Indian Army Field Post Offices, 1939 1947

By E. Jagger

I trust that these notes, though far from complete, will prove to be of interest and assistance to collectors of these postmarks.
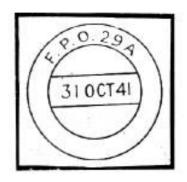
Not having access to official records, if any, the following has been gleaned from covers or from personal knowledge by the writer and other collectors. At the outbreak of the 19391945 war the datestamps in use by the Indian Army Field Post Offices were the ones shown as (Fig. 1), which were the type used throughout, the first World War and, writing from memory, were first brought into use about 1907.

Probably the first Indian F.P.O. covers which arrived in this country were from Egypt, as units of the Indian Army were landed there in 1939 and Indian F.P.O. postmarks are found cancelling the Egyptian 10milliemes Military Stamps as well as ordinary Egyptian stamps, it is also possible to find these datestamps on postage stamps of Sudan, Ceylon, Palestine, Burma, Straits Settlements, Kelantan, Kedah, Johore, Perak, Great Britain, Iraq, Persia and South African.

In Malaya on the occasions when stamps had to be affixed to letters to prepay registration or air mail fees, it was necessary to utilise Malayan stamps which were cancelled by the F.P.O. datestamp and I have yet to see a cover from Malaya during the 1940-41 period bearing Indian stamps.

Probably some similar consideration also applied to the use of Sudanese stamps though in this instance the use of Indian stamps were quickly resorted to, whether the powers that be had realised that the use of local stamps gave an indication of the location of the writer of such a letter.

From 1941 onwards the use of the Egyptian military stamps were dispensed with and ordinary British stamps utilised instead, so that any letters bearing British stamps may have emanated from anywhere in the Middle East Command, Central Mediterranean Force, or Greece after October, 1944.

The use of British stamps in Paiforce was frowned upon, though it is possible to come across British stamps used in Persia and Iraq, these stamps were probably in the possession of the soldier when he was posted or transferred from the Middle East or the United Kingdom. On one occasion I presented a British Registered envelope bearing the impressed threepenny registration fee stamp, but this was ignored and I had to affix an additional 3 anna Indian stamp to cover the registration fee.

The use of Iraqi and Persian stamps come into a different category; letters from soldiers in Paiforce intended for civilian addresses in Iraq or Persia had to be handed over to the respective Civil Post Offices for delivery as the Army Post Offices do not deliver mail; consequently the recipient had to pay postage due on delivery, as forces mail at that time up to a certain weight was carried free.

Representations were made on this subject, apparently even the franking by Indian stamps would not meet the case, and as it was forbidden for troops to utilise the civil post offices, arrangements were entered into by the Director of Army Postal Services with the Persian and Iraqi Postal Administrations making it possible to

prepay local letters with Iraqi or Persian stamps, letters were subject to the usual censorship regulations and the stamps cancelled with F.P.O. datestamp, every Field Post Office in Paiforce possessed a small stock of Persian and Iraqi stamps which could be purchased for the purpose of franking letters intended for delivery to civilians.

These covers are very rarely seen as they would mainly be addressed to banks, shops and maybe the oil companies.

In some of the towns and cities of the Middle East, Indian Field Post Offices existed side by side with British Field Post Offices, so that any correspondence for India was forwarded by the Indian F.P.O., whether franked with Indian or British stamps.

Situated outside the Dock Gates at Port Tewfik (Egypt) in the next but to the Indian F.P.O. 93 was the British F.P.O. which used British F.P.O. datestamps No. 190.On Kingsway Haifa (Palestine) was F.P.O. 116, which was only a few doors away from the British F.P.O., whilst situated on Julians Way in Jerusalem were again the twin post offices.

An Indian F.P.O. was located in Rue Georges Picot BEYROUTH until 1944, when it removed to the Transit Camp situated outside the town.

In the Wolsey Barracks Nicosia (Cyprus) at one side was Indian F.P.O. R.7, whilst at the other was the inevitable British F.P.O. In Famagusta, or rather the new portion of the town named VOROSHA, existed Indian F.P.O. 12, which was the only F.P.O. there. Prior to being located in Cyprus the Field Postmaster informed me that this F.P.O. had been in operation in Syria, Sudan, Eritrea and Ethiopia during these campaigns, so that it is always a question of a particular date as to where a certain postmark was used.

At Rhodes in the Dodecanese, alongside the British F.P.O. was Indian F.P.O. go, both of which closed down before the end of 1946.

In the British Commonwealth occupation Force in Japan, Indian Forces naturally took their place and seven F.P.O.s were in operation there, F.P.O. 56 officited as Indian Base Post Office and was located at IWAKUNI, the other offices used datestamps No. 77, 112, 148, 651, 652 and 653, which were closed down about October, 1947.

On Independence Day, August 15, 1947, a special cachet was applied to letters, this consisted of the crossed flags of the new Dominions of Pakistan and India with date 15th August, 1947, between and JAPAN under date, it may have been used at all F.P.O.s, but I have only seen it applied to mail which emanated from F.P.O. 77.

Any Indian F.P.O.s not closed down by August, 1947, would be closed down soon after, as the Indian Government requested the return to India of all Indian troops serving overseas.

The datestamps with prefix R appear to have been brought into use in the Middle East, including Paiforce, as this Command, prior to September, 1942, was known as Middle East Force loth Army, with the possible exception of F.P.O. R. 46, which was used in the Indian theatre of operations, though it may have been in use previously in the M.E.F.

After the invasion of Sicily and Italy in 1943 some of the R. datestamps are known to have been used there and also in Greece, it is likely that the prefix R. denoted Reserve, as most of these datestamps appeared to be of a provisional nature.

Most of the datestamps exist in two or even three varieties of the same type of datestamp, which were used concurrently and probably made slightly different for easy identification, or it may have been accidental. For instance, No. 38 had an ornament at base, whilst the other was without; in No. 39 the main difference was the use of a slightly different figure 9, Nos. 40 and 51 had an asterisk at base, whilst the other was minus same; the main difference in No. 44 was the spacing from the outer circle to N.; the only difference in regard to No. 52 appeared to be in the slope of the figure 2. Generally speaking, the main differences are in the
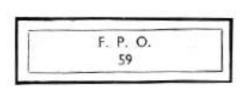
placing of the line under O in No., which sometimes is on a level with the foot of N, on other datestamps the line under O is raised up, sometimes immediately below; also exists with two dots below line.

The use of seal type cancellation by F.P.O. 9 inscribed FD POST OFFICE with large g in centre, and in conjunction with an improvised civil datestamp with two names erased in September, 1942, is inexplicable as the normal F.P.O. 9 datestamp is found cancelling letters in October, 1942, both the above were used in Assam.

Early in 1943 an improvised F.P.O. datestamp was utilised by F.P.O. 21 had box enclosing figure (see illustration) : also with No. omitted; this provisional datestamp was still used when this F.P.O. returned to India from Paiforce in July, 1943; however, an additional F.P.O. 21 datestamp was brought into use by August, 1943, which was slightly different from the original datestamp.

Duplicate datestamps of F.P.O. No. 101, 102, 103, 105, 107, 146 and 37 are somewhat easy to distinguish as the letters No. are omitted, and in the four former are small figures, whilst No. 37, 146 and 107 are normal size.

In December, 1941, Field Post Offices No. 35 and 59, operating in Persia, both used a rectangular boxed marking.

These were used concurrently with the normal datestamps, so it can only be assumed that these were pressed into service on account of the influx of additional mail by the troops who may have received their Christmas Cards and parcels up to time, as ordinary sea mail letters took roughly three months to arrive and parcels from three months upwards.

Provisional handstanrps were brought into use in Ceylon in 1943 and just bear letters A, B or C, and apparently were in use for a considerable time as 1944 dates are also found. A appears to have been located at Colombo and B at Kandy.

I have never seen a normal 145 datestamp, though I have been shown an example of provisional handstamp 145B in small characters which was used in S.E.A.C., May, 1944, a similar item inscribed 5.285 was used in Eritrea December, 1942.

Field Post Office 6 in September, 1942, used a British type single ring datestamp inscribed Field Post Office at top, with figure 6 at foot; this was the type that was first placed into use at Chanak in the Dardanelles in 1921/23, and as far as I am aware never used since 1923 until its reappearance in 1942.An additional type of F.P.O. 70 at top with bottom portion filled in, a similar type existed but lettered at top S.9 F.P.O.

F.P.O. 29A and 29B, used in Malaya, 1941, as was F.P.O. S.16, which was in use at Kuala Lumpur after the end of hostilities in 1945.

F.P.O. 29A. 16th November, 1941 PERAK. M.
F.P.O. 29B. 27th January, 1942. JOHORE. M.
F.P.O. S.16. October, 1946. KUALA LUMPUR. M.

During June and July, 1942, letters emanating from the Headquarters of the 123rd Indian Infantry Brigade bore impression of a seal inscribed H.Q. 23rd IND. INF. BDE., no F.F.O. datestamp appears on the covers except the arrival postmarks of the towns in India and transit markings, the sender's address being shown as care of No. 6 Indian Section Base P.O., Manipur Road, Assam.

A rather unusual use for Camp Post Office datestamp was the use of these in Eritrea early in 1942, later used in Egypt and Cyprus.

Camp P.O. L. 80 and Camp P.O. 68 were both used in this Command and perhaps the first occasion of their use outside India proper.

I do not propose to enumerate the Camp P.O. datestamps which existed in India itself and utilised these postmarks as well as those inscribed temporary P.O. and experimental P.O., both of which were used by reinforcement, transit and other military camps and installations as well as for civilian refugee camps in India.

I have been shown postmarks inscribed Base P.O. Burma and Indian F.P.O. type F.P.O. 2, but with Burma at foot; these were actually Burmese, as there existed an Indian F.P.O. 2.

In the summer of 1942 some letters which had emanated from Eritrea bore a seal type impression, white numbers on a coloured background, and the following numbers have been seen: 7, 13, 21, 25 and 34.

It is possible that these numbers may have represented the F.P.O. of the same number as numbers 13, 21 and 25 were in the Middle East at the same period, hut of F.P.O. No. 7 and 34 I have no knowledge of their movements from late 1941, when both F.P.O. operated in Malaya, until their reappearance in 1943 in Assam.

At the same period one finds a small single circle enclosing figure 22 which emanated from Egypt; as a matter of fact, F.P.O. 22 was in the Middle East at that period.

On some of the covers appear interesting cachets and markings which are sometimes helpful and of assistance in discovering the locality where used, from the Assam theatre in 1942 appears cachet in two lines, "On Active Service, not to he taxed," and from Burma, in 1942, appeared the triangular marking inscribed with number at apex followed on next line with F.S. and FREE below, the initials F.S. denote Field Service.

Please mention you saw it in India's Stamp journal. Thank you. (By courtesy: The Philatelic Adviser)