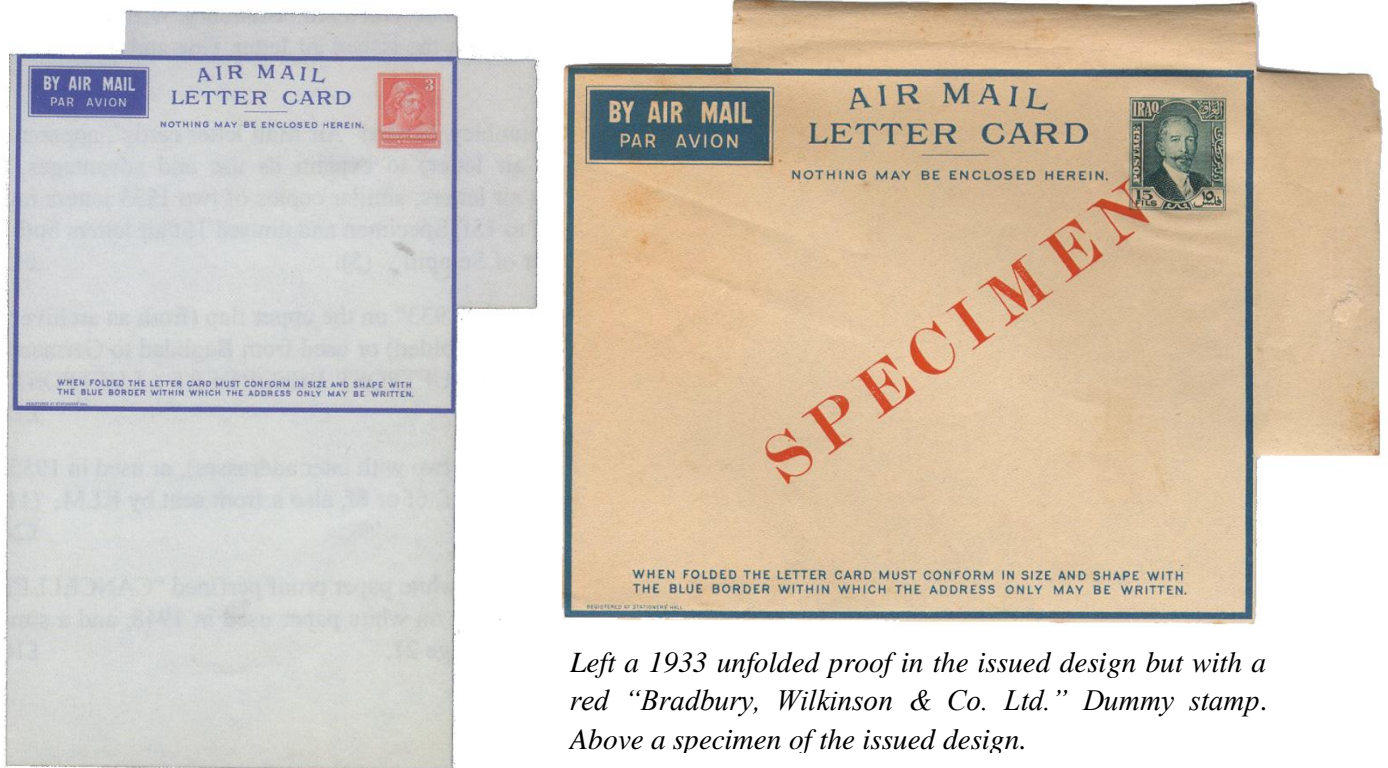


## Air Mail Letter Card

### **Edmund Hall (ESC239)**

The Air Mail Letter Cards (AMLC) was a thin lightweight piece of foldable and gummed paper for writing a letter for transit via airmail, in which the letter and envelope are one and the same. Most postal administrations forbid enclosures in these light letters, which were usually sent abroad at a preferential rate. Printed warnings existed to say that an enclosure would cause the mail to go at the higher letter rate. The aerogram was largely popularized by its use during the Second World War (1939–45).

It had been introduced into the Iraqi postal service in 1933 by Major DW Gumbley CBE DSO Royal Engineers. He was the Inspector General of Posts and Telegraphs for the Iraq government between 1913 and 1934. The original form, on thin paper was 124mm x 99mm in size, greyish in colour, with blue lined framing and with the designation legend on the front. It had a beautifully impressed effigy of Faisal I of Iraq and was printed by Bradbury Wilkinson.



*Left a 1933 unfolded proof in the issued design but with a red “Bradbury, Wilkinson & Co. Ltd.” Dummy stamp. Above a specimen of the issued design.*

During the early years of the war the Australian Government contacted Douglas Gumbley in Palestine and asked if he could help provide a cheap and rapid means of communication between Australian troops in the Middle East and their families back home as an aid to maintaining morale.

Gumbley suggested the adaptation and use of his Iraq Air Mail Letter Card. This was readily accepted and implemented by the Australian Command and an ‘AUSTRALIA’ Air Mail Letter card was produced without an impressed stamp, a 3d. adhesive postage stamp had to be added. The introduction of the Air Mail Letter Card to Australian forces in the Middle East—one form per man, per week—proved a great success.

The Postal Directorate, Middle East, consisting of four Officers and eighteen Other Ranks, left Home Depot at 24th. June 24, 1940 under the command of Lt. Col. R.E. Evans. This success prompted that Lieutenant Colonel R. E. Evans, Royal Engineers, Assistant Director Army Postal Service Middle East Force (MEF), proposed that a lightweight self-sealing letter card that weighed only 1/10oz (2.58g) be adopted by the British Army for air mail purposes. On 31st. August he reported to London that there was strong pressure from Middle East H. Q. and

Palestine for cheaper air mail rates and the letter cards which he had suggested in his earlier report of 7th. August. He recommended its use to Sir Anthony Eden, the Secretary of State for War during his visit to the Middle East, in late 1940.

In London, a memo dated 20th. November 1940 said-Attached is a report brought home by the Secretary of State for War, Rt. Hon. Anthony Eden on the subject of the mail service to and from the Middle East. The Deputy Quartermaster General M. E. wished the possibility to be explored of the Air Mail Letter Card proposal. Extract from the Report. The letter cards weigh 3.4gm. and can be produced locally at a cost of £E1 per thousand. Three cards weighing 10 grams could be sent for 1/- which would include the cost of the card.

In London, a memo dated 20th. November 1940 said-Attached is a report brought home by the Secretary of State for War, Rt. Hon. Anthony Eden on the subject of the mail service to and from the Middle East. The Deputy Quartermaster General M. E. wished the possibility to be explored of the Air Mail Letter Card proposal. Extract from the Report. The letter cards weigh 3.4gm. and can be produced locally at a cost of £E1 per thousand. Three cards weighing 10 grams could be sent for 1/- which would include the cost of the card.

By January the following year, General Archibald Wavell, 1st Earl Wavell, the Commander-in-Chief, MEF was told by Eden that "Your Assistant Director Army Postal Services may forthwith introduce an Air Mail Letter Card Service for the Middle East. Use British stamps from all countries, including Egypt". A reply cable from Cairo dated February 11, 1941 said Letter Card probably first March but will confirm.

Further cables to and fro:

Memo. from G. P. O. Overseas Mail Branch to Divisional Controllers London, E.C.F.S, and I. S. 2nd. April 1941.

It is understood that the service was put into operation on 1st. March except in Egypt. Egypt will be included when the difficulty regarding the use of British stamps in that country has been resolved. The Letter Cards are being prepared in the Middle East and specimens are not available here. The service has been extended to Naval Units beyond the Middle East which despatch closed air mails for U. K. via the Empire Air Service.

In cases where Naval personnel have difficulty in obtaining supplies of the letter cards, the use of light letters which may not exceed 4gm. in order to pass the 3d. rate, has been authorised.

Cable from Cairo 1st. March 1941. Air Mail Letter Card service M.E.F. to U.K. introduced from Palestine, Cyprus, Cyrenaica, Greece and Crete.

Cable from Cairo 10th. March 1941. Air Mail Letter Card service from Sudan to U.K. with British stamps on.

Report from Cairo dated 1st. April 1941. The C. in C. hoped to get a decision from the Egyptian Prime Minister re free postage in Egypt but nothing has transpired.

In the circumstances, he asked me to fix up an Air Mail Letter Card for the personnel in Egypt by means of a modified Air Mail Letter Card sold as Stationery sold in bulk to the O.C. Units at 3d. per time. This will be sent forward franked Official Paid. This is a poor subterfuge but....Arranged for new Air Mail Letter Card with Director of Printing and Stationery.

Report from Cairo 28th. April 1941. 220, 000 cards valued £2750 taken on charge 26th. April and issued to F.P.Os for sale.

Cairo 2nd. May 1941. Egypt has agreed to grant free postage on surface mail letters sent by our troops. British stamps will be used on all Air Mail including letter cards.

From 5 July 1941, they became available for mail between the Middle East and New Zealand. The postage rate was 3d and was payable in New Zealand stamps

Official correspondence seen gives two further important dates, 16th June, Air Mail Letter Card service inaugurated from East Africa to U. K. via Khartoum and Freetown, then by sea. Postage 25 cents. 27th. July. Air Mail Letter Card usage extended to South Africa.

On 1 March 1941, the air mail service between the Middle East and the UK was started, using a combination of Imperial Airways seaplanes and military transport. 1 March 1941 - with an initial ration of one per man per month. They were first produced without stamp imprints - with a postage rate of 3d. The private nature of the air letter ensured its popularity among its users and that popularity, with its lightness, brought about its continued use as today's civilian air letter (aerograms) and the British military "bluey".

Of interest to us is the usual machinations of the Egyptian postal authorities either to show their independence of the British or concern of losing revenue. The subterfuge of AMLC being issued with a printed Official Paid was put into use but only for a month(?) in March 41. Not surprisingly then that few are seen.



*Two AMLC from my collection, the left one is dated 11.MA.41 the right the date stamp is difficult to read but appears to be 23.JY.41.*

A cover was illustrated in a Charles Entwistle list early 2015 with a date Jun 41. Entwistle states about the 'Official Paid' that the situation with Egypt was resolved and the Egyptian service for normal AMLS commenced 2 months later. This would be then not April but May. Of the three covers two are later still are later then this could be due to using up old stock before issuing the standard AMLS or simply the squaddies themselves were still using up the Official Paid verity they had. It would be interesting to find the earliest date of a normal AMLS from Egypt. But my cover dated in March shows that the subterfuge AMLS were used before the Egyptians accepted the idea.

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*The Great Britain Air Letter, 1941–2011 A Miscellany to Celebrate 70 Years*, Peter Jennings GSM August 2011

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*Air Mail Letter Cards and Air Letters*, O.R.J.Lee. 1988. The Forces Postal History Society.

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Auctionnumber =693&ShowAll=yes&page=14

Further extensions of the survive are show by the official memos and cables:-

9th. August 1941. War Office to G. O. C. in charge, West Africa. Authority now sanctioned for rationed letter card one per man per fortnight, charge three pence.

6th. October 1941. Accra. A rationed homeward Air Mail Letter Card service at 3d. introduced on the 1st. October for members of H. M. Forces in each of the West African colonies.

8th. October 1941. Accra. First Air Mail Letter Card dispatches left 6. 10. 41.

26th. October 1941. Paiforce. Inauguration of Air Mail Letter Card service to U. K. 3 annas postage rate.

7th. March 1942. Cairo. The Air Mail Letter Card service has now been extended to Nyasaland.

May 1943. Instructions for Army and RAF personnel serving in Turkey. Stocks to be held include Air Mail Letter Cards available to United Kingdom and Antigua, Australia (Temporarily suspended), Bahamas, Barbados, Basutoland, Bechuanaland, British Dominica, Canada (by surface from U. K. ) Cayman Islands, Ceylon, Eire, Grenada, India. Jamaica, Kenya, Malta, Mauritius (via Durban), New Zealand (Temporarily suspended), Newfoundland, Northern Ireland, Nyasaland, Rhodesia (North and South), St. Lucia,

St. Vincent, St. Kitts, Seychelles (via Mombasa), Swaziland, Tanganyika, Tobago, Trinidad, Uganda, Union of South Africa.

10th April 1944. Cairo. Air Letter service for use British members Palestine Police to U. K. will commence 17.4.44.

7th. June 1944. G. P. O. London. This administration prepared to arrange onward air conveyance Air Letters from Forces to all countries Western Hemisphere subject to additional 6d. per item. Air Letters addressed Canada not subject to surcharge because free conveyance Canadian Air Services normally available.

21st. November 1944. Cairo. Air Letter service extended to France and Italy.

13th March 1945. Cairo. First dispatch of (free) Air Letters from repatriated POW's ex Russia, made today.

1st. April 1945. Cairo. Troopers cable of 30.3.45 authorises free postage by air to U. K. on letters up to 1oz. in weight.

15th. June 1945. Cairo. Concession on Air Mail extended to Empire personnel corresponding to their home country, except for Australian and New Zealand forces who are restricted to free Air Letters.

Change of name and increases in ration.

6th. December 1943. The War Cabinet overseas mail committee at their meeting on 3rd. December, invited Service Departments to discontinue the use of the term Air Mail Letter. Card in favour of the term Air Letter in all connections in which the former term had been used.

London, 7.3.44. From 15th. March 1944 ration Air Letter will be increased to three per two weeks per man.

London, 11.3.44. Ration should read six per four weeks per man. Base censored Air Letter remains one per four week period.

London 28.7.44. From 1st August 1944, ration Air Letter will be increased to two per week per man. Ration inclusive of Air Letters treated as Green.

Main dates included in the above cables are:-

1 March 1941 - the air letter service begins from the Middle East to the UK with an initial ration of one per man per month. They were first produced without stamp imprints - with a postage rate of 3d.

21 July 1941 - First issue of Prisoner of War air letter sheets which could be sent to British prisoners of war and internees held by the Axis countries in Europe.

7 December 1942 - Air letter sheets issued which required a 6d stamp to be affixed. The air letter replaced the 3d air postcard and at first could only be sent from GB to the armed services in East Africa - extended to South Africa 9 April 1943. The air letters were produced by the printers McCorquodale & Co Ltd at Wolverton. The forms were designed by Mr. Robert A. Gifford.

18 June 1943 - First air letter sheets with an impressed 6d stamp printed by letter press. Available for limited use by the public to others not in the armed services from June 1944.

24 August 1944 - 6d air letter service extended to Empire and British mandated territories in Africa, Asia and Pacific regions.

11 September 1944 - Air letter service extended to Canada, Newfoundland, British West Indies and Falkland Islands.

7 April 1945 - 1½d forces air letter on sale (at 2d). Use extended from 13 July to send to forces in Australia, New Zealand and South West Pacific area, replacing the 6d air letter.

29 June 1948 - The first GB commemorative air letter went on sale at the same time as the Olympic Games stamps.

Several other countries adapted the British lettersheet model during the war, while many other countries introduced them after the war. Curiously, the British 6d air letter rate remained in effect until 1966 while other postal rates increased.

As indicated in my above statements it would indicate that the British use of the AMLC was influenced by their use by the Australians had the facility first. However this idea has been questioned by philatelist in philatelic Literature in the 1970s/1980s. The arguments are outlined by O.R.J.Lee

He quotes Peter Jennings and articles articles in Stamps and in Stamp Collecting by A. Feldmancent in which it is said:

*that Col. Evans saw Australian Air Mail Letter Cards being handled in the civil posts in Palestine before 7th. August 1940. On the other hand, the Australian philatelist Harry Porter gave the date 14th. July 1941 for the introduction of Air Mail Letter Cards for Australian troops. Intensive search in U. K. and in Australia has not revealed any collectors who have items used before that date. Hodson's first entry in the*



A.I.F. listing gives the use of a British form in June 1941. The second entry is of an Australian form in November 1941.

However, the proof that Harry Porter's date is the most reliable and therefore the issue of British Air Mail Letter Cards in March April and May 1941 was an all-British first, lies in a letter dated 5th. June 1941 from the Australian Postmaster-General's Department to the Director-General of Posts, Malaya. This says- The British authorities recently instituted a service whereby members of the British, Naval, Army and Air Forces in Palestine, Cyprus and Libya are enabled to send lettercards by air mail via the South African route at a postage rate of 3d. for each missive, such postage being prepaid in British stamps. The lettercards, of a standard type weighing approximately 3.3grammes, are issued to all troops free, the cost of the supplies being borne by the Defence Authorities. This Administration has signified its concurrence in a proposal submitted by the Australian Army authorities for the institution of a similar service as between members of the Commonwealth Forces in the Middle East and Australia. Steps are therefore being taken for the inauguration of an arrangement whereby letter cards similar in weight and dimensions to those used in the Middle East-Great Britain service supplied and distributed by Defence Authorities to members of the Commonwealth services, will be accepted for transmission to Australia from areas in the Middle East in which the Australian Base Post Office has been granted the facility of independent working, upon prepayment of postage in Australian postage stamps to the amount of threepence in respect of each letter card

The Army Department has intimated that it would welcome an extension of the service to embrace members of the Commonwealth Forces serving in Malaya and your kind consideration of this proposal is therefore invited.

This makes it clear that as at 5th. June 1941 was no Air Mail Letter Card service to Australia. The author has had several disappointments in endeavouring to get information first and second hand from people who were involved in postal and printing activities during the war, but their recollections (and sometimes their statements in their books) can too often be proved wrong either by official documents or the evidence of the Air Mail Letter Cards themselves.

In a Cavendish auction a lot is described as: AIR LETTERS:1941-45 A selection of used Air Letter cards inc one from FPO 45 dated the 1 Oct 1941 the first day of the Airmail letter card service, other cancellations inc... FPO.45 was at Takoradi at this date which could be a first day for that area.



*In my own collection I have an AMLC with a 3d stamp cancelled by the Australian BASE P.O. B.W.I dated 30.JU.41.then based at Jerusalem.*

References:

*The Great Britain Air Letter, 1941–2011 A Miscellany to Celebrate 70 Years*, Peter Jennings GSM August 2011

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