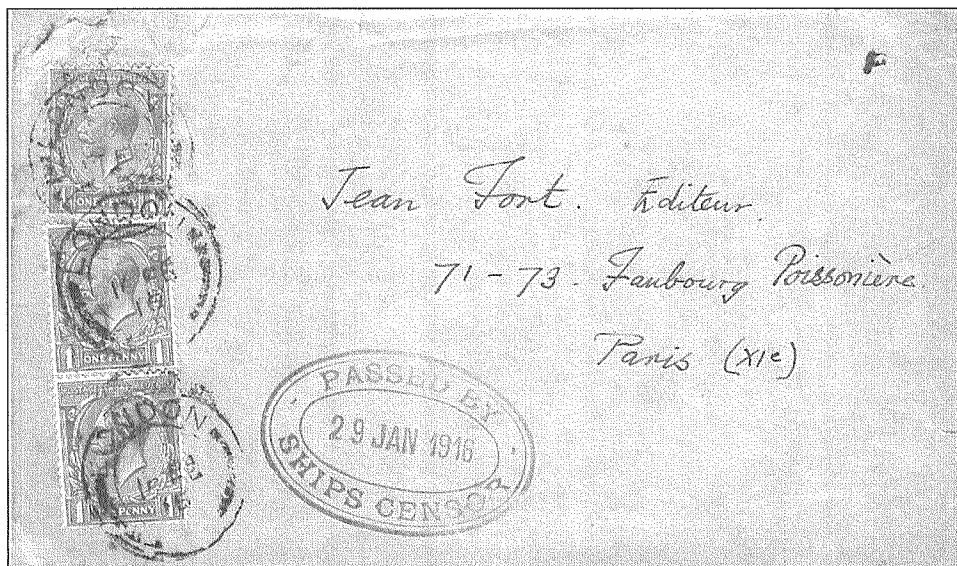


Figure 4. Cover franked GB 3d while posted on board destroyer *HMS Usk* and censored by Gould type 7C35 dated 29 JAN 1916. Landed at London 16 February 1916, before being despatched to Paris.

Between August and November 1914 *HMS Usk* was attached to the Japanese Fleet for operations against the German colony of Tsingtau. Next it made the passage together with *HMS Ribble* from Hong Kong to Malta unescorted, where they arrived in January 1915. The next two years *HMS Usk* was involved in the operations in the Eastern Mediterranean. Like *HMS Scourge*, the *HMS Usk* took part in the Gallipoli landings on Anzac Cove, with 2nd Squadron on Sunday 25 April 1915.

Jean Fort Editeur, 71-73 Faubourg Poissonnière, Paris

The destination of these covers Jean Fort Editeur (Fig. 1 & 4) is of special interest to mention too. Straight (2003) describes that Jean Fort was the nephew of Pierre Fort, a Paris bookseller and publisher who was active from 1896 until 1905. Following his uncle's footsteps, Jean Fort began his own publishing career in 1901, from the Paris address of 71-73 Faubourg Poissonnière. Jean Fort published erotica under many different imprints; some openly published, some published clandestinely. From his Faubourg Poissonniere address in 1907 until around 1921 he primarily used the imprint 'Jean Fort' or 'J. Fort' but between 1910 - 1913 he also published a few books under the imprints, 'Bibliothèque des deux hémisphères' and 'Sweetgra's Quebec'. It looks like our sailor was soliciting for some of these erotica publications and this might also explain that no address was left behind on the outside of the covers. However, the ships censors apparently had no problems with these as the letters were not being stopped and were delivered to France.

Conclusion

At the time of the Dardanelles Campaign we can find letters written while on sea with a censorship applied on board ship. We have identified two of these originating from the British destroyers *HMS Usk* of the 'E'-class and *HMS Scourge* of the 'G'-class. Sealed bags were landed in the (nearest) port of call which could be Valletta or London, where next these GB pre-franked covers would be cancelled and sorted for onward transmission. The identification of the sender, of these two identically addressed covers in the same handwriting, is for the moment impossible as the sender did not leave his address on the outside of the cover. However, Lieutenant Leonard George Addington, R.N would make a good candidate. Lt. Leonard Addington, served on both *HMS Scourge* and *HMS Usk*. In command of *HMS Usk* on 4 May 1915, at Gaba Tepe he volunteered twice to go in to bring off wounded men, the beach and boat being at the time exposed to rifle and machine gun fire at close range. In recognition for his bravery he was awarded the DSC for his work at the Dardanelles while serving in *HMS Usk*. To us is of particular interest that he was lent from *HMS Usk* to *HMS Scourge* in August 1915 before later being appointed to *HMS Foxhound* on 8 Apr 1916. That fits with the first cover posted in Valletta

and may-be in January 1916 he was somehow involved again with *HMS Usk* where on board the second letter was censored. Of interest is also to note that against regulations the two covers do not have the censor's initials showing. May-be Lt. Leonard Addington was one of the ships censors, being an officer on board, and did not sign for (self)censorship, may-be he wanted to avoid identification because of the nature of the contents being a demand for erotica publications. Only if more covers from his hand appear on the market we will be able to tell.

Acknowledgement

I like to thank Frank Schofield for the assistance in identifying the censor mark on the second cover and the hint for a possible identification of the sender of this correspondence.

References

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Halpern, Paul G. (1994). A naval history of World War I. Naval Institute Press, Annapolis, USA.

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