

HMHS Rewa torpedoed January 1918.

by Marc Parren

The cover depicted here should be one of the last postal documents originating from the hospital ship *Rewa* before it was sunk in early January 1918. The cover with its accompanying letter was written on board the HMHS *Rewa* by a staff member on the 16th November 1917. HMHS *Rewa* was a 7,267 ton ship built for the British India Steam Navigation Company in 1906, and converted to a hospital ship in August 1914 (Firebrace 1991). Having sailed from Malta the HMHS *Rewa* was carrying 279 cot and walking wounded cases from Greece. She was in the Bristol Channel, when on the 4th January 1918, Wilhelm Werner in his U-55, lined her up, and soon sank her with his torpedoes despite the fact that the *Rewa* was clearly marked as a hospital ship. This should not have come as a surprise since in April 1917, Germany advised that it would not give anymore consideration to the Red Cross flag flown by hospital ships (Barnichon 1998). Four engine-room crewmen died, and the ship was very lucky to get away with such light casualties. Remaining crew and patients were rescued by local craft and landed safely at Swansea (Ball 2003).

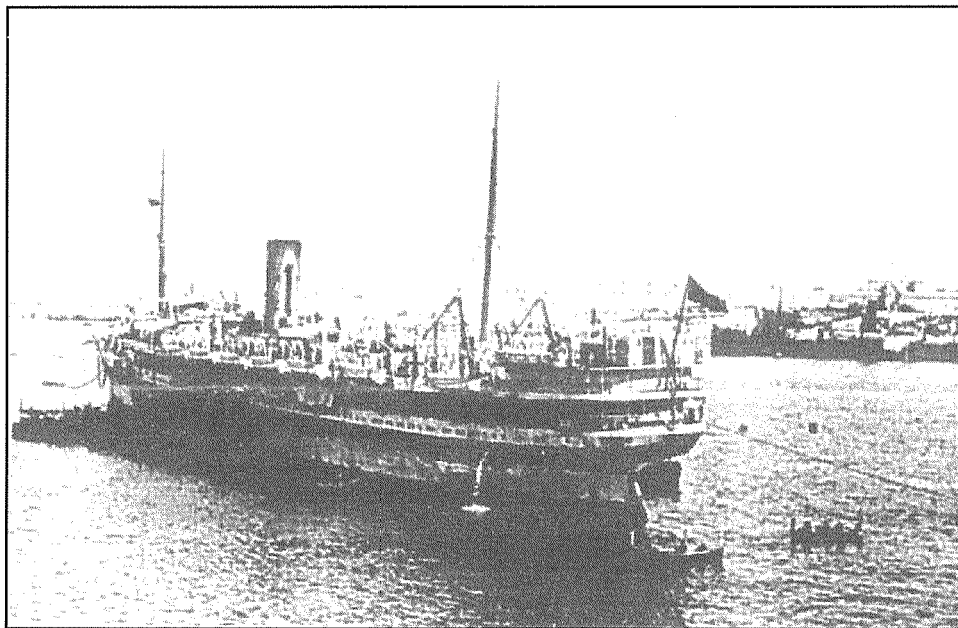


Fig. 1. HMHS Rewa in Valletta Harbour

Of interest to note is that in the course of 1917 sailings of hospital ships were to form part of convoys, sailing preferably at night. Another protective measure taken was to carry German hostages on board. On some vessels, it was necessary to remove some hospital beds to accommodate the hostages while on converted passenger vessels this did not have to be done and the hostages often enjoyed first class cabins. As allied defenses strengthened and the convoy system was enforced, U-Boat successes declined although they remained the main danger to Allied shipping until the very end of the war.

Now looking at the contents of the letter it seems likely that the HMHS Rewa was docked at Malta at the time of writing as it reads as follows:

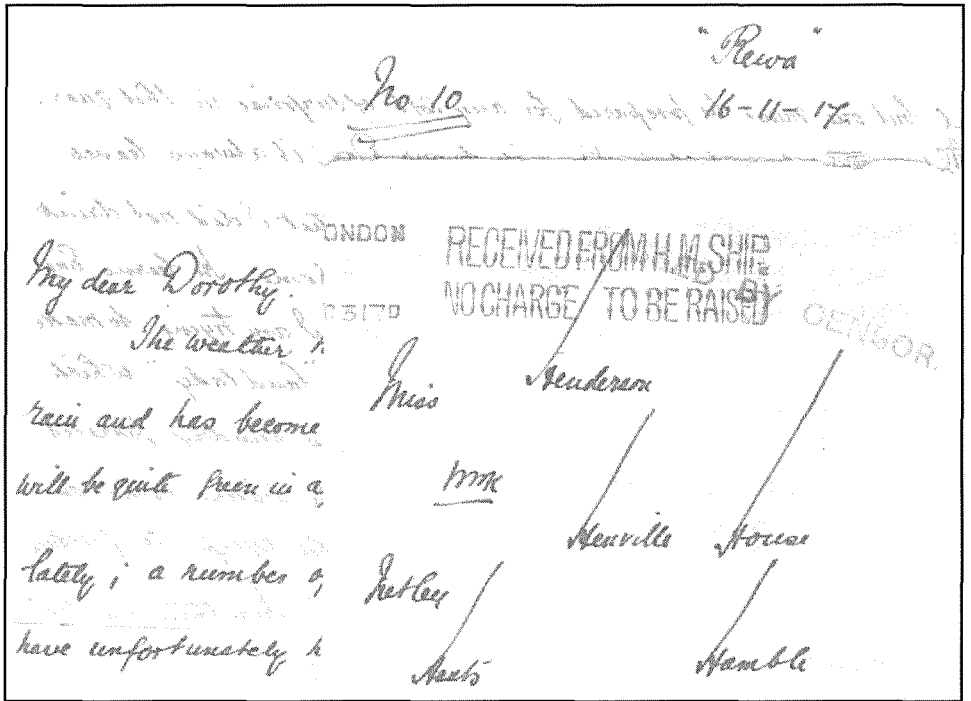
“My dear Dorothy,

The weather has changed with a vengeance. It has started to rain and has become quite cold. If it goes on like this the old dust heap will be quite green in a few days. We have had quite a lot of work lately; a number of bad cases have streamed in suddenly and we have unfortunately had a death. There will probably be a lull now for some time as this is really a healthy time of the year. I have not been ashore very much during the last two or three days. Work kept me on board during the early part of the week and now the weather is doing so. We expect that the “Karapara” is home now and we are awaiting news of her as we have only about 2 months’ grab on board and we shall have to send for more if we stay out very long.

I see that things both in Russia and Italy begin to look more hopeful but one must be prepared for any sort of surprise in that quarter. I have just been talking Spanish to our Don; it always leaves me very thirsty and makes me deplore the fact that I did not drink more beer when I had the chance years ago at home. He learns English in the morning and I learn Spanish at night. I am trying to make him learn the difference between “hostess” and “landlady” which he seems to consider synonymous terms. He has also sundry phrases which I must knockout of his head before the sisters come on board. I seem to have every duty in the world except the pursuit of medicine and surgery. How is the gardening? Here they are digging the soil for amusement! Best love from

William W Keir”

The rains changing the landscape from dust to green could well apply to Malta. Since I have not gotten hold of the log book I am not able to confirm the ships position in mid-November. The sister ship HMHS Karapara expected to being home in the UK at the time of writing also directs to a possible positioning in the Mediterranean. Most unfortunate the cover has no indication of originating from Malta as it just received the 3rd December 1917 London, “RECEIVED FROM



H.M.SHIP / NO CHARGE TO BE RAISED” Krag machine cancellation. The unframed censorship mark reading “PASSED BY CENSOR.” is classified by Gould (1998) as Type 4C. This particular censorship mark is unrecorded by him and has the following dimensions: length 68 mm (excluding stop) by 4 mm height; distances P-B 29 mm, P-C 42 mm; stop rectangular. Further HMHS Rewa covers might attribute this censorship mark to the ship. At the same time neither Firebrace (1991) nor Ball (2003) describe any hospital ship handstruck marks and cachets for HMHS Rewa. So this may mean that they had none aboard unless someone proves the opposite.

Ball, D. (2003). British and Empire hospital ships at Malta in WWI. *Melita* 15(11): 355-370.
 Barnichon, G. (1998). *Les navires hopitaux français au XXe siècle*. Editions Marcel-Didier Vrac, Le Touvet, France. With English translation by P. Roulet.
 Firebrace, J. (1991) *British Empire campaigns and occupations in the Middle East 1914 -1924. A postal history*. Christie’s Robson Lowe, London, Bournemouth, U.K.
 Gould, M.H. (1998). *British naval post & censor marks of the First World War*. Postal History 2000, Burnham-on-Crouch, U.K.