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Postal History of the Desert Air Force

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DESERT Air Force was the air component of the Eighth Army. The formation, with, is Field Post Offices, crossed to Italy and Sicily in 1943, but continued to use the title "Desert Air Force" until 1946, by which time very few of its members had actually served in the desert.

One apparently obvious inclusion has no part in desert postal history. British stamps overprinted "M.E.F." were never used in Libya, Cyrenaica or Tripolitania by Montgomery's troops or airmen. The only available stamps for these troops after October, 1942, were the ordinary British Id., 3d., 5d. and 10d. pale shade stamps. I never saw any other values than these four on sale.

I select October, 1942, as an arbitrary starting date, because this was the month when the hated airmail postcard ceased to be used. The airgraph and air letter-card had sounded its death knell. Here, then, is a list of some F.P.O. cancellations to be found on M.E.F. and C.M.F. covers proving them to have been sent from the Eighth Army or D.A.F. I have given locations where they are known. Green "privilege" envelopes, by the way, rarely bear a unit censor stamp.

At the time of Alamein (23/10 /42) and until the first week of 1943 R.A.F. mail from the Western Desert bore no F.P.O. cancellation. Hence beware of letters alleged to have been written during the battle with a F.P.O. stamp. All mail at this time bore an "Egypt" cancellation (Type A), although the letter might have been posted at Sirte, in the next country but one to Egypt! The cancellation is 27 mm. in diameter, and is separated from the next cancellation by the usual five wavy lines. Cancellations are 52 mm. apart.

On January 3rd, 1943, F.P.O. 232 began its long association with the D.A.F. and Eighth Army. It was located near Marble Arch airfield, itself near El Agheila, just inside Tripolitania. Air mail was lifted back when possible by 249 (Transport) Wing, R.A.F., and many of your covers have been carried in their captured Junkers 52. Otherwise, all mail was road-hauled back to Benghazi. F.P.O. 232 remained the Field Post Office of the forward areas until the end of the North African campaign in May, 1943. Probable locations :- January, 1943-Wadi Tmat, Tripolitania ; late January, February, March-Castel Benito, Tripoli ; in March the unit crossed into Tunisia at Medenine ; April El Djem (in sight of the Coliseum shown on French issues for Tunisie) and Monastir ; May-Sfax or Sousse.

The campaign having ended, desert forces moved back to the Tripoli area ready for embarkation to Malta and Sicily. At this time D.A.F. units used F.P.O. 532, located near the wonderful Roman ruins of Sabratha, one of the three cities (tripolis) of earlier Tripolitania. Troops in the port of Tripoli used F.P.O. 233, probably an offshoot of F.P.O. 232, left behind at Castel Benito when F.P.O. 232 went on to Tunisia

The standard rate to U.K. for a lettercard was 3d., airgraph the same, and an air letter (3 weeks in transit) 10d. Sea mail was free, so that covers bear no stamps, but was very slow (up to nine months from England). The 3d. stamp cost variously four for 5 piastres in Egypt and Cyrenaica, four for Is. B.M.A. (no smaller change was ever issued), or four for 10 Tunisian francs.

Letter cards are invariably white with blue print, and always unit censored. All airgraphs from the Desert bear the legend " Military Airgraph Service authorized by Egyptian Postal Administration ", and are always unit censored. They bear no F.P.O. cancellation, but the unit censor stamp and signature appear on the photograph.

In June, 1943, the two commands moved to Malta, G.C., and here they used F.P.O. 188. The cancellations of all other F.P.O.'s mentioned in this article are as the one of F.P.O. 188 illustrated (Type D). These covers must be rare, because the formation was only on the island for four weeks, and letter writing was very strongly discouraged.

The force moved into Sicily on the invasion of the island (July 10th, 1943) and F.P.O. 167 began its long connection at this time. Its locations were :-July 11th to 17th, 1943, Pachino; July 17th to August 27th, 1943, Lentine ; August 27th to early September, 1943, Catania.

When D.A.F. moved into Italy (September 3rd, 1943), the F.P.O. became again 232, and remained so until December. Locations :-September, a series of locations in quick succession round the inside of the “ heel “ of Italy from Reggio di Calabria up to Bari. In October I had the pleasure of visiting them at Foggia. November found them near the railhead at Termoli.

At the end of 1943 the force underwent one of its infrequent disorganisations of mails, and the routes were disrupted in December, 1943 and January, 1944. Some mail went back through F.P.O. 712 in the Vasto area, south of the Sangro in these months. About Christmas Day, 1943, however, F.P.O. 167 moved into the area and began another very long tour of duty with the Eighth Army and its Air Force.

I should mention that the white air-mail letter-card became obsolete in October, 1943, and was followed by one issue only of an “Armed Forces Air Letter”, this being a very violently romantic puce colour. It is rare. Its source is possibly American (printers reference - CFQ.11.40/P and S/1448. 2.P.G.I.W.). The first grey-blue letter cards, AF3077, followed immediately on these and held sway throughout the remainder of the war. They were very popular. Two per week were issued to all ranks, and the rate to the U.K. was 3d. Unover-printed British stamps, pale shades, were used throughout the Italian campaign and Italian stamps were forbidden on military mail.

In March, 1944, the privilege of signing the back of a letter-card with an “honesty” superscription, thus cutting out unit censorship, was granted. Soon after this the cards, known as AF3077a, were issued with this legend-the same as that appearing on “green” envelopes. A blue triangle was printed on the address side of the card to differentiate it from the unit-censored type. A similar card, AFW3077a, was used for a very short time in 1944 from casualty clearing stations and hospitals, and is rare.

F.P.O. 167 followed the great trek to the Cassino front in May, 1944, and were near this battlefield for a short time. Summer locations were :-June, Rome ; July and early August, Perugia and Siena. The formation switched back to the Adriatic coast in the early autumn with its faithful F.P.O. 167, which found itself in late August, September and early October near Ancona, and in late October at Rimini. Another short period of “flap” set in with mail, probably because of the very heavy flooding of roads, and a limited amount of D.A.F. mail came back through F.P.O. 402, in the Rimini area, in early November, 1944.

About November 10th, 1944, the old desert F.P.O. 232 moved into Rimini, almost in the shadow of San Marino, and all was serene again. This F.P.O. catered for the Rear Eighth Army area for the rest of the war.

At this time also, the remains of the old white letter-card were issued to exhaust old stocks.

F.P.O. 167, however, was more forward, in the Ravenna area, throughout the winter of 1944-45, and until the last “push” of April, 1945. This F.P.O. moved up with the troops during those exciting last days of April-May, 1945, passing via Ferrara, Mestre (near Venice) and Udine (near Trieste), where the Cease Fire found it. I lost track of it here, but it is more or less certain that it went over to Klagenfurt, Austria. In July, 1945, the Eighth Army ceased to exist, and British Troops, Austria, took its place.

The last weeks were most interesting from the postal history point of view. After April 3rd, 1945, all post to U.K., except parcels, travelled free and by air, so that no stamps appear on air mail letter-cards after this date, unless the sender proved absent-minded in his hour of victory.

Letter-cards were used less after the end of the war. Although the word “air” does not appear on covers from D.A.F. in N.E. Italy during the occupation of 1945, they were, nonetheless, flown home. The initials O.A.S. (On Active Service) still appeared where the stamp had been usually placed.

“Old Faithful” F.P.O. 232 moved into Udine in May, 1945, became static, and handled D.A.F. and Rear Eighth Army mail until July, 1945. With the demise of the Eighth Army this F.P.O., too, passed over to the other side in Austria, where it is to be hoped that the trumpets sounded for it. Its location in Austria was

probably Villach. F.P.O. 271 (not to be confused with the F.P.O. 712 of December, '43) took over the handling of D.A.F. mail at this time. It was located in Udine. Mail was flown out from nearby Campofornio. There is one variety, very rare, to look for in this F.P.O.'s cancellations. For a very short time at the end of July, 1945, it used one cancelling stamp with a star over the date (Type G). It is the only F.P.O. mentioned here to have used this cancellation. F.P.O. 721 was still handling D.A.F. mail in January, 1946, the date of my last cover.

And now a word about airgraphs. They became unpopular after the command had landed in Europe, apart from the very popular official "Christmas Card" airgraphs of 1943 and 1944. Apart from these specials, which are worth looking at (Type H), the only airgraph I have after June, 1943, is a solitary specimen in January, 1944. Not all airgraphs are dated.

I may mention that the first day of the South Africa-England airgraph service in April, 1942, coincided with the presence of a large convoy of Eighth Army reinforcements in Cape Town, and many of us sent first day airgraphs from the port. Since, how-ever, for security reasons, they bear no date or place of cancellation, their claim to fame is difficult to prove.

If anyone is in any doubt as to the authenticity of covers and letter cards from Eighth Army and Desert Air Force, or would like to know more about them or their background, I will oblige anyone sending an S.A.E. for return postage.