

THE HISTORY OF THE BRITISH ARMY POSTAL SERVICE.

Concluding Part.

British North Africa Force (BNAF) 1942-43

The APS was not involved in the initial planning stages of Operation Torch. Consequently, a Base APO was not established in Algiers until a month after the invasion and through no fault of the APS the mail services to the BNAF were very poor in the initial stages. This was worsened by the fact that a convoy carrying the Christmas mails was sunk.

After consultation between the military authorities and the APS air links with the UK were established and both air letter and airgraph services were made available. Kodak established an airgraph processing station in Algiers, which was later to process the airgraphs sent by troops engaged in the Italian Campaign.

In theatre the mails were carried along the North African coast to the front lines by sea, rail and vehicles. The road service that operated over 500 miles from Algiers to the front was described as having

"the regularity of a town collection in peacetime Britain".

A staff officer with the 6th Armoured Division commented that

"As soon as the tanks pulled out of battle, there was the mail waiting for them – incredible."

Operation Torch (8 November 1942 – 16 November 1942) was an Allied invasion of French North Africa during the Second World War. While the French colonies formally aligned with Germany via Vichy France, the loyalties of the population were mixed. Reports indicated that they might support the Allies. American General Dwight D. Eisenhower, supreme commander of the Allied forces in Mediterranean Theater of Operations, planned a three-pronged attack on Casablanca (Western), Oran (Center) and Algiers (Eastern), then a rapid move on Tunis to catch Axis forces in North Africa from the west in conjunction with Allied advance from east.



The Western Task Force encountered unexpected resistance and bad weather, but Casablanca, the principal French Atlantic naval base, was captured after a short siege. The Centre Task Force suffered some damage to its ships when trying to land in shallow water but the French ships were sunk or driven off; Oran surrendered after bombardment by British battleships. The French Resistance had unsuccessfully attempted a coup in Algiers and, even though this raised alertness in the Vichy forces, the Eastern Task Force met less opposition and were able to push inland and compel surrender on the first day.

The success of Torch caused Admiral François Darlan, commander of the Vichy French forces to order cooperation with the Allies, in return for being installed as High Commissioner, with many other Vichy officials keeping their jobs. Darlan was assassinated soon after and the Free French gradually came to dominate the government. Torch was a compromise operation that met the British objective of securing victory in North Africa while allowing American armed forces the opportunity to engage in the fight against Nazi Germany on a limited scale. It was the first mass involvement of US troops in the European–North African Theatre, and saw the first major airborne assault carried out by the United States.

Source: *File:Operation Torch - map.jpg* - <https://en.wikipedia.org>

Central Mediterranean Force (CMF) - Italy 1943-45

The Postal units of the MEF and BNAF, which made up the CMF, accompanied their respective formations on the invasion of Sicily and subsequent landings on mainland Italy. These invasions were the first major amphibious operations of the war. (A datestamp taken by a Postal unit from the Syracuse Post Office dated 10 July 1943, the day of the invasion is an exhibit in the RE Museum).

FPOs were established on the beachheads during the landings at Salerno and Anzio. On two occasions mails leaving the Anzio beaches onboard LST were lost to enemy action.

Once the VIII Army was secured on mainland Italy Base APOs were established, to handle their mails, at Bari on the heel of Italy then at Naples, which became the main Base APO.

Mails were distributed within the VIII Army operational areas by truck that were augmented by rail and air, which were developed to provide an internal mail service to troops as they moved north. Surface mails entered and exited via Naples, Bari, and Taranto. Until the liberation of Paris on 25 August 1944 airmail was staged through Gibraltar on its way between the UK and Naples, but after that date a more direct air route over France was established, which reduced the transit time for airmails to the Italian and Far East theatres.

The only outlet for telegrams accepted at A/FPOs in Sicily was by air from Catania via Castel Benito to Cairo where they were passed to Marconi for electronic transmission to their destination. Once the Base APO was established in Naples the telegrams were flown direct to Cairo.

India and Far East 1942-45

The mail services for troops serving in the Far East was administered and provided by three agencies: the RE (PS), the Welfare Department of the Adjutant-General's Branch of the Indian Army (GHQ, India) and the Indian Army Postal Service (IAPS), an arrangement that was fraught with political tensions and proved to be an uneasy working relationship.

The outbound surface mail travelled by sea from Liverpool to Durban, South Africa, at which point an APS Postal Regulating Office was established, the mail then crossed the Indian Ocean to the IAPS Postal Clearing Section at Bombay (now Mumbai) and from there it was forwarded to the battle fronts in the Far East.

There was a limited airmail service in operation between India and Britain that followed the Empire air post service routes across the Middle East.

After the fall of Singapore and the retreat from Burma in 1942 the military postal services in India came to a virtual standstill because a serious backlog of undeliverable mail had built up at the IAPS Postal Clearing Section, Bombay (now Mumbai). A situation that prompted complaints to be heard in the Houses of Parliament. The Director Army Postal Services (DAPS), Brig F Lane, who worked from the GPO HQ, London was instructed to resolve the problem. He sent a member of his staff, Lieutenant Colonel EG Hucker RE to India to investigate the apparent shortcomings of the service.

Hucker concluded that the IAPS should be reorganised along British lines and the adoption of this recommendation coincided with the establishment of the HQ Allied Land Forces, South East Asia (HQ ALFSEA) in 1943, (fragments of his report are held in the Museum).

A Base APO was established at Calcutta (now Kolkata) by the RE (PS) and mail for the British and African troops engaged in the recapture of Burma was forward from there to postal units at the forward supply depots and hence to the front line FPOs.

Reconquest of Burma - mail airdrops

Postal units, officered by RE (PS) were formed for the 81 (West African) and 11 (East African) Divisions and accompanied their respective formations to the Far East.

The 81 (WA) Division Postal Unit RE under the command of Lieutenant AE Tee RE become the pioneers of 'air dropping' mails to forward FPOs and troops. Special air despatch postal units were located at the main airfields and were responsible for packing and loading mails onto the correct aircraft. Dedicated mail sorties were flown in Dakotas from the main supply depots at Imphal and later Chittagong. Lieutenant Tee was subsequently promoted and posted to the Chindits to oversee their mail services. L.5 casualty evacuation aircraft were also used to carry mail between the front line FPOs and the APOs at the rear area airfields.

On the ground close co-operation existed between the British and Indian APSs and the two services lines of communication were dovetailed to make efficient use of the resources.

Singapore and Postal POWs

On the fall of Singapore, to the Japanese, on 15 February 1942 the entire staff of the 18 Division Postal Unit RE were interned.

During their internment they took responsibility, as far as their captors allowed, for the organisation of the mail service within the Changi gaol and on the 'death' railway work camps in Thailand, for which the OC of the unit, Captain WA Border RE was later awarded a Member of the Order of the British Empire (MBE). In 1946 he wrote of this episode:

After over twelve months the first mail arrived from home, these letters were quite twelve months old, and contrary to the usual Japanese practice the men of the Postal Unit got the work of distribution.

On 18 June 1942 twelve members of the unit left Changi POW Camp for Thailand. In July 1942 Captain Border RE was appointed Assistant Camp Commandant 18 Div, but by November he was ordered, with Spr Joslin, to Bampong Thailand where the POWs were engaged in the construction of the Bangkok-Moulmein railway.

From July 1943 onwards Postal Unit personnel in Thailand gradually split, men being included in various parties sent to jungle camps and employed on the building of the Bangkok-Moulmein railway or transferred to camps in Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam) and Tokyo, Japan.

Of the 27 members of the unit, 17 (63%) of them survived to be repatriated back to the UK at the end of the war.

Operation Overlord and the British Liberation Army (BLA) 1944-45

The APS played a significant part in Operation Overlord not only as a morale booster, for General Montgomery and his staff considered that a regular mail service was "the greatest morale factor in an army", but probably more importantly, as one of the means of maintaining the elaborate deception plan that was essential to retain the element of surprise required to ensure the success of the operation.

APO England and its contribution to the deception plan

After the ADPCs had been established in late 1940 UK stationed units were served by them using a "closed address" (i.e. Number, Rank, Name, Unit, c/o APO England), the style of which was already in use for overseas theatres (e.g. c/o BEF, MEF, SEAC, BLA etc.). This was a radical departure from the past for until then UK based units used their normal civilian GPO address and service.

The importance of this address style was that it meant letters so addressed were circulated under APS control thus providing a simple but effective weapon in the Staff's deception arsenal. The GPO circulated "APO England" mail to the HPC RE, where it was sorted and forwarded under military control to the correct destination thereby providing the necessary security to mask troop movements and locations. During the buildup to the invasion planners ordered that UK units adopt this address style. Such an instruction had obvious implications on the staffing of the HPC, which was reluctantly allowed to increase its establishment to accommodate the extra work. The 'closed address' concept remains a part of today's BFPO address system.

Marshalling areas

In the prelude to the invasion, troops were sealed in their marshalling areas and their only official contact with the outside world was through the camp's FPO set up by the APS. To maintain secrecy all private mail posted at these FPOs was impounded and stored at the APDCs until the news of the landings had been made public knowledge by the news agencies.

During this time special trains running out of Nottingham were set up to carry mails to the marshalling areas and embarkation ports. Mail was delivered to the assault troops up until D-1 (5 June 1944).

Pre-location scheme

The APS planners were among the very few staffs that were entrusted with knowledge of the full battle plan, with such information, the ADAPS Second Army, Lieutenant Colonel C.R. Smith RE conceived a pre-location scheme that enabled mail to be delivered to the various 'serials' of each unit as they landed in Normandy. The scheme worked on a system of 'phantom FPOs' whereby units were allocated FPOs from which they collect their mails. In reality they were served by the FPO closest to them, which may not have been their allocated FPO, but was regarded by the APS for location purposes as their phantom FPO.

Normandy Beaches

FPOs attached to the beach parties and special forces were established on the beaches on D-Day. Although it was planned that mail be delivered to units on D+1 (7 June 1944), mail was delivered the following day (D+2) because of confusion caused by the day's delay of the invasion.

To ensure the safe recovery of mail from ships arriving from Southampton, a Postal officer was given the task of patrolling the choppy anchorages in an amphibious Jeep bawling through a megaphone at each ship "Are you carrying mail?". This system remained in place until the Mulberry Harbours at Arromanches were established to allow mails to be docked more formally. The 6 Airborne Division Postal Unit RE (commanded by Captain JCG Hine RE and as a unit accompanied the Division on its airborne drops during the night of 5/6 June 1944), and the Beach Group APO S698 made the first despatch from Normandy on D+2 (8 June 1944).

Mulberry harbours were temporary portable harbours developed by the United Kingdom to facilitate the rapid offloading of cargo onto beaches during the Allied invasion of Normandy in June 1944. After the Allies successfully held beachheads following D-Day, two prefabricated harbours were taken in sections across the English Channel from the UK with the invading army and assembled off Omaha Beach (Mulberry "A") and Gold Beach (Mulberry "B").

The Dieppe Raid of 1942 had shown that the Allies could not rely on being able to penetrate the Atlantic Wall to capture a port on the north French coast. The problem was that large ocean-going ships of the type needed to transport heavy and bulky cargoes and stores needed sufficient depth of water under their keels, together with dockside cranes, to off-load their cargo and this was not available except at the already heavily-defended French harbours. Thus, the Mulberries were created to provide the port facilities necessary to offload the thousands of men and vehicles, and tons of supplies necessary to sustain Operation Overlord. The harbours were made up of all the elements one would expect of any harbour: breakwater, piers and roadways.



Source: File:The Mulberry artificial harbour off Arromanches in Normandy, September 1944. BU1024.jpg - <https://en.wikipedia.org>

The Mulberry harbours were to be used until major French ports could be captured and brought back into use after repair of the inevitable sabotage by German defenders.

The Mulberry B harbour at Gold Beach was used for 10 months after D-Day, and over 2.5 million men, 500,000 vehicles, and 4 million tons of supplies were landed before it was fully decommissioned. The still only partially-completed Mulberry A harbour at Omaha Beach was damaged on 19 June by a violent storm that suddenly arrived from the north-east. After three days the storm finally abated and damage was found to be so severe that the harbour had to be abandoned.

Source: Mulberry harbour - <https://en.wikipedia.org>

Base Army Post Office 8

The main Base Army Post Office (No 8) arrived in theatre on D+10 (16 June 1944) and established itself in a barn at Crepon. The barn had to be cleared of 20 ft deep accumulation of manure and straw by bulldozers of a RE Road Construction Company before the Base Army Post Office could become operational.

The Base Army Post Office was later moved forward to Brussels, where it remained until the end of the war.

The advancing British and Canadian forces took Antwerp, Belgium on 4 September 1944. Later in the month on 26 September the Base Army Post Office closed at Crepon and at the same time opened in a large warehouse belonging to the Societe de Congo, in Antwerp.

On 8 March 1945 the Base Army Post Office in Antwerp received a hit from a VI pilotless aircraft, which destroyed much of the building, but miraculously only one serious injury was sustained. As the building was so seriously damaged it was decided to move the Base Army Post Office to Brussels where it remained until the end of war. After the Base Army Post Office moved to Brussels members of the postal trained ATS from HPC RE, Nottingham were sent out to augment its staff.

Airlifts and road service schedules

On 6 July 1944 (D+30) a two-way airlift system was established between the UK and airstrips in Normandy for the exclusive transportation of letters and newspapers.

As the British Army advanced along the north coast of France into Belgium and finally into Germany, these airlifts continued and were augmented by an elaborate system of road service schedules that linked the airstrips with the Base APO and A/FPOs. Towards the end of 1944 the schedules were settled and it was said that ones' watch could be set by the arrival of these vehicles, such was their punctuality. The principle routes were:

Down Special - Brussels Airfield, Amiens, Rouen

Up Special - Rouen, Amiens, Arras, Antwerp

Arras Limited Up - Arras, Lille, Antwerp

Arras Limited Down - Brussels Airfield, Lille, Arras

The service provided a transit time of 2–3 days from the UK. In September 1944 an Advance Base Army Post Office (No 18) was opened in Dieppe, it was transferred to Ostend and on 25 October 1944 was re-designated 18 Postal Port Regulating Section.

Once troops crossed the Rhine a Postal Despatch Rider Service was operated daily on a schedule between the Army Depot, the Location Centre and the Base Army Post Office. This enabled the APS to keep up to date with the rapidly changing locations of advancing units.

End of hostilities in Europe

After the German surrender FPOs were established in all the main towns of the British zone of Germany. Airmail was flown to various forward airfields, but Bückeburg, Lower Saxony, Germany eventually became the main terminal. Surface mail entered Europe at Calais and forwarded to the Rhine by train, from there it was transferred to vehicles and transported by road.

A base post office was established in Herford, which in 1946 became the Zone Postal Depot.

Royal Engineers (Postal Section/Postal & Courier Communications/Postal & Courier Services) - Post War Period (1945-93)

The Home Postal Depot continue to operate under the management of the British Army after the end of the Second World War.

In 1947 the Home Postal Centre RE was redesigned the Home Postal Depot and moved from Nottingham to Sutton Coldfield, where it took residence in the buildings that had been occupied by the American UK Postal Depot.

The responsibility for military mail remained with the Royal Engineers until it was transferred to the Royal Logistic Corps on its formation in April 1993. In July of that year the Defence Postal & Courier Services Agency was established. It was the first Defence Agency to be formed within the Quartermaster General's (QMG's) Department and was owned by the Director General Logistic Support (Army) (DG Log SP (A)).

Source: History of the British Army postal service - <https://en.wikipedia.org>

The Royal Logistic Corps (RLC) was formed on 5 April 1993, by the union of five British Army corps:

Royal Engineers Postal and Courier Service

Royal Corps of Transport

Royal Army Ordnance Corps

Royal Pioneer Corps

Army Catering Corps

The RLC comprises both Regular and Army Reserve units. The RLC is the only combat service support corps of the British Army with battle honours, derived from the usage of previous transport elements of the Royal Waggon Train, and their successors as cavalry. The battle honours are:

Peninsula, Battle of Waterloo, Lucknow, Taku Forts, Peking.



The RLC cap badge is an amalgamation of the cap badges of the forming corps:

The laurel and garter band is from the Royal Engineers

The Indian star is from the Royal Corps of Transport

The shield in the centre is from the Royal Army Ordnance Corps

The crossed axes are from the Royal Pioneer Corps

The motto, "We Sustain", is from the Army Catering Corps.

The inscription on the garter band "Honi soit qui mal y pense" can be translated as "Evil to him who evil thinks". It is the motto of the Order of the Garter.

Source: Royal Logistic Corps - <https://en.wikipedia.org>