

Military Matters – The Japanese Navy in WWI

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I think it would be fair to say, when thinking about Egyptian military matters, that Japan would not spring to the minds of most collectors. However during the First World War Japanese warships were sent to the Mediterranean on March 11, 1917, arriving on April 13 at Malta where they were based. This was the Second Special Squadron under Admiral Sato Kozo aboard the cruiser *Akashi* with eight of the Navy's newest destroyers (*Ume, Kusunoki, Kaede, Katsura, Kashiwa, Matsu, Sugi* and *Sakaki*). Later *Akashi* was replaced by *Izumo*, and four more destroyers were added (*Kashi, Hinoki, Momo* and *Yanagi*). The Japanese Second Special Squadron headed back home in May 1919. In the meantime Japanese sailors had visited Alexandria and on occasions Port Said.

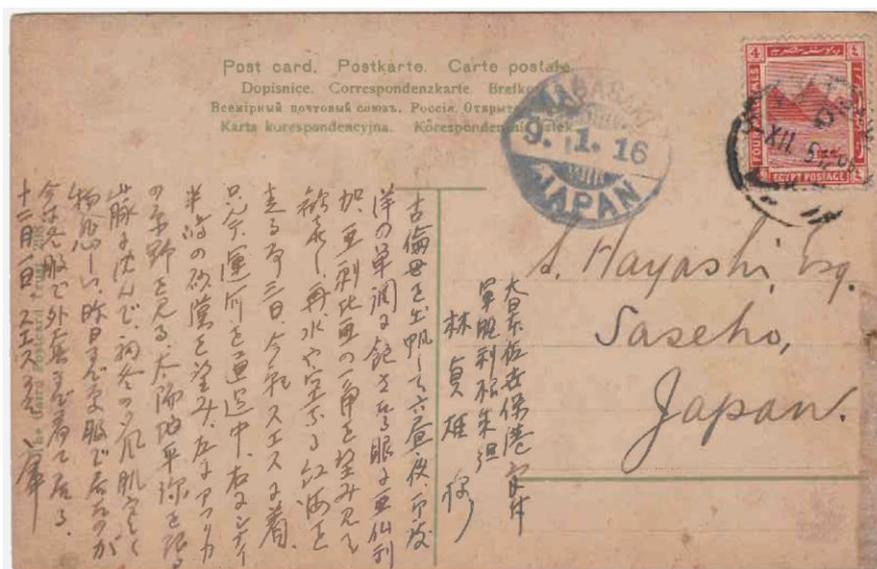
Japanese sailors also temporarily manned two British gunboats, which they designated the *Tokyo* and *Saikyo*, and two British destroyers, renamed the *Kanran* and *Sendan*. At peak strength in 1917, the Japanese Mediterranean flotilla numbered 17 warships. One of their major tasks was to escort Allied shipping between Marseille, Taranto and ports in Egypt. Their other function was to hunt German and Austrian submarines threatening Allied vessels in the Mediterranean.

Although the Anglo-Japanese alliance of 1902 did not require it, Japan declared that it would support Britain in the war against Germany and sent an ultimatum to Berlin demanding withdrawal of German warships from Japanese and Chinese waters. Edward Grey, the British Foreign Secretary, opposed any Japanese participation in the war, fearing that it would seek an opportunity to expand beyond reasonable bounds. Churchill, almost from the day he took the helm as First Sea Lord in October 1911, accelerated the withdrawal of battleships from the Mediterranean and China seas and their redeployment against Germany's growing naval power in the North Sea. By March 1914 British naval strength in the Far East had decreased from five battleships and an armoured cruiser in March 1904 to two battleships, a battle cruiser, and two cruisers. The Japanese Navy had been modelled on the Royal Navy, whom they admired, and proved themselves in the Russo-Japanese war of 1905, inflicting ignominious defeat on the Russian fleet. Mindful of the potential of the Japanese fleet, Churchill remonstrated with Grey's opposition to Japan's full participation in the war and helped Grey to accept Japan's support. Japan formally declared war on August 23, 1914.

Japan helped to establish control of the Pacific and Indian oceans early in the war by seizing the German fortress and East Asia naval base of Tsingtao on November 16, 1914. The British contingent was deliberately excluded from Japanese plans and learned of the assault only after the fact, confirming Grey's earlier concerns. The use of Japanese ships provoked a mixed response from Australia and New Zealand. They fully endorsed Japanese ships as escorts for troop convoys but sharply disapproved when in late 1914 the Japanese First Fleet seized the German colonies of the Marshall, Mariana, and Caroline islands.

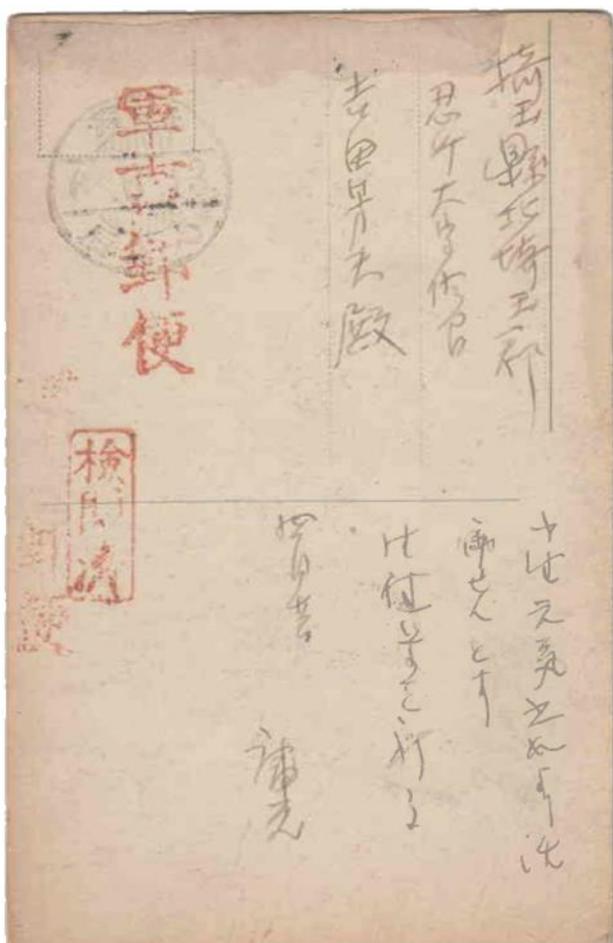
On October 16, 1914, it conducted the first of what would be many voyages wherein Japanese warships escorted Australian-New Zealand Army Corps (Anzac) troops to the Middle East and no doubt docked in Egyptian ports. By 1917 German and Austrian submarines operating in the Mediterranean were sinking Allied shipping at an alarming rate. During the entire war, the Allies would lose 12 million tons of shipping and a full quarter of that was sunk in the Mediterranean. Despite misgivings about the quality of Japanese seamanship (based on bigotry and ignorance), the Allies pressed Japan to help out. This resulted in the Japanese Second Special Squadron being based at Malta.

By the end of the war the Japanese had escorted 788 Allied transports. During their patrols Japanese destroyers engaged German and Austrian submarines 34 times. Two of their destroyers were damaged. The *Sakaki* lost 68 sailors killed when the Austrian U-boat U-27 attacked her in June 1917. Despite the damage, she remained afloat and was repaired.



Postcard from Naval Warship on Suez Canal dated 6-12-15 Port Said. Datestamped Nagasaki (9.1.16) in transit to Sasebo. Addressed to Sadao Hayashi, Crew of Warship Tone, c/o Sasebo Port, Dainippon.

The card reads: “It took six days to come from Colombo. I slept during boring simple situation of crossing Indian Ocean. I was cheerful seeing Africa and Arabia. Three days has passed since our passing of Red Sea. Today I reached Suez. I’m passing through the canal. On the right, I see Sinai Peninsula. On the left, I see African plain. Sun set under mountains. I feel sad. I wear winter clothes, nevertheless I wore summer clothes until yesterday. 1st December.” The card is signed ‘庸’ (Tsuné), only a part of the sender’s name.



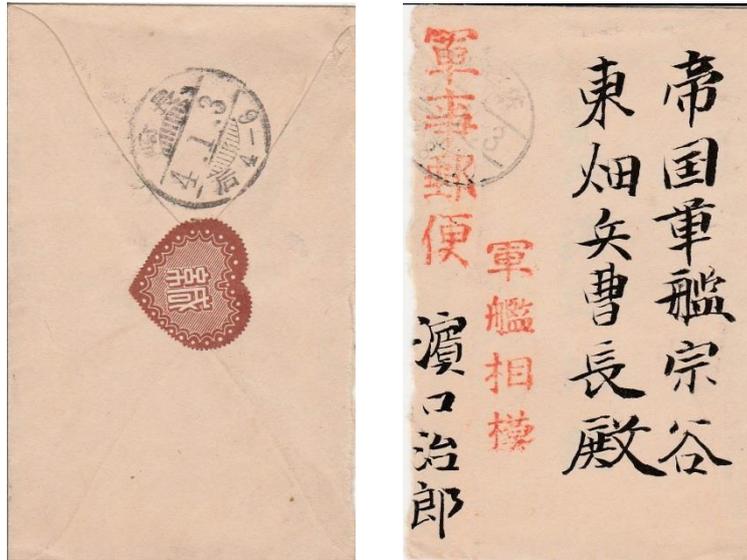
The card is dated before the arrival of the Second Special Squadron so could have been sent by a member of an escort ship or one passing through to Europe.

The ship to which it was sent, the *Tone*, was assigned to the Japanese Second Fleet, and fought at the Battle of Tsingtao. In 1917 she was re-assigned to the Japanese Third Fleet, and was based out of Singapore, from which she patrolled the sea lanes of the Indian Ocean and also occasionally in the Dutch East Indies against German commerce raiders and U-boats.

The card at left is from Tsunemitsu Yoshida (庸光), captain of the destroyer *Sakaki* during operations in the Mediterranean, postmarked Yokohama, PM3-5.1.3 (6.6.1917) in transit to Saitama prefecture. Addressed to Yoshio Yoshida, Sazo, Oshi-Village, Kitasaitama-Gun, Saitama-Prefecture, it reads: “I’m fine and I’m going to serve for operation from now. I wish you may be fine. 20th April. Tsunemitsu.” 庸光 (Tsunemitsu). Handstamps in red are “Gunji Yubin” (military mail) and the boxed chop “Ken-etsuzumi” (Censored).

Eight of the Kaba-class destroyers including the *Sakaki*, arrived at Malta in mid-April 1917 for convoy protection duty as the 10th and 11th Flotillas. Less than a month after the Mediterranean operation began on April 9, 1917, the destroyers *Matsu* and *Sakaki* were

engaged in rescue work on May 3 for the British transport ship *Transylvania*, which had been attacked by a German U-boat. On June 11, 1917, she was torpedoed by the Austrian U.27 just off Crete while on escort duty. Her bows were blown off and with many of the crew forward in the mess hall, 68 were killed. She was salvaged and repaired. The 27 officers of the *Sakaki* were later decorated by George V.



*Small name-card sized envelope Jiro Hamaguchi, Warship Sagami (相模))
To Petty Officer Higashihata, HIJMS Warship Soya (宗谷).
Postmarks Sasebo, AM8-10.3. (1.4.1915) and Nagasaki, PM4-6.3. (1.4.1915)*

HIJMS battleship *Sagami* (相模) was formerly the *Peresvet* (Пересвет) a pre-dreadnought battleship built for the Imperial Russian Navy at the end of the nineteenth century. She was transferred to the Pacific Squadron on completion and based at Port Arthur in China from 1903. During the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–05, she took part in the Battle of Port Arthur and was seriously damaged during the Battle of the Yellow Sea and again in the Siege of Port Arthur. The ship was scuttled before the Russians surrendered, then salvaged by the Japanese and placed into service with the name *Sagami*. Partially rearmed, the *Sagami* was reclassified by the Imperial Japanese Navy as a coastal defence ship in 1912. In 1916 the Japanese sold her to the Russians, their allies since the beginning of World War I. On route to the White Sea in early 1917 she hit mines laid by a German submarine and sank off Port Said soon after traversing the Suez Canal.

After the war the United States began protecting and speaking for China and Britain began to side with the US at the Treaty of Versailles. This angered Japan because their only ally was siding with one of their largest rivals. This led to the termination of the Anglo-Japanese alliance in 1922 when Britain and the US rejected Japan's statement of racial equality and forced them to limit their navy to 3/5 the size of the US and British navies. Japan was extremely insulted and bitter about the result and remained angered until they took their revenge at Pearl Harbor.

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.”

Japanese warships were actually under way 72 per cent of the time, the highest percentage recorded by any Allied warships. The British record was 60 per cent, the Greek and French only 45 per cent. British officers credited the Japanese warships with excellent performances, at least, they added, when all went according to plan. Postwar British criticisms that the Japanese “acted inferior to our men when unforeseen situations

cropped up” reflect British prejudices expressed during the war, and not supported by the actual record. That record clearly demonstrates instead how seriously Japanese naval officers took their duty. The Japanese Second Special Squadron headed home in May 1919; as part of their spoils of war, they took with them seven German submarines.

Prewar racial and diplomatic animosity between Japan and the United States, set aside in 1917 and 1918, quickly re-emerged despite wartime Japanese assistance to the United States in the Pacific. Japan’s valuable role as an ally rarely appeared in Western histories of the war. Many Japanese resented how at Versailles the “three Great Powers acted as judges” in a confrontation with Chinese delegates over the Japanese occupation of Shantung. The apparent hostility toward Japan after the war, despite its service, led an increasing number of Japanese military officers to believe in an American and British conspiracy against Japan, founded on racial animosity. The arrival of the seized German submarines began a new and long-term relationship between the Japanese and German navies after the termination of the Anglo-Japanese alliance. 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.

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