

Postal Stationery from a South African attached to the Allied Central Mediterranean and Middle East Forces

Part I

The first British Overseas Airways Corporation service over a British Empire wartime route was inaugurated between London and Durban on 3 April 1940. However, services to the Empire were suspended on 11 June 1940 following the entry of Italy into the war. Thereafter, the "horseshoe route" - by sea to Durban, thence by air elsewhere – was introduced on 14 June 1940.

The first ever forces AIR MAIL LETTER CARD was introduced on 3 April 1941 for use by the Allied armies in the Middle East and Central Mediterranean theatres of operations. It was exclusively an army form, often bearing the imprint "A.F.W. 3077" or "Army Form W 3077" in some form or other.

This form of communication was unique to the Allied forces, and initially even civilians were excluded from the process. Visualise the circumstances in which a soldier could write: "I have been away for three years, one-hundred-and-two days and eleven hours. In some ways the time has flown....in others, it has dragged interminably". The creation of this service was an inspired move by military command, for its availability to the armed forces was to play a profound role in boosting the morale of the military personnel living away from home and under very trying circumstances for long periods of time.

This brief article represents a summation of information gleaned through the examination of 170 Air Mail Letter Cards sent by one man, my father, from the Central Mediterranean and Middle East theatre of operations to South Africa between February 1942 and November 1945. It is written in order to share - and hopefully expand - knowledge. Given the restricted nature of the survey, however, no claim is made of it being a definitive account of the subject.

Rather than expose the reader to a tedious diatribe of analyses – of minutiae, similarities and differences - the author has constructed a basic table which, if used, should assist researchers of the subject in differentiating one type of Air Mail Letter Card from another. The classification devised is, of necessity, fairly arbitrary being based as it is on a smallish sample size. However, where possible, precedents adopted in accepted texts on Air Mail Letter Cards and Postal Stationery have been observed.

There appears to have been three distinct format-types used in the printing of those Air Letter Cards issued to South African troops in the Central Mediterranean and Middle East Allied Forces. These were:

* those which was adapted by Major Douglas William Gumbley C.B.E., T.S.O from his 1933 Iraq Air mail Letter Card, and initially for the Australian Government (Illustr.1 TYPE A)



Illustration 1

* those which used the basic Air Letter tablets (A-I to A-IV : Illustr.2) common to many Air Mail Letter Cards of the British Empire printed during George VI's reign. (Illustr.3 TYPE B)

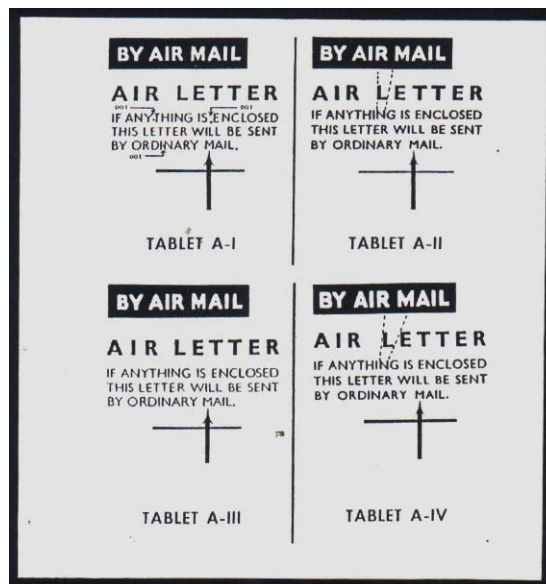


Illustration 2



Illustration 3

* those which were printed by the Government Printer of the Union of South Africa in Pretoria. (Illustr.4 TYPE C)



Illustration 4

A comparative synoptic analysis of the main differences between each of these three Air Mail Letter Cards types is presented. (Table 1.)

Type and Subtype	A.1.1	A.1.2	A.2	A.3	A.4.1	A.4.2		B.1	B.2	B.3.1	B.3.2	B.3.3
No. examined per subtype	22	23	11	1	3	1		2	3	13	17	13
% of each individual type	36	37.7	18	1.7	4.9	1.7		2.6	4.3	18.6	24.3	18.6
Usage Date Range	2/42-8/45	12/43-7/44	8/42-8/45	8/45	2/44	3/44		9/44	9-10/44	1/44-7/45	7/44-7/45	10/12/45
AIRMAIL Tablet	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a		A-I	A-II	A-III	A-III	A-III
Frame dimensions (range)	116x90-95.3	116-118x95-96	111-116x88-96	117x94	115x95.5	116x94.5		n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Overlay colour	no	no	no	no	no	no		yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Army Code No.	none	none	none	none	none	none		W3077	W3077	W.3077.	W.3077.	W.3077.A
Additional Code (Control No.)	none	none	none	none	none	none		51-6818(6)	51-6818(1)	51-6818(2)	51-6818(2)	51-6818(2)
"First fold here" intersect at	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a		"o"	"d" - "h"	"o"	mid "o"	mid "o"
Address Lines	none	solid	none	dotted	none	solid		dotted	dotted	dotted	dotted	dotted
Position of "G" in ANYTHING relative to SEND in the line below	G/S	G/S	G(L)/E	G/SE	G(L)/S	G(L)/S		n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Privilege triangle/corner	no	no	no	yes	no	no		no	no	no	no	large
Privilege note	no	no	no	yes	no	no		no	no	no	no	yes
"Python" message	no	no	no	no	no	no		no	no	no	no	no
Type and Subtype	B.4.1	B.4.2	B.4.3	B.4.4		C.1	C.2	C.3	C.4	C.5	C.6	C.7
No. examined	5	1	1	15		2	8	5	5	17	1	1
% of each individual type	7.1	1.5	1.5	21.5		5.1	20.5	12.8	12.8	43.6	2.6	2.6

Usage Date Range	5-7/44	7/44	10/44	3-6/45		6/45	6-7/45	8/45	8-9/45	9-12/45	11/45	11/45
AIRMAIL Tablet	A-IV	A-IV	A-IV	A-IV		n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Frame dimensions (range)	122x99	122x99	122x100	123x99		118x94	118x94	118x94	117x93.5	117x94.3	117x94.3	117.5x95.5
Overlay colour	grey-slate	slate-blue	slate-blue	slate/b - slate		yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Army Code No.	W3077	W3077	W3077	W3077		none	none	none	none	none	none	none
Additional Code (Control No.)	51-8077(3)	51-6818(3)	51-6818(7)	51-8077(1)		2/45	2/45	4/45	5/45	6567a/GHQP/8-45	no	no
"First fold here" intersect at	"l"	"l"	"d" - "h"	"l"		n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Address Lines	4 dotted	4 solid	4 dotted	4 dotted		dotted	dotted	dotted	no	no	no	dotted
Position of "G" in ANYTHING relative to SEND in the line below	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a		G/SE	G/SE	G/S	G/SE	G(R)/S	G/S	G(R)/S
Privilege triangle/corner	no	no	yes	no		no	no	no	yes	no	no	no
Privilege note	n/a	n/a	small	n/a		yes	yes	no	yes	no	no	no
"Python" message	no	no	no	no		no	no	no	no	yes	yes	no

TABLE 1a : Overview of Air Mail Letter Cards Types A - C

TYPE A : The basic design was adapted by Major Douglas William Gumbley C.B.E., T.S.O from his 1933 Iraq Air Mail Letter Card, and provided initially at the request of the Australian Government. It appears that the forms used early on may have been printed by the Southern Rhodesia Survey Unit in Addis Ababa, the others by the Directorate of Printing and Stationery, South African Union Defence Forces in Nairobi. Printed on poor quality paper, a frame of variable dimension and colour surrounded a simple central design largely constituted of text (Illustr.1). In my sample, most carry a stamp of the United Kingdom.

These appear to have been introduced in late 1941 or early 1942. The cards constituted 36% of the Air Mail Letters Cards examined. Based on the evidence available to the author, there appears to have been four printings, two with modifications. The various printings may be distinguished by assessing the relative positions of the "G" in "ANYTHING" to "SEND" in the line below (as in "IF ANYTHING IS ENCLOSED THIS CARD WILL BE SENT BY ORDINARY MAIL").

TYPE B : These were the first forces AIR MAIL LETTER CARDS. They were made available from 3 April 1941 for use by forces in the Middle East and Central Mediterranean theatres of war. They were the fore-runner of the civilian and Forces Air Letters (later to be called "aerogrammes") later to be issued with imprinted stamps of various denominations in Great Britain from 1943 onwards.

Initially though, it was exclusively an army form. The paper tended to be of poor quality, of various shades of grey, stone, drab or buff. The front and back panels were overlaid with a close printing of minute dots so as to afford privacy to the correspondents. There were no imprinted stamps but a space was denoted where an adhesive stamp could be affixed (Illustr.3). All those examined carry a stamp of the United Kingdom. These cards constituted 41% of the Air Mail Letters Cards examined. Based on the evidence available, there appears to have been four printings, two having five variations between them. These printings may be differentiated easiest by determining the tablet used (Illustr.2 : A-I through to A-IV, the which were to become common to many Air Letters of the British Empire printed during George IV's reign) ; the variants in the printing of the Army Code (W3077) and different numeric codes imprinted on the form; and the position at which the horizontal second fold intersects the instruction "First fold here" found on vertical axis.

TYPE C : Little record has been found pertaining to the circumstances that led to the design and printing of these Air Mail Letter Cards. It appears that these may have been printed by the Government Printer of the Union of South Africa in Pretoria. When posted, most carried a South African stamp. Their design includes elements of the type A (Illustr.4). These appear to have been introduced in 1945 and constituted 23% of the Air Mail Letters Cards examined. Based on the evidence available, there appears to have been seven printings. They may be distinguished by noting the numeric code imprinted on the card; and by assessing the relative positions of the "G" in "ANYTHING" to "SEND" in the line below (as in "IF ANYTHING IS ENCLOSED THIS CARD WILL BE SENT BY ORDINARY MAIL").

On the back panel of some may be found the following doggerel printed in blue :

"Tyres checked and batteries topped
"Jap wrecked and Python dropped."

From an explanation included in one of the letters I perused, it appears that "Python" was the code name for a British Army leave scheme.

Common to each of the three types denoted above was the so-called "privilege" type of form. These had either a small or large bold triangle in the lower left-hand corner (Illustr.5), or a filled-in triangle in the right lower corner (Illustr.6). On the back panel, usually there was inscribed an honour pledge which read.... "I certify on my honour that the contents of this `privilege' Air Mail Letter refer to nothing but private and family matters." These air letters were said to have been limited to one form per serviceman per month and were intended to be immune from censorship except by the base censor. This facility was contrived to enable a serviceman to write a letter of personal nature to his family without the unit censor knowing the contents thereof.



Illustration 5



Illustration 6

Time passes; and knowledge is lost. And just as "... some there be, which have no memorial: who have perished, as though they have never been;" so it is with any history of our time. Little appears to have been written recently on this period of postal history. I am hoping this brief survey will stimulate interest and enable a reiteration of events before the information irretrievably disappears.

SELECTED REFERENCES:

1. British Air Mails : 1784-1946. 1947. N C Baldwin. Francis J Field Ltd.
2. British Postal Stationery: A K Huggins. 1971. The Great Britain Philatelic Society.
3. Aerogrammes. P Jennings. 1973. Picton Publishing
4. Kessler's Catalogue of Aerograms : Volumes I. British Air Mails. 1961. Aerogram Catalogue Publishing Co. Inc.
5. British Forces Postal History Society: B F Air Mail Cards and Air Letters 1941-1977: O R J Lee
6. History of British Army Postal Service: Vol III; 1927-1963: E B Proud. Proud Bailey Co Ltd.
7. A Check List of Great Britain Aerogrammes. 1984. A A Whitworth (personal communication).

Comment from Mr Justice A Mullins of Port Elizabeth :

20 April, 2000

I was interested in your article in the SA Philatelist on Air Mail Letter Cards. I have a large collection of military mail of World War II, including a large number of varieties of Air Mail Letter Cards. I served in the Natal Mounted Rifles in East and North Africa, and apart from my own letters to my father, I have acquired a large number of other specimens over the years. I have also done considerable research into the South African embossed Active Service Letter Cards and Air Mail Letter Cards, although I have not published the papers I have written. However that is another subject.

I have also made quite a study of the unstamped Air Mail Letter Cards and Air Letters of the type you refer to, and I have always used Lee (Revised edition) as the authoritative check list. I do not have the other authorities you refer to, and if any of them are of particular importance, I wonder whether you could let me have a photocopy.

Now for my comments on your article. One must at the outset be careful to distinguish the early Gumbley type Air Mail Letter Cards, with "Air Mail" being arched, with those described as "Air Letters". The change in name came about in December 1943. (See Lee p 4). At about the same time printings appeared with the code Army Form W.3077 or just W.3077. I do not know of any of the Gumbley format bearing this code.

The use of Air Mail Letter Cards by South African troops was certainly not limited to the three types mentioned by you. These Air Mail Letter Cards were available from various sources, and I have literally dozens of different types used by South African troops. My earliest example is one written by myself to my father dated 6 July 1941, which commences "As you see I am using one of the new Letter Cards with which we have been issued today". This is of Lee Type BIV Sub-type 6 (see Lee p 22) with SOUTH AFRICA printed on the address panel. Incidentally Lee states that the earliest specimen of this type seen by him is 28 July 1941.

I notice you state that the Air Mail Letter Cards introduced on 3 April 1941 were exclusively an "army form", often bearing the imprint W.3077. Firstly where do you get the date 3 April 1941 from? Lee states (p 10) that Air Mail Letter Cards were introduced on 1 March 1941. Furthermore the imprint W.3077 first appeared in March 1943 (Lee p 5). Although prior thereto the Gumbley type Air Mail Letter Cards were an official army issue, they did not receive a "Army Form" number until March 1943, when the format was changed from the Gumbley design and the name changed to "Air Letter". Possibly the fact that Gumbley held the copyright (Lee p 1) had something to do with it.

It is correct that some Air Mail Letter Cards may have been printed in South Africa by the Government Printer (see Lee Type AIII p 16), but I don't think the Air Letter depicted as your Figure 4 is one of these. According to Lee's illustrated index, your Figure 4 is his Type J, the first to bear the name "Air Letter". There is no suggestion that this was printed in South Africa.

I hope you will not consider my comments unduly critical. I enjoy research, especially when it combines my philatelic and military history interest. I should be interested to hear from you.

© 2008. Dr R M Pelteret. All rights reserved. www.pelteret.co.za