

## Military Matters - Force Publique

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Although the Belgian Army surrendered to the Germans in May 1940, exiled Belgian authorities declared that the Congo would support the Allied cause. Any protest was crushed by the Force Publique, the Belgian colonial army in the Congo. The Belgian Congo accelerated production of valuable resources for the Allies, including 160,000 tons of copper a year; 9,000 tons of rubber in 1943 and 11,300 in 1944; 12,500 tons of tin in 1943 and 17,300 in 1944; and uranium for the development of the atomic bomb. A provisional understanding was soon made with the British authorities, who took control of all Belgian shipping, and received such portion of the Congo's exportable products as it desired. On the other hand the Congo would be treated as de facto part of the British Empire

Meanwhile back in Belgium a group of right-wing parties headed by the Rex Organization proposed to the Germans that they be allowed to raise a corps of Belgian aviators and enough Belgian officers to command a regiment of colonial soldiers ready for the time when the Germans invaded the Belgian Congo. They would naturally be equipped by the Germans and of course under their command, but the idea was dismissed by the Germans.

The Force Publique in Africa, consisting of three brigades of infantry, was mobilised in the Belgian Congo to fight with the Allies in Africa. Governor-General Pierre Ryckmans and Lieutenant-General Paul Ermans, commander-in-chief, took part in discussions with the South African and British military missions in Leopoldville which resulted in some Belgians being sent to help in the East African Campaign in southern Abyssinia. The Congolese troops, under the direction of Major-General Auguste Gilliaert, Belgium's solidly built, 6ft general, were commanded by Lieut.-Colonel Leopold Bronkers Martens

While the wartime expansion of the Force Publique was constrained by lack of European leadership on account of its racist policy of "whites" only officers, and only from occupied Belgium, three mobile brigades each comprising 6,000 soldiers and 4,000 porters were dispatched from the colony in January 1941. The brigade undertook a precarious route, transported by truck, railway and riverboat some 2,000 kilometres from Congo to Juba in South Sudan and then into western Ethiopia.



*Fig.1*

I found a map of the journey on the internet, but part of it doesn't make sense and does not accord with the scant information I could find. Parts of the route were over uncharted territory and maps for the area have different names for what appear to be the same place. Some of this is due no doubt to changes of place names once the Congo was free of Belgian rule. I have tried to use place names of the time but can't be sure of that. I have drawn my own map, which I think is the route taken.

In the prewar period the main form of transport was by river so the initial section was by the River Congo to Bumba. Like the Nile parts are difficult to traverse because of the rapids. Built between 1924 and 1937 by a Belgian company mainly to help with mining activities in the northeast of the country, the Vicongolo line of some 600mm (1ft 11 5/8 in) gauge was a portage railway bypassing the rapids. This carried the force to Mungbere, from where a difficult overland journey took them to Juba in Sudan. Here the column turned north along the White Nile, then still in the dry season. River boats brought them in five days to Malakal, home of the Shilluk people. At Melut the column turned eastward, pushing trucks through a waterless desert 250km to Kurmuk on the Ethiopian border.

The first aim of attack was Asosa, in the region drained by the Blue Nile. The combined attack of the Congolese troops and the King's African Rifles began on March 11, 1941, just six weeks after the Belgians left the Congo. The Italians were completely taken by surprise to meet the combined thrust. They abandoned Asosa, pushing southward to join their next garrison along the Ethiopian massif at Ghidami, 120 miles away. In late May 1941 the Belgian Major-General Gilliaert cut off the retreat of the Italian General Pietro Gazzera in Ethiopia and accepted the surrender of 7,000 of his troops (including eight generals) and took 7,600 rifles, 200 machineguns, 18 cannon and 250 trucks. Some 500 Force Publique troops were killed in the campaign.

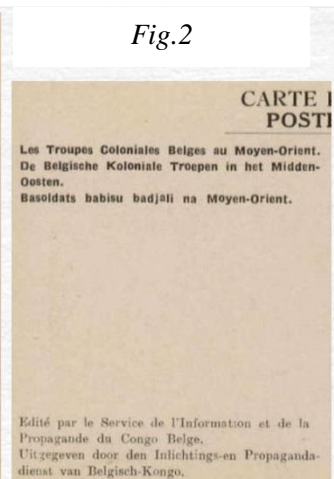
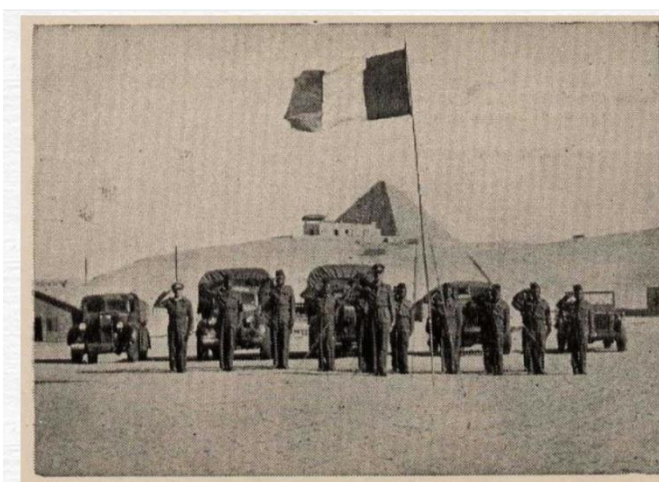


During the Abyssinian Campaign, the Belgian forces in the Sudan were served by the Sudanese military postal services, and the military field hospital was served by the postal service of the army to which it was attached.

In July 1942 a 13,000-strong Force Publique brigade was shipped to southwest Nigeria to prepare for an invasion of the adjacent Vichy French territory of Dahomey (today's Benin), but this was cancelled in November when the territory switched to Free French control. The force in Nigeria first used a double ring Military Post 1 or 4 (Fig. 9) cancellers and a bilingual Military Censorship / Belgian colonial troops.

The office was installed in Ibadan and then in December in Lagos; it was closed in March 1943

As a result, the brigade was transported to the Middle East, being shipped around the Cape to Suez but because shipping in short supply 18 motorised columns, totalling 2,000 men in 850 trucks, undertook another mighty trek, driving 6,000 kilometres from Zaria in northern Nigeria through Chad and Sudan to Cairo. While the Congolese troops in Egypt were reorganised and re-equipped along British lines, a continued shortage of European personnel kept them out of the European and Burma campaigns.



Card taken from <http://www.congoposte.be/bupostemil2.htm>. Showing *Les Troupes Coloniales Belges* in Egypt. The soldiers have swapped to British battledress but retained their distinctive tarbush.

*I have made a mock-up based on the postcard. I don't know if there were any shoulder flashes but most of the Free Belgians had the Belgian flag.*

Beginning in June 1943, the Force Publique garrisoned the Suez Canal, where they guarded prisoner camps, roads and storage facilities. In April 1944 the brigade helped to suppress fighting between royalists and communists in an exiled Greek brigade. In May the Congolese were transferred to security duties in Palestine and were eventually sent home between September 1944 and January 1945.

Philatelic evidence is correspondingly thin on the ground. I have only a few covers outbound and few covers inbound that are not in my own sparse collection. Peter Smith<sup>1</sup> makes passing reference in his book and there is a single query in the *Forces Postal History Journal* some twenty years ago. In the Alan Brown auction of December 1996<sup>2</sup> two lots offered some four incoming and two outgoing covers; the combined hammer price was £290. The one illustrated is addressed to Boulad in Cairo with EPP81, 3.DE.42 and then BASE ARMY POST 4, dated 28.FE.44 and the Belgium BPM 101 dated 28.FE.44. Benians<sup>3</sup> lists EPP 81 at this time used by the Free French and BAP 4 was the main sorting depot for the British Forces. That the Belgium BPM 101 has the same date would suggest that it was held at the same place. Why BPM 101 was used is uncertain, unless the sender states on the reverse that he was with the Belgian forces.

A military post office opened in Cairo in April 1943, with the task of supporting troops stretching out from Tripolitania to Syria, via Egypt, Palestine and Lebanon.

At the beginning this office used the double-circle datestamp with the number 4 (*Fig. 9*), which the expeditionary force had used in Nigeria for the Middle East and came via the Cape. The datestamp became confused with some postmarks used by some Free French units so the British authorities decided to allocate a distinctive type of datestamp to the contingent which was intended as the first in a recognizable series.

This new datestamp, manufactured in Cairo, was put into use in June 1943. It is rectangular, measuring 41 x 22mm, and divided into three horizontal sections of different heights. On two lines in the top part is the text POSTE MILITAIRE / N°101; in the middle section the date, month in letters and the year; and in the lower section the words CONGO-BELGE (*Fig.10*). The Cairo office was issued with two cachets: one with the initials B.P.M 101 M.E.F. on one line, the other with B.P.M. 101 / M.E.F (*Fig. 11*) on two lines in larger lettering (Bureau postal militaire 101 – Middle East Force). These different postmarks of the Belgian colonial troops in the Middle East were withdrawn from service after the closure of the office in November 1944. I believe the office operated from the British Base Office 4. The information above comes from the articles by Zaalen.<sup>6</sup>

This coincides with the transfer to Palestine. One can assume that mail was then handled from there, making the Cairo office redundant, and that probably the British military system handled their mail. I have not seen any philatelic evidence to support this.

For the three-sectioned rectangular POSTE MILITAIRE, N°. 101, date, CONGO-BELGE dates I have are: 16 JUL 1943; 19 AOUT 1943; 30 AOUT 1943; 17 SEP 1943; 30 AOUT 43/44?; 9 FEV 1944; 28 FEV 1944; 12 MAI 1944 and 30 AOUT 1944. On Delcampe I found a cover that quite clearly has the date 9 JUIN 1948 thankfully the seller has also shown the back of the cover, which has an indistinct receiving mark of Elizabethville 28-7-43 so it seems reasonable that the date 9 JUIN 1943 could be added to the list. Overall, the list then spans 9 JUIN 1943 to 30 AOUT 1944, which fits well with statements on the website <http://www.congoposte.be/bupostemil2.htm>.<sup>4</sup>

From the Cavendish website<sup>5</sup> I found two references to past auctions, date unknown and without illustrations. One single cover with date is described as *from 3rd Congo Expeditionary Corps franked with 7F B.Congo stamp*. Another lot under CIGARETTE CARDS reads: *BELGIAN CONGO - ALLIED CONTINGENT IN THE MIDDLE EAST; Nov. 1943 - Sept. 1944 group of five stampless O.A.S. envs. all addressed to Belgian Congo and all with mostly very fine large boxed "POSTE MILITAIRE/No.101/CONGO-BELGE" datestamps (used at Cairo), and all censored; 3 with British military censor marks (one also with v. fine*

“CENSURE/15/CONGO BELGE”), one with printed “CONGO BELGE” censor label & one with blue “CENSURE MILITAIRE/TROOPES COLONIALES BELGES” in blue. Scarce group. (5 covers).

Benians also mentions two EPPs associated with Belgians:

EPP 57	Kassassine	Belgian in camp 30.JA.42
EPP 149		Belgian unit 12.JU.43

Now the EPP 57 is too early for use by the Force Publique, so it was used either by a Belgian with the British Forces or the actual date should be 30.JA.43.

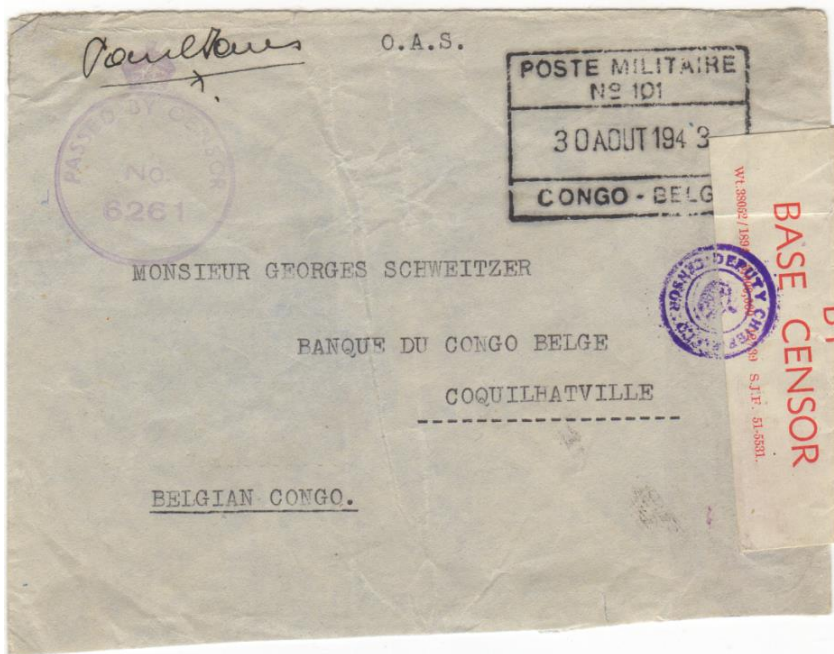


Fig.3

Cover cancelled by 101 BPM MEF 30 August 1943. Note the characteristic gap between the 4 & 3 of 1943  
Censored by the British and stampless, suggesting that like other Middle East troops, postage was free.



Fig.4

Registered cover cancelled by 101 BPM MEF 19 August 1943. Censored by the British, the registration label is similar to those used by the French. The stamp suggests registered mail had to be paid for. The website shows a similar registered cover dated 16 JUL 1943 with registration number N° 93

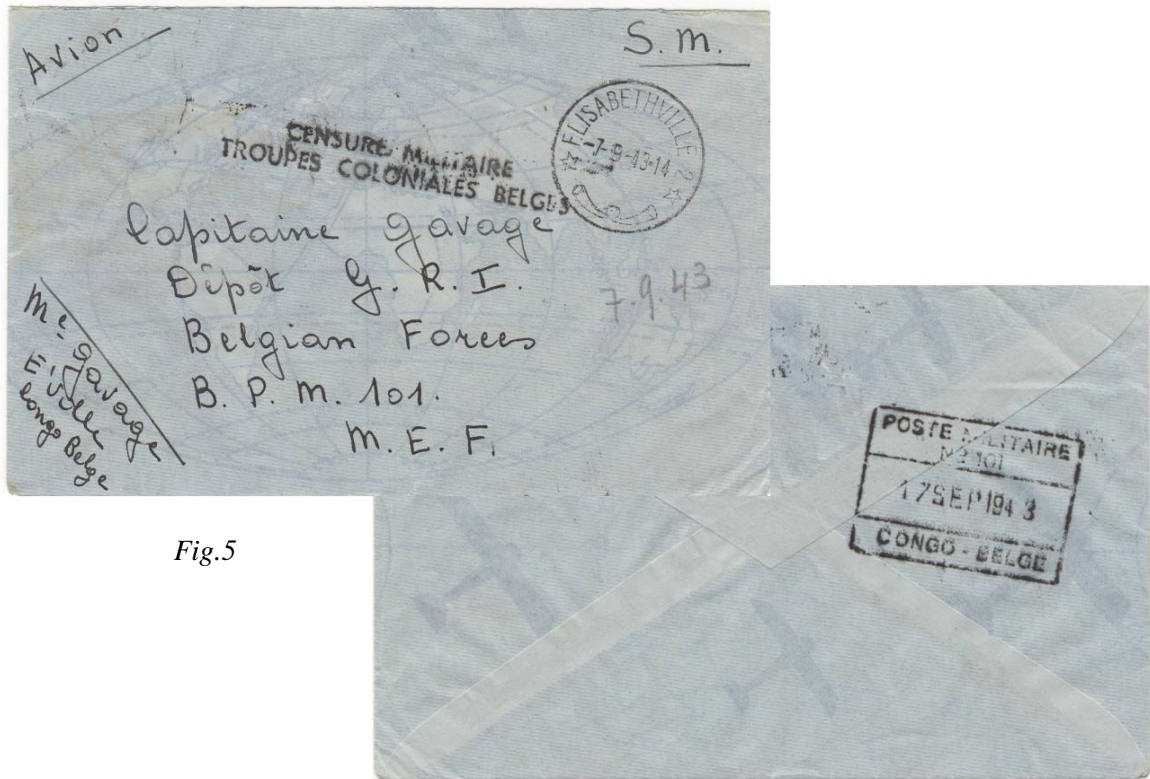


Fig.5

Cover to the Belgian forces at BPM 101 from the Belgian Congo backstamped 101 BPM MEF used as a receiving mark. The censor mark CENSURE MILITAIRE TROUPES COLONIALES BELGES is similar to one used in Nigeria so was most likely applied at the point of departure.



Fig.6

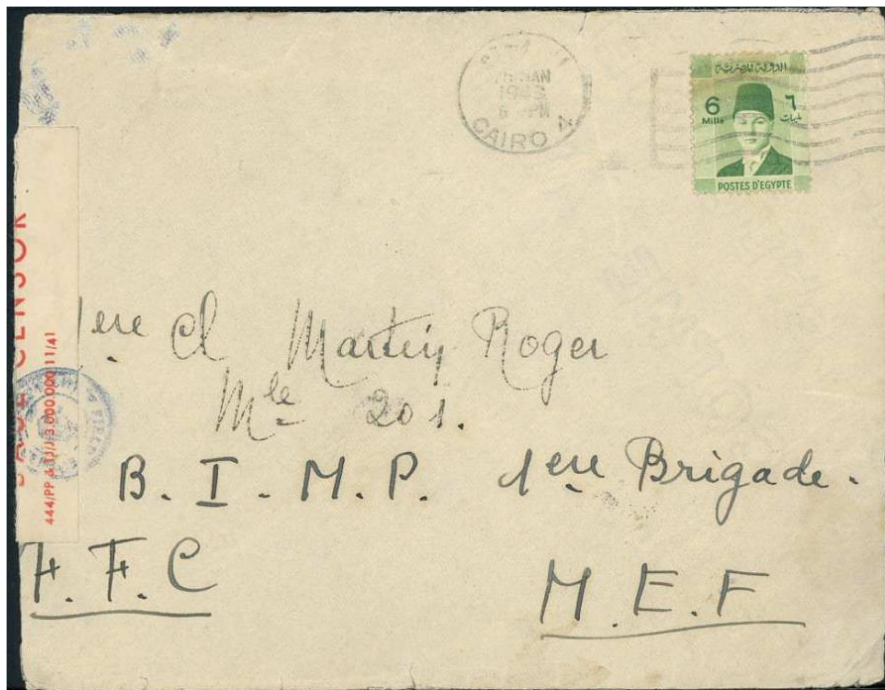
Cover showing the straight line CENSURE CONGO BELGES

Fig.7



Cover clearly dated 9 JUN 1948 but with a backstamp 24-7-1943. I can only assume the postal official used the wrong year-slug. It also has CENSURE MILITAIRE TROUPES COLONIALES BELGES similar to Fig.5. Where the censor marks were applied is unclear to me: Egypt or the Congo.

Fig.8



Internal cover though the Egyptian post sent at the internal rate, confirming that the 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade was stationed in Egypt.

Censorship was set up in the Belgian Congo by enactment No75/PT of May 17 1940.

At first it was used only by civilian authorities, but enactment No102/PT of March 6 1941 extended its use to the military authorities.

As a result, censor marks used by either of the services responsible for censoring mail can be found on mail going through military post-offices



Fig.9

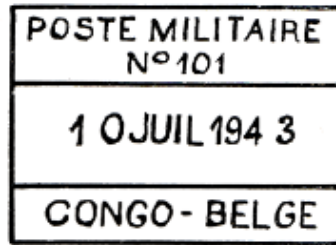


Fig.10

B. P. M. 101 M. E. F.

Fig.11

Zaalen in his articles mentions five military censor markings for the Belgian Congo but I have seen only the two illustrated in relation to post to Egypt.

**CENSURE MILITAIRE  
TROUPES COLONIALES BELGES**

Fig.12

**CENSURE CONGO BELGE**

Fig.13

These were only used in the Belgian Congo while in Egypt British censor marks were used.

*References:*

1. *Egypt: Stamps and Postal History*, Peter A. S. Smith, 1999
2. *The Alan Brown Collection of Military Postal History*, Cavendish Auctions, December 6, 1996
3. *Egypt Postage Prepaid Military Date Stamps 1941 to 1947*, F. W. Benians, 1978
4. <http://www.congoposte.be/bupostemil2.htm>. The site on the Belgian Congo and Ruanda-Urundi was created by Charles Stockmans and acknowledges J. Fr. Zaalen as the writer of the article on 101 BPM MEF
5. *Also War Covers*, Cavendish (no illustrations) and Delcampe have yielded some information.
6. "Les postes militaires de campagne au cours de la guerre mondiale 1939-1945", *Balasse* magazine No.56,59/60 & 58, April 1948. J.Fr.Zaalen. (Great thanks to Nick Martian for the invaluable translation)