



The Spire Sentinel



**The Newsletter
of The
Branch of The
Front**



**& Magazine
Chesterfield
Western
Association**

ISSUE 122 - April 2026

Our aims are 'Remembrance and Sharing the History of the Great War'.



Western Front Association Chesterfield Branch – Meetings 2026

Meetings start at 7.30pm and take place at the Labour Club, Unity House, Saltergate, Chesterfield S40 1NF

January	6th	. AGM + Tim Lynch - “Huns on the Run” Tim explores the often overlooked experiences of German POWs held in Britain during and immediately after the First World War
February	3rd	Ross Beadle - Sarajevo 1914 This talk examines the sequence of chance events of the preceding 36 years and, even, on the day of the killing.
March	3rd	Andy Rawson - Malta...Nurse of the Mediterranean against the Germans and Italians during WWII. However, over 125,000 casualties from the 1915 Gallipoli and 1916 Salonika campaigns were cared for on the island during WWI.
April	7th	Mick Byrne - Shot at Dawn Between 1914 and 1920, more than 3,000 British soldiers were sentenced to death by courts martial arms, However, only 346 were executed with 37 of these having committed capital crimes such as murder. The remainder become the centrepiece of our talk.
May	5th	Christina Holstein - - Verdun. What was the plan behind the German offensive of February 1916? A thundering opening bombardment brought early success but the German advance soon slowed and the French refused to give up.
June	2nd	Scott Lindgren The Admiralty dispatched two dreadnought battlecruisers to the South Atlantic to eliminate the threat of the German East Asia cruiser squadron. This talk explains the events and consequences of the Falklands battle, along with some of the strategic and tactical lessons.
July	7th	John Wilson The action at Sheikh Sa'id November 1914. The opposed landing that nobody has ever heard about! .
August	4th	Ian Castle - Gotha Raids. The talk traces the sequence of raids made by the deadly Gotha and massive 'Giant' bombers, and the development of the world's first in depth, integrated aerial defence system. Based on his book London 1917-18: The Bomber Blitz
September	1st	Roy Larkin - Where the Money Went. Following the success of the original 'Where the Money Went', the Sequel explores the financial costs of the Great War. Fully illustrated
October	6th	Peter Hart Welsh Warrior at Ypres, 1914: The thrilling memories of Captain Hubert Rees who ended up in command of the 2nd Welsh Regiment during the fighting at Gheluvelt.
November	3rd	John Horner 'In the care of St Dunstons : Private Richard Horners story'
December	1st	Neil Taylor....”Winston`s Little Army...Aspects of the Royal Naval Division”

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Chairman`s Ramblings



Another month has gone by and we will be meeting again next Tuesday , 7th of April I hope everyone has a good Easter. The talk in March by Andy was excellent as always thanks Andy for a informative talk. April`s talk is about Shot At Dawn which I think will be interesting talk.....Mick Byrne is a first time visitor to the branch.The branch is going to welcome the Mayor of Chesterfield to the meeting in April so I hope it will be well attended, and we will give them a warm welcome.

Thank you everyone again for your continued support of the branch.

April Meeting Presentation



David Bardell and Mick Byrne met over 10 years ago and teamed up to deliver History Talks. Shot At Dawn was one of the first to be delivered. Between 1914 and 1920, more than 3,000 British soldiers were sentenced to death by courts martial for desertion, cowardice, striking an officer, disobedience, falling asleep on duty or casting away arms. However, only 346 were actually executed with 37 of these having committed capital crimes such as murder. The remaining 309 become the centrepiece of the Talk. We explain the Background to how these events unfolded; we pick out a handful of examples and tell their stories; we explain how they were finally pardoned after 90 years of disgrace to their families.



Secretary`s Scribbles

Dear Members and Friends,

Welcome to the April edition of the Branch Newsletter and magazine. Seems ages since we had a Branch Meeting - March is a long month.

On March 10th, I was honoured and privileged to attend a presentation to Branch member Bill Bryan at the Nether Langwith War Memorial. This presentation made by Alex Peace -Gadsby, Deputy Lieutenant for Nottinghamshire and was in recognition of the service that Bill has given to The Royal British Legion, Western Front Association and his local Community. Bill, whose health is not good just now has researched all the names on his village War Memorial and has visited the Western Front on many occasions, including Fampoux near Arras where his grandfather is buried. Great to see Branch members Edwin Astle and James Kaye attending this ceremony. A full report is elsewhere in this newsletter.

Thanks to Andy Rawson for sharing his presentation at our March meeting for use in the newsletter. March has been busy for me. Started on Friday 6th March at Retford Probus Group where I gave my talk on Quintinshill. Then on 19th I attended the meeting of the Nottingham Industrial Heritage Association and made a presentation on Nottingham`s Industry in WW1 Great to see John Horner coming up from Burton upon Trent to support me - thanks John. Then on Tuesday 31st March I presented "Women Won the War" at West Bridgford Library. This was a `sell out` as the room only holds 35 people. This was a Nottinghamshire County "Inspire" event. Our April meeting we have a first time visitor to the Branch - Mick Byrne with a presentation entitled **Shot at Dawn** Between 1914 and 1920, more than 3,000 British soldiers were sentenced to death by courts martial for desertion, cowardice, striking an officer, disobedience, falling asleep on duty or casting away arms However, only 346 were executed with 37 of these having committed capital crimes such as murder. The remainder become the centrepiece of the talk. Next month we have one of WFA`s "big guns", Christina Holsten, we will deliver a presentation on Verdun.

Best wishes, Grant grantcullen@hotmail.com / 07824628638

Presentation to Bill Bryan

On Tuesday, 10th March 2026 at 1pm, WFA Chesterfield members, Edwin Astle, James Kay and myself joined about 25 others at the War Memorial in the village of Nether Langwith, to see Branch Member and Royal British Legion Member, William Wilfred Bryan, receive, from Nottinghamshire Royal British Legion, The President`s Certificate of Commendation for Service to his Community, the Royal British Legion and the Western Front Association.



The Ceremony was opened by Councillor Tony Eaton, Chairman of Bassetlaw District Council who welcomed all who had come along to witness the event.



Councillor Sybil Fielding, Armed Forces Champion for Bassetlaw then read out the Citation on the Certificate of Commendation.



Alex Peace-Gadsby OBE, Deputy Lieutenant for Nottinghamshire and President of Nottinghamshire Royal British Legion then presented Bill with his Certificate.

Rev. Nigel Stones, Chaplain Worksop Royal British Legion, the led the Act of Remembrance, with Alex Peace-Gadsby OBE DL speaking the Exhortation.

Sarah Emblen then played Last Post followed by a minute`s silence followed by Reveille.

The Kohima Epitaph was then spoken by Alex Peace-Gadsby OBE DL



Bill Bryan then laid a wreath on the War Memorial.



The Ceremony was then concluded with a Blessing and Final Words from Rev. Nigel Stones, Chaplain, Worksop Branch, and Royal British Legion.

Thus ended a very moving and humbling event.

NURSE OF THE MEDITERRANEAN by Andy Rawson

Welcome to Malta

I visited the Malta in August 2024 for my birthday
And while there I discovered that the island is steeped in history
Most of it is focused on two famous sieges

Two Famous Sieges

The first is the siege of Malta in 1565
When the Knights Hospitallers defended the island against the Ottoman Empire
They then built the capital Valletta and turned it into a key naval centre in the Mediterranean
Sea

The second siege took place in the Second World War between June 1940 and November 1942
When the German and Italian air and naval forces tried to bomb and starve the island into
submission

They failed and it became the headquarters for Operation Husky, the invasion of Sicily, in July
1943

However, the island had also played part in the First World War
When it served as a hospital base during two well-known campaigns
The Gallipoli campaign which lasted from April 1915 to January 1916
And the Salonika campaign between October 1915 and September 1918
Which is why the island proudly calls itself the Nurse of the Mediterranean
And this is the story of that time

Crimean War

Stepping back in history a little, we should not that
Many casualties had been cared for during the Crimean War of 1854-56
But Florence Nightingale's request for a dedicated military hospital was rejected for some
time

Now you may be asking why Britain was using Malta as a base

It was ruled by the Knights Hospitallers or Order of St John of Jerusalem from 1530 to 1798

It was seized by France during the Napoleonic Wars

So, the Maltese asked the British to oust them and they did

Britain then refused to leave, so the island became a British Crown Colony in 1813
And the Royal Navy used the natural harbours around the capital, Valletta, as a base
Malta would eventually gain its independence peacefully in 1964

Seven New Hospitals

So, back to the story

Seven military hospitals had been added by the time of the First World War



Cottonera Hospital dealt with army patients while Bighi Hospital looked after naval ratings

The island's artillery garrison were cared for in an old fort in Valletta

And another small hospital on the northeast coast cared for those with contagious diseases

There was a hospital for officers at Mdina and another for soldiers' families at Mtarfa

Both were in the middle of the island

A small hospital on Gozo, to the north of the main island, served the island's garrison

Mediterranean Sea

Time now for some relevant First World War geography of the Eastern Mediterranean

The fire symbol is Gallipoli and Constantinople, or Istanbul as it is now known, is above

The first leg of a casualty's journey was to the blue dot, Mudros

A small island, virtually deserted, which was used as a logistics base

The casualties were sorted and their wounds cleaned and dressed

Those with minor injuries went straight back to their unit on Gallipoli

Mainly ANZAC troops went to Alexandria in Egypt, the orange dot at bottom right

Mainly British troops were taken to Malta, the red dot mid left

The explosive symbol is Salonika or Thessaloniki

The casualties from that campaign were taken a similar route to Malta

Outbreak of War

Malta's peacetime garrison consisted of five British Army battalions and their support services

The 6,000 men were looked after by 187 medical staff of the 30th RAMC Company

On the outbreak of war, Colonel Michael Russell put the hospitals on standby

Maltese medical staff and the St. John's Ambulance Association were also put on standby

But most of the 389 beds were in Cottonera Hospital

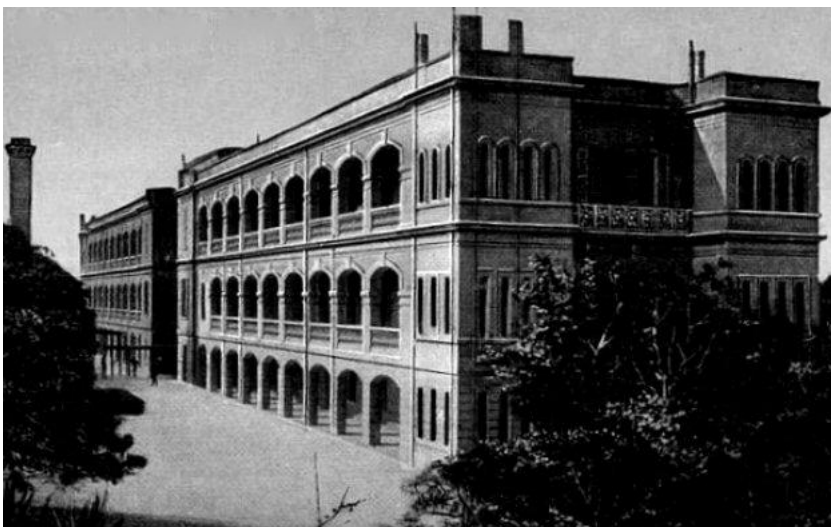
He also set up two triage facilities in Floriana Barracks and at the Zabbar Gate

To deal with casualties when they were taken off the ships

However, the garrison and Russell's men left for England at the end of August

Where they would join the new 7th and 8th Regular Divisions

They were replaced by five Territorial battalions and the 1st London Field Ambulance



Warships en Route to Gallipoli

Lieutenant Colonel Richard Sleman and his 200 men would have little to do for six months

But it was the calm before the storm

The War Council approved a naval attack against the Dardanelles in January 1915

A telegram asked Malta what facilities it could offer on 24 February

Because British warships had cleared the entrance to the Dardanelles

Sleman offer of 500 beds was approved

That was because a quick advance across the Gallipoli peninsula was expected

Enabling hospitals to be set up around the beachheads

Trouble Brewing

However, Malta's governor Field Marshal Paul Methuen thought trouble was afoot

When the Hospital Transport Ship, the Arcadia, stopped at Malta, en route to the Dardanelles

With the medical staff of the 29th Division on board

Methuen was a veteran of the war in South Africa

And he had seen how quickly casualties could mount up

Particularly from the many diseases found lurking in hostile environments

Surgeon General William Birrell wanted to hear what the island could offer

Extending the Hospitals



Methuen reckoned he could set up 3,500 beds

And he asked the War Office if it could send medical and nursing staff

Sleman's men started adding beds in the wards and on the verandas

Of Cottonera Hospital and Valletta Military Hospital

The military families were moved out of Mtarfa hospital
Another 600 beds were put in the barracks next door
While tents were set up around the Forrest contagious hospital

Convalescent Camps



Malta also needed convalescent camps for those who needed to recover their fitness after treatment

The officers were housed at Villa Dragonara near St. George's Bay

While the other ranks were sent to one of three tented camps in the fields northwest of Valletta

They were called St. Paul's, St. David's and All Saints

They were run by the convalescents helped by the local Red Cross, the YMCA and the Church Army

Men did exercises and marches and washed in the sea to conserve drinking water

Preparing the Facilities

Colonel Sleman organised the Royal Engineers and local labour

As they cleaned the barrack blocks and erected tents and huts

Colonel Spencer's ordnance troops built beds, operating tables and laboratory equipment

Scouring the island for things to make them with

They also used many items taken from a captured ship

Major Lewis-Hall organised his Army Service Corps troops as they distributed everything

Required to equip medical facilities, washrooms and kitchens

2,000 mattresses were bought from Valletta's shops while the locals donated bedding

Organising the Supplies

Meanwhile, medical stores started to arrive from Britain

Major Falkner made sure they were distributed evenly

The patients and staff would need food and drink

Water also had to be rationed until the waterworks was improved

While tinned milk had to be shipped from Britain

The island did not have enough fruit and vegetables

And there would be shortages until regular supplies started arriving in June 1915

While eggs and chickens were shipped from Egypt, Tunis and Italy

Organising Local Support

Lord Methuen also organised a committee of local ladies

Who would welcome casualties with refreshments, tobacco and stationery

They also collected pyjamas, shirts and socks for the patients to wear

And many of them would end up helping on the wards

Hidden Plague

But the first casualties to reach Malta were not battle casualties

Methuen received a message from the ANZAC headquarters in Egypt on 19 March 1915

Asking if Malta could take patients suffering from what the press called 'the hidden plague'

Because the Australian and New Zealanders had been enjoying themselves a little too much

500 men suffering from venereal disease arrived at the end of the month on HT Atlantia

The serious cases were taken to Forrest Hospital while the minor cases went to Mtarfa Hospital

The culprits had their pay stopped while everyone else's was limited, to curtail their activities

The Australian Official History says that "*the outbreak was as short as it was sharp*"

Because the uninitiated youths were scared off with horror stories

With lurid stories about what would happen to their wedding tackle if they strayed

The bad boys were all sent back to Egypt as soon as they recovered

Extra Staff Arrive

Sleman had less than 250 RAMC staff as the battle for Gallipoli loomed

When a Scottish Women's Unit landed on Malta en route to Serbia

So, Doctor Alice Hutchison and her sixty staff were instructed to stay until help arrived

Variety of Uniforms



Many types of staff cared for the casualties and they all had different uniforms

Miss Wohlmann would arrive with 140 nurses in May 1915

They were members of the Queen Alexandra's Imperial Military Nursing Service

Regulars wore a scarlet cape, while Reserves and Territorials wore a grey cape with scarlet facings

Nurses of the Canadian Red Cross Society also arrived

They wore a grey suit with a striped shirt and a straw hat with black band

Around 100 Maltese nurses helped on the wards, while the local Boy Scouts ran errands

Lord Meuthen and the Red Cross Staff

Captain Stockings arrived to organise the British Red Cross Society and St. John Ambulance Brigade

Members of the Red Cross wore a blue uniform and a white apron with the Red Cross emblem

Members of the St John Ambulance Brigade wore the Brigade uniform with a brassard on their arm

Mrs Keighly arrived with the first Voluntary Aid Detachment a few days after the first casualties landed

And 200 VADs had arrived by August 1915

Landing on Gallipoli

Now let us look at what had been happening 800 miles away in the Dardanelles

The Mediterranean Expeditionary Force (MEF) landed on the peninsula on 25 April 1915

29th British Division landed on Cape Helles, the most southerly point

The Australian and New Zealand Army Corps (ANZAC) landed north of Gaba Tepe

The commander-in-chief, General Sir Ian Hamilton, had planned for a rapid advance

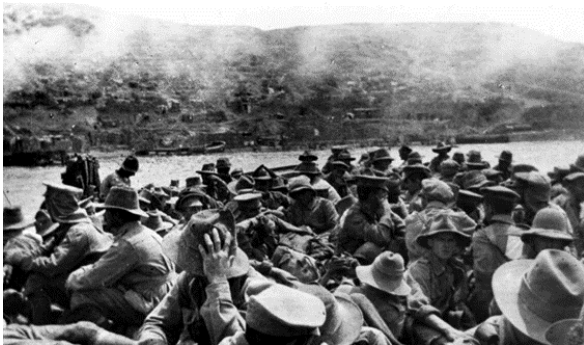
And his Assistant Director of Medical Services, Lieutenant Colonel Alfred Conquer Keble

Had to prepare the casualty evacuation plan

Because the Director Medical Services, Surgeon General William George Birrell

Only reached Mudros a few days before the landings

Chaotic Casualty Evacuation



However, the plan needed safe spaces on the beaches to treat the wounded

That did not happen, so casualty evacuation descended into chaos

Surgeon General Sir Neville Howse VC the Director Medical Services of the AIF

Was disgusted by the situation

But like all the best Australians, Howse came from Somerset, England

And the situation did not change because there would be no advance across the peninsula

The medical facilities along the shore remained under fire

And the casualties mounted as the days turned into weeks

Rescued from the Battlefield

On the Western Front the wounded were picked up by stretcher bearers
And moved swiftly by ambulance and train along the casualty evacuation chain
They were soon recovering at a Base Hospital or were on a hospital ship heading for England
However, Gallipoli casualties had a very different experience

First Aid Under Fire

Casualties were taken to the first aid posts in the gullies leading down to the sea
Where their wounds dressed in a dirty and dusty dug out or shack

Down to the Shore

They then lay in the sun for some time before they were carried down to the shore

Barges to the Ships

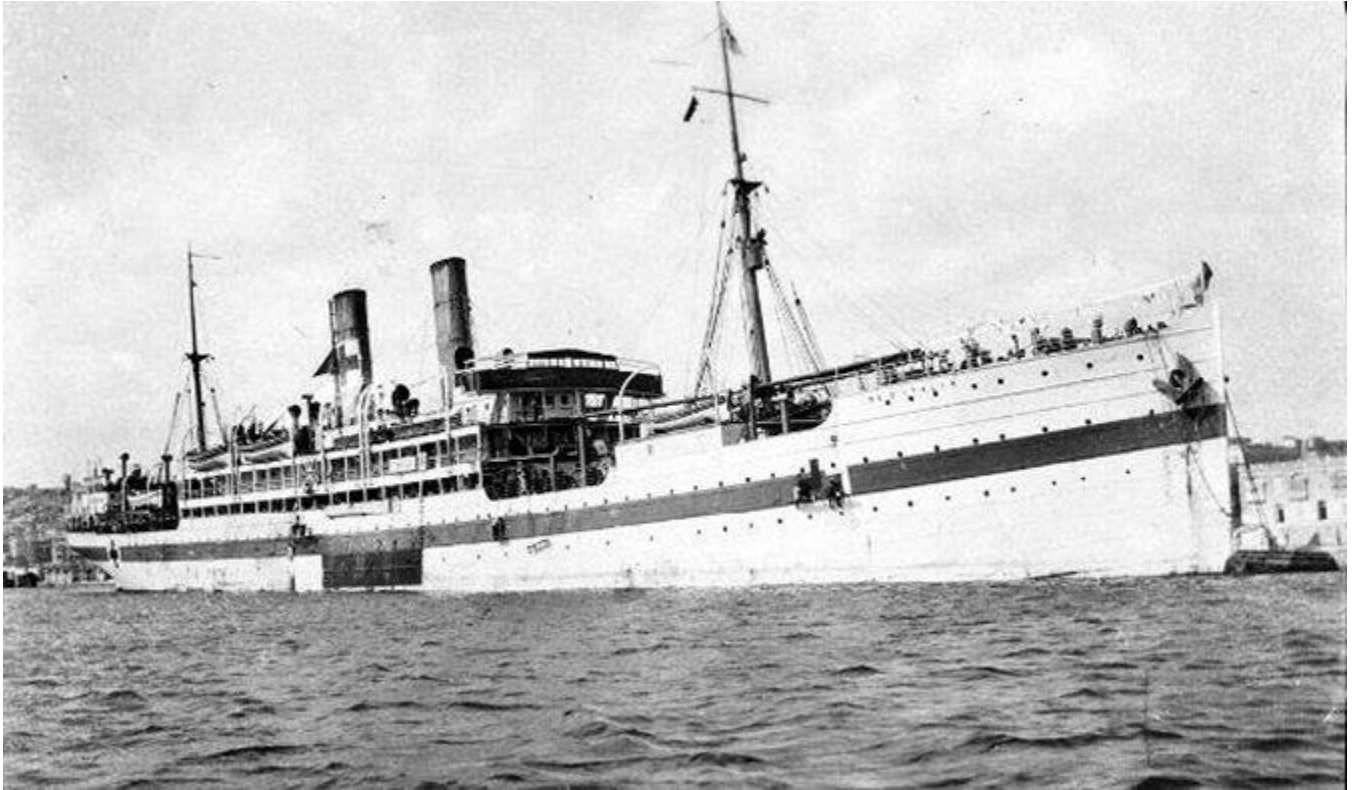
Barges then towed them out to a hospital ship
Again, under the hot sun

Barges onto the Ships

Stretchers were lifted on board by cranes while the rest climbed aboard
Sister Charlotte Despard wrote:

"I shall never forget the wounded coming on to the ship. Some of them had been in the trenches for months and their uniforms were torn and faded almost white with the sun's rays. They were ill and footsore, but they came on with their heads held high. I just wanted to cheer them up because they loved to have one of their own nurses."

White Hospital Ships



Eventually 58 ships would support the Gallipoli campaign and there were two sorts
Hospital Ships - the white ships - were equipped to deal with stretcher cases and serious casualties

Hospital Transports - the black ships - were kitted out to deal with the walking wounded
Sister Agnes Chapman was onboard one of them:

“We lay close to the shore. The naval vessels lying further out were bombarding the mainland and the shells passed over the top of our vessel. We only had accommodation for 500 wounded but on that trip, we took 1,000 on board. Four other hospital ships were there as well and although all of them quickly became as overcrowded as we were, there were still hundreds of wounded men left lying on the beaches waiting for a transport.”

Black Hospital Transports

The ships sailed the 60 miles to Mudros, where they were sorted and given emergency treatment

885 are buried in East Mudros Cemetery

Some were sent back to Gallipoli

But those who required further treatment faced the 800 mile journey to Malta

Hospital Ship Staff

The medical staff had never experienced such a concentrated amount of suffering before

And they had to work long hours on board with limited or improvised equipment

There was often little they could do to ease the suffering of the wounded

Sister Lydia King wrote:

“I shall never forget the awful feeling of hopelessness on night duty. It was dreadful. I had three wards with about 250 patients to look after. I shall not describe their wounds; they were too awful. One loses sight of all the honour and glory in the work we are doing.”

While the men needed urgent medical attention it would some time before they would get it

Their wounds festered, the infections spread, the sickness took hold and the pain increased

Welcome to Malta

After a sea journey of several days, Malta came into sight

This is the capital, Valletta, looking from the east and it sits on a peninsula between two

bays

The Grand Harbour is to the south (or left) and Marsamxett Harbour is to the north (or right)

The whole town is surrounded by huge 16th century walls built by the Knights of Malta

While St. Elmo Fort at the tip of the peninsula is now a large military museum

St. Elmo is the patron saint of sailors, as in St. Elmo's fire

The Calm Before the Storm



The nursing staff had prepared the wards for their patients

The operating tables were readied and the dressings prepared

The beds were made and the wards were aired and decorated with flowers

And then they waited for the next hospital ship to enter the harbour

Appreciating the calm before the storm, apprehensive about the next few hours

When they would be rushing around, attending to the needs of the wounded

Unloading the Wounded

Cranes lifted stretcher cases onto small boats, so they could be taken to the quayside

The Bighi naval hospital even had a lift to take stretcher cases up the cliff

Ships then moored, so the walking wounded could disembark and be driven to the hospitals

Transporting the Casualties

There was a shortage of transport in the early days

Just one ambulance, one car, one traction engine and a few tractors and horse-drawn wagons

So, the Maltese made thirty private cars available

Thirty ambulance cars and six lorries would arrive in June 1915

The First Wounded Arrive



Hospital Transport Glen McGillivray was the first to land 600 men on 4 May

Followed by the Hospital Ship Sicilia with 400 stretcher cases

Dr Alice Hutchison described the arrival of the wounded:

“At last, the bell clanged and the first batch of wounded arrived. Down the long corridor they came, ragged, dirty and hungry looking. Some were joking but others were dejected. Those who could walk trooped in, followed by a procession of stretchers with their still burdens. Until late in the evening they came and one by one the beds were filled. Meanwhile, the doctors and nurses dressed the wounds, many of which had remained untouched since first-aid had been given at Gallipoli ten days ago.”

The staff were inexperienced at dealing with such injuries but they had to learn

More Staff and Patients Arrive

The casualties often came faster than the medical staff deal with them

For example, Tigné Hospital received 570 cases in just three days

And it only had two RAMC staff and 18 volunteers to deal with them

Reinforcements soon arrived, so the Scottish nurses could continue their journey to Serbia

There were 1,100 staff by the end of May while 4,000 sick and injured had reached the island
Another 2,000 casualties arrived in June as the fighting on Gallipoli settled down

Keeping Spirits Up

Half the patients could return to the front line but the rest were evacuated to England

Dr Hutchison watched how the patients relaxed after treatment and some rest:

“Our patients are a cheery lot, full of thrilling tales of the first terrible days of the landings. They exchange banter with their comrades up and down the wards. Wounds are a joke, a painful part of the day’s work and they are eager to get back to the fighting line. Many are soon up and about in corridors and courtyard, clad in pyjamas and military caps. Bandaged legs give them the opportunity for hopping competitions or the one-legged jump; while singing It’s a Long Way to Tipperary or Who’s Your Lady Friend.”

Second Group of Hospitals

Surgeon-General Hayward Whitehead took over Malta’s medical staff in July 1915

He had served on the Northwest Frontier and in India before heading Britain’s Eastern Command

He was made aware that the Gallipoli campaign was going to be larger and longer than expected

So, he found more space for beds in military and public buildings

Three facilities opened around Marsamxett Bay for casualties requiring surgery

They were the Floriana Barracks, Tigné Barracks and the Auberge de Bavière

Head and spinal injuries were treated in the palace of the Grand Master of the Knights of Malta

While St. George’s Barracks and St. Andrew’s Barracks were prepared for 1,750 patients

Responding to the Suvla Landing

The landing at Suvla Bay increased the number of casualties in August

So, another five public buildings were commandeered around Valletta for 1,250 beds

St. Elmo’s School, St John’s School and the Hamrun Technical Institute

As well as St. Ignatius Hospital and the Little Company of Mary Sisters nursing home

Lady Jean Hamilton, wife of General Ian Hamilton, commander of the MEF helped out

Many Maltese offered beds in their homes but there was insufficient staff to look after them
Valletta's Grand Palace was also turned down for the same reasons

Tented Accommodation

Methuen was also told to increase accommodation for non-battle casualties

To treat those suffering from summer diseases, such as malaria, dysentery and typhoid

Three camps were set up on farmland northwest of Valletta

St. David's, St. Patrick's and St. Paul's could house around 1,750 in tents and huts

A large convalescent camp was also set up in the north, where there was a beach for bathing

Ghajn Tuffieha or the Spring of Apples even included a disciplinary compound for 400 trouble
causers

Altogether, the number of beds had increased to 7,000 beds by the autumn of 1915

Christmas in the Wards



Methuen was then warned that the numbers would increase again with the onset of winter
weather

The most that would arrive was 900 a day, many of them suffering from frost bite

Verdala Hospital was opened for officers while Ricasoli Barracks was opened for the other
ranks

A ward was also set up in Malta's ancient quarantine area on Manoel Island in Marsamxett Bay
They added nearly 2,000 beds

Another 1,000 beds were set up in Spinola Fort north of Valletta

While St. David's Hospital was increased to 1,000 beds

The Spring of Apples convalescent camp was increased to 3,000 spaces

While St Michael's convalescent camp was opened in the north of the island for 1,250

Patients were sent to Fort Chambray on Gozo island when everywhere was full

But the staff did their best to make sure their patients had a memorable Christmas

Decorating the wards, providing gifts and putting on a festive dinner

San Antonio Palace was turned into a respite facility for the tired nurses

Who had worked long hours in difficult conditions for weeks on end

Entertainments

But it was not all doom and gloom around the hospitals

The local services did what they could to lift the spirits of the patients

Putting on musical concerts and other cultural events

They also opened tea rooms, to give the young men an alternative to bars

Here we have a pass out allowing access to the bright lights of Valletta

Competitions

The staff arranged competitions to both entertain the men and improve their fitness

Running and shooting were popular, as were ball games

They provided entertainment for the convalescents as well as for the locals

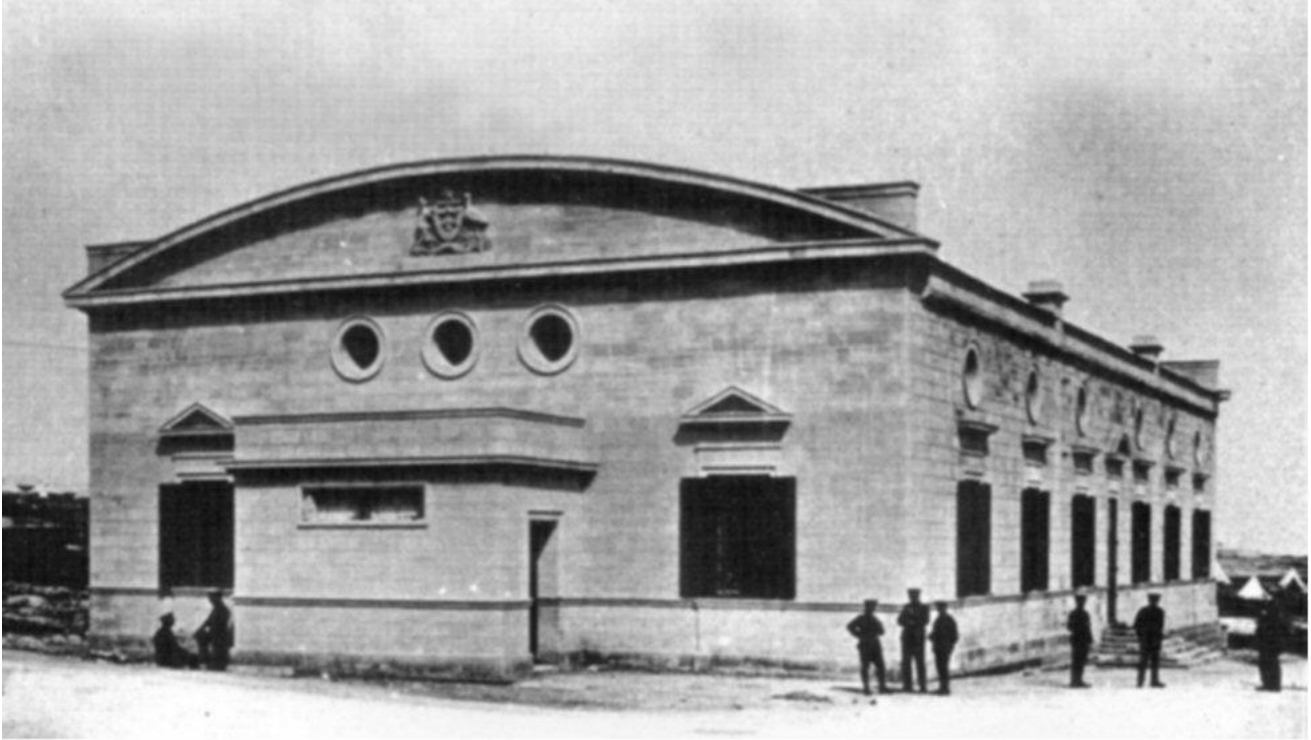
Quiet Time

All the hospitals had quiet areas where the men could relax, read and write

A place where they could swap stories or write to their loved ones

It was also a place where they could indulge in a soldiers' favourite pastime, playing cards

Australian Hall



Australian Red Cross Society even paid for a building to be used as a clubhouse

And the governor opened the Australian Hall in January 1916

Unfortunately, it burnt down in 1998 and the shell is awaiting renovation

As One Campaign Ends

As the Gallipoli campaign came to a freezing end over the winter of 1915-16, another one had started

A combined Franco-British Force had landed at Salonica, on the east coast of Greece, in October 1915

The plan had been to help Serbia, but it was too late to save its army

So, a stable front was established around the port of Doiran instead

The Salonica Campaign Begins

While there was room to set up medical facilities in Salonica, it was easier to make use of Malta's

Where there were hundreds of nursing staff and thousands of bed spaces

Small numbers started to arrive on the island and there 4,000 patients by the end of March. Surgeon-General Hayward Whitehead headed to Salonika to oversee medical affairs in April 1916

Having done sterling work over the past twelve months

A New Surgeon General Arrives

Whitehead was replaced by Surgeon-General Thomas Yarr

He had been the Assistant Director of Medical Services during 29th Division's operations at Helles

And served as Deputy Director of Medical Services for both

The Egyptian Expeditionary Force and the Mediterranean Expeditionary Force

Casualties numbers increased to around 7,000 a month during the summer of 1916

The number of battle casualties was low but there were a lot of sick men to care for

As dysentery, malaria, typhus and sand fly fever plagued the Salonika front

Some hospitals were reopened, while they all erected marquees to increase their capacity

The Spring of Apples camp on the northwest coast eventually expanded to five camps

With space for 5,000 at St Peter's, St Lawrence, St Barnabas, St James, and St Anthony

By October 1916, the island had over 24,500 beds

Mtarfa Hospital even set up a laboratory to find out what was causing so many men to fall ill

And it discovered they were suffering from salmonella caused by eating contaminated food



Vera Brittain Arrives

One of those who fell ill from suspected food poisoning

Was Vera Brittain, the VAD nurse who would become an author, poet, journalist and pacifist

I just want to give a brief resume of her experiences during the First World War

Because it illustrates the mental stress nurses went through

Her brother Edward and his school friends Roland Leighton and Victor Richardson all enlisted

She left Oxford University and began nursing at the Devonshire Hospital in Buxton

Vera and Roland became engaged while he was on leave in August 1915
And she was transferred to the 1st London General Hospital in London in November
Only a month later she heard that Roland had been killed
Her brother then arrived at the hospital, having been wounded on the first day of the Somme
Vera headed to the Mediterranean Theatre in September 1916
Only to be taken ill with suspected food poisoning at Mudros
So, she reached Malta on a stretcher and recovered at Mtarfa Hospital
Then she heard that Geoffrey Thurlow, a mutual friend through her brother had died
Victor was blinded during the battle for Arras in April 1917
So, Vera returned to England to care for him
She planned to marry him but he died soon after she arrived
Vera then asked to serve in France and she nursed German prisoners of war in Étaples
She returned home to London to look after her parents in March 1918
Only to hear of her brother Edward's death on the Italian front in June

Vera's Lost Boys

Vera published a book of poetry called 'Verses of a VAD' in August 1918

This poem is called 'To Them' and it remembers her four lost boys

I hear your voices in the whispering trees; I see your footprints on each grassy track.

Your laughter echoes gaily down the breeze, but you will not come back.

*The twilight skies are tender with your smile; the stars look down with eyes for which I
yearn.*

I dream that you are with me all the while, but you will not return.

*The flowers are gay in gardens that you knew, the woods you loved are sweet with summer
rain.*

The fields you trod are empty now, but you will never come again.

Vera joined the Queen Alexandra's Military Hospital in London in October

Where she worked until April 1919

She would publish her autobiography, *Testament of Youth*, in 1933

But the 2014 film of the same name omitted her time working on Malta

Mines Show No Mercy

Troop ships had always been targets for U-Boats while hospital ships had been vulnerable to mines

HMHS Britannic was taking RAMC staff to Salonica

When it hit a mine and sank on 21 November 1916

A quick rescue meant only thirty lives were lost and over 1,000 were saved

Warmer waters and safety features installed after the sinking of her sister ship, SS Titanic

Just four years before helped the successful rescue

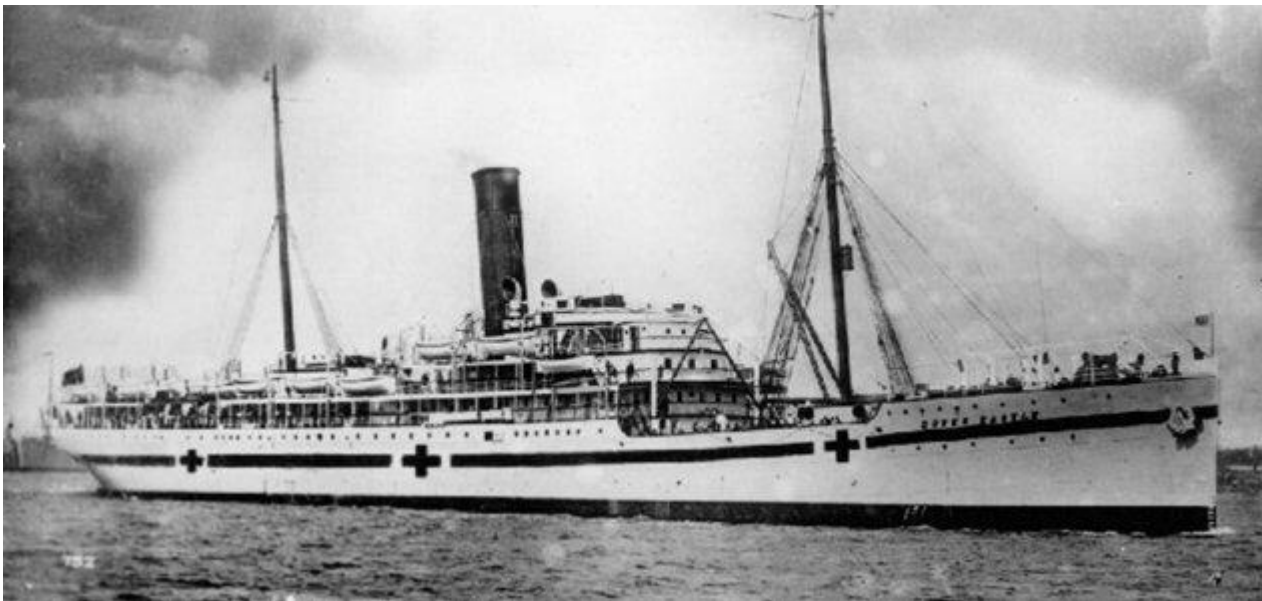
However, Germany started unrestricted U-Boat activity on 1 February 1917

Then on 19 March the German government accused the Allies

Of using hospital ships for military purposes and it declared them legitimate targets

If they did not allow U-Boats to stop and search them

U-Boat Captains Show No Mercy



You all know the RMS Lusitania was sunk in the Atlantic Ocean on 5 May 1917

But HMHS Dover Castle was torpedoed and sunk in the Mediterranean Sea on 26 May

Fortunately, the casualties could be transferred to HMS Cameleon and taken to safety

But it was decided that it was unsafe to evacuate casualties from Salonica to Malta

Hospitals would be opened behind the front line around Doiran

Five hospitals closed and their staff packed up the equipment

They formed the 61st, 62nd, 63rd, 64th and 65th General Hospitals, each with 1,000 beds

There was also a reorganisation of the convalescent camps

The five General Hospitals set sail on Hospital Transport Ship Abbassieh on 6 July

But their two destroyer escorts mistakenly steered into a minefield

HMS Aster and HMS Azalia struck mines and the Aster sank

So, the Abbassieh and the Azalia had to return to Malta

The hospital staff eventually reached Salonica five days later

Salonica Comes to an End

Only a few hundred serious casualties were shipped to Malta every month after the hospitals left

The tented accommodation was packed away and the buildings returned to their original use

As the number of beds and patients were reduced

The original seven hospitals had been reinstated by the time of the Armistice

While the Spring of Apples camp was a holding camp for men waiting to return to England

Saying Goodbye to Malta



There was a mild influenza outbreak in the summer of 1918

Followed by a severe influenza outbreak in the autumn which required extra beds

There were over 3,000 influenza cases and 59 deaths

But the remaining sick and wounded were quickly evacuated to England after the Armistice
So, the island's garrison was back down to its prewar level of 400 beds by February 1919

The Nurse of the Mediterranean

So, as we come to the end of Malta's story, let us look at a few statistics

469,000 soldiers of the Mediterranean Expeditionary Force had served in Gallipoli

Over 30,000 had died and over 8,000 were missing or prisoners

Nearly 74,000 had been wounded and 58,000, or 80 per cent, had been treated in Malta

600,000 soldiers of the British Salonica Force had served in Macedonia

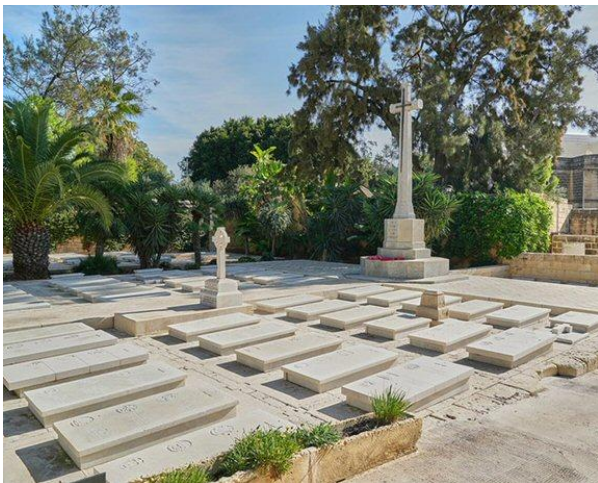
There had been 26,000 battle casualties, while 116,000 had been struck down by disease or illness

78,000 or 55 per cent were treated in Malta before the hospitals were transferred to Salonica

The maximum number of casualties on the island at any one time had been 21,000 in October 1916

Mainly those suffering from sickness and disease

The War Cemeteries



There are three cemeteries with large numbers of First World War Wargraves in them

Pieta Military Cemetery has 1,303

Malta Naval or Capuccini Cemetery has 377

Addolorata Cemetery had 260

There are a few scattered graves in Pembroke Military Cemetery and Ta-Braxia Cemetery

For the record, there are over 3,800 Commonwealth Wargraves from the Second World War

The War Memorials



There are also war memorials

Such as the main one dedicated in 1938 and this ANZAC one

The first Anzac Day ceremony took place on Malta in 1916

And it has been repeated every year

World War II

I just want to remind you that the people of Malta suffered during the siege of 1940 to 1942.

As service men from many nations fought to keep the Germans and Italians at bay

4,000 are either buried or remember on memorials on the island

These are two of the air raid lookout posts on Valletta's walls

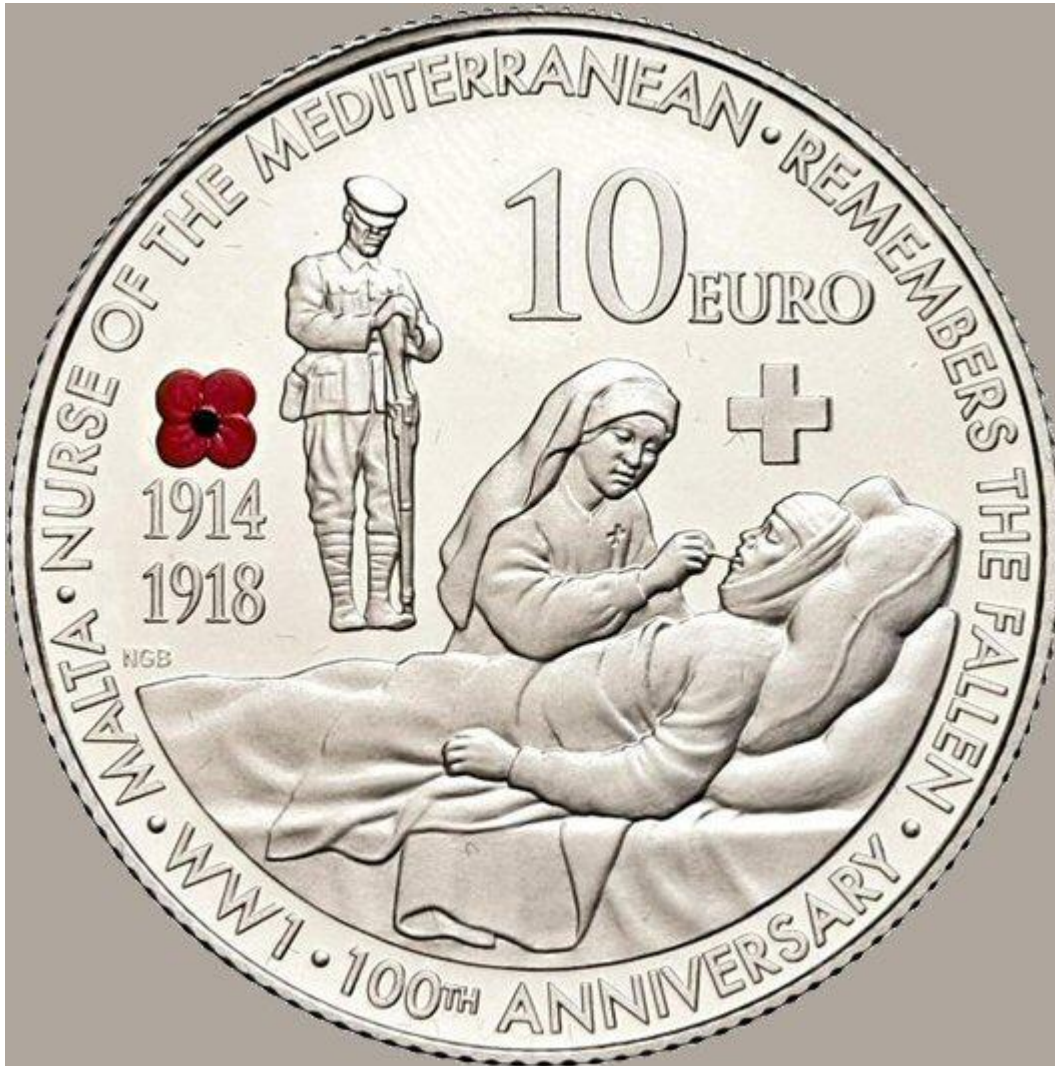
And this is unusual siege bell memorial which overlooks the bay

Depicting the body of a serviceman who died at sea about to go overboard

An act my grandfather witnessed while serving as a medic on troopships

As they ferried troops from North Africa to the Italian campaign in 1943

Remembrance



And Malta still remembers that it once was the Nurse of the Mediterranean
And the time thousands of injured young men were cared for across the island
The island had dealt admirably with them all and most things had been organised locally
The rest had been acquired by asking for personnel and equipment from London
But the War Office and other commands had rarely been involved

Adieu Kind Friends, Good Night So, that is Malta's story in the First World War I am going to leave you with a poem by J.J. Doyle, of the Australian Army Medical Corps
Written as he was about to sail from Malta

It was published in the *Western Star* newspaper on 15 December 1915:

*Tonight, we leave thee little isle, tonight we go from thee.
Back to our comrades, away to the front, with happy hearts and free.
To us how kind you people were, though strangers here we came.
Australian, British, everyone to you, t'was all the same.
Even when we landed, we were met by ladies fair, not few.
Who loaded us with luxuries and more they could not do.
Yet better still, the smile that cheers was mixed with it all, it was Heaven.
To us poor soldiers wounded then, for the Cross against the Crescent.
And now 'God Speed' us, off we go, by the blessed morning's light
But remember us, aye pray for us, adieu kind friends, good night.*