

British Cancellations used in the Middle East during 1939-1945.

This subject should be treated in two parts: a) Military Postal Cancellations and b) Military Censorship marks. As it would take up too much space to include both these headings in one study I shall in the present article deal only with the postal cancellations; the censorship marks to follow.

The scope of this part is a very wide one. I shall endeavour to be as brief as possible, leaving out for the moment 1) Egyptian Army postmarks, and 2) postmarks of foreign armies that fought in the Middle East, principally the Free French Forces. Herein I shall limit my study to the Postal Cancellations of the British, Dominion and Colonial forces.

I. BRITISH ARMY

This section is devoted to the Land Forces: at the end of the study I shall mention a few words regarding naval cancellations. The British Forces in Egypt, an army of occupation since 1882, had its own cancellations for Cairo and for Alexandria. These postmarks are distinguished by the letters M.P.O: (Military Post Office) with, at foot, the name of one of these two cities. (Fig. 1).



Fig.1.



Fig.2.



Fig.3.

Upon the declaration of war in September 1939, these postmarks were almost immediately replaced by those of the various fighting units. The first cancellation of this kind, so far as I am aware, (I may say that all particulars given below are with errors and omissions excepted, and I invite any corrections with pleasure) bears at foot characteristic numbering from 601 to 615 all preceded by the letter E, while at top appear the initials B.P.O., M.P.O. or F.P.O., which are self explanatory (vide Fig. 2 and 3).

To the best of my knowledge the earliest date of these cancellations is 24th October 1939 with No: 601; there may, of course, be earlier ones. These cancellations were used until the month of December 1941.

It would appear No. 601 was used in Cairo, 602 in Alexandria, 603 in Suez (or Port Tewfik), 604 in the Sudan, 607 probably another Alexandria number. I have been unable to establish the localities of the remaining cancellations. In due course I shall endeavour to locate the other sectors so far as it is possible. It would be useful if an interested collector could contact the War Office and obtain full particulars (1).

The next step should normally be the study of the Field Post Office cancellations, the first date of which goes back to November, 1939: However, by reason of the importance attaching to this group. I prefer to clear the ground of the other and less important ones.

(1) No complete list of the various postal sectors exist, to my knowledge, in respect of the 1914-1918 war. In these circumstances what can be said of the campaign under study ?

In these circumstances I go on to the next in chronological order and which curiously enough has the characteristic of the initials K.W: at foot. These initials stand alone sometimes, but are more often followed by a number varying between 1 and 6. The earliest date of these cancellations is 24th July 1940, and the last is 13th June 1944: There is every reason to believe that they were used by the New Zealand Forces.

In these cancellations, as in the preceding one, at top we find the initials B.P.O., M.P.O., or F.P.O, which need no explanation (vide figs. 4, 5 and 6).



Fig.4

Fig.5.

Fig.6.

A variety of this type bears the inscription «No. 7 Advanced Base Post Office» or «C: Base Post Office: Reg.» or «Base Post Office No.» with «SOR», instead of «Base Office», all with rosette at foot. (vide Fig. 11).

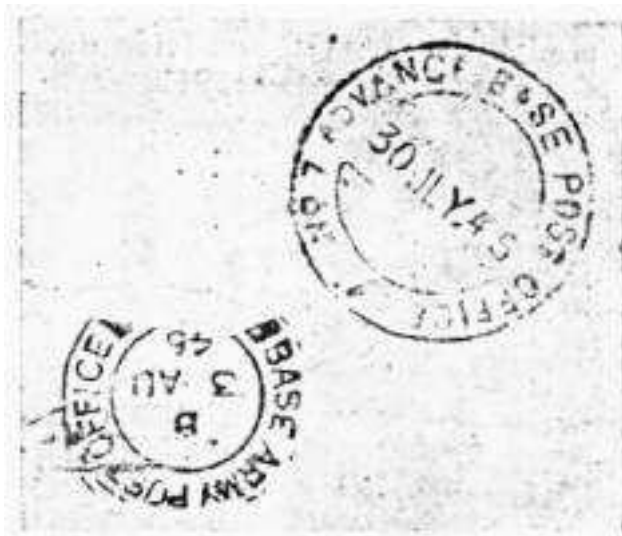


Fig.11

Taken as a whole, this type covers the period 1st December 1940 (Sudan) to 23rd August 1944. But the use of this mark in its various varieties is rather rare.

We now come to the two most important cancellations which read: «Field Post Office» and «Egypt Postage Prepaid».

The former exists in three major types all with one common characteristic, i.e. a sector number at foot.

The first type used is blank between the upper inscription and the date (vide fig. 12).



Fig.12.

Fig.13.

Fig.14.

The second has the letter A or B (vide fig. 13):

The third has either a rosette or a star (v: fig. 14).

A third postmark met with at the beginning of the war, but the use of which was continued throughout it bears the legend. Base Army Post Office, with die number 4 at foot. I do not believe that any other die numbers were used; on the other hand however, in the centre and above the date, will be found a letter, generally «A» and more rarely «B». This cancellation was probably used by G.H.Q., Cairo. (vide fig. 7). As far as I am aware its first date of use was 11th May, 1941.



Fig.7.

Fig.8.

Fig.9.

A fourth postmark, similar to the foregoing one in its text, but not in its set out, reads: «Base Office» This cancellation, which is the largest of the Military ones could be subdivided into various types, viz:

a) No. 2 under Base Office, with the abbreviation «SOR» at foot (vide Fig. 8).

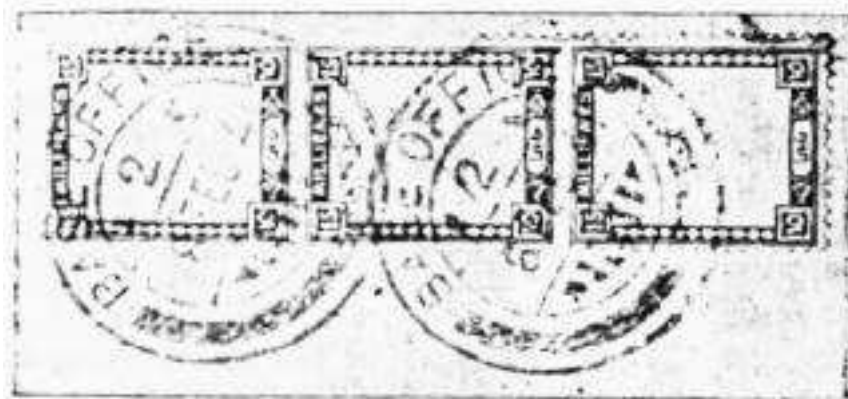


Fig.10.

b) Nos. 1 or 2 in the same place, with a rosette of foot (vide Fig. 9).

c) No. 2, as above, with a thick black bar at foot (Fig. 10)

d) The abbreviation «SOR» preceded by «C» in lieu of a number and with a rosette at foot.

Types 1 and 3 having been most generally in use, I shall first deal with type 2, always with the intention of clearing the ground of matters of less importance. The cancellation with the letter A first came into use on 16th April 1940. The sector numbers of these known to me are the following: 28, 36, 69, 76 Jerusalem), 157, 170, 235, 309, 494, 509, 519, 578, 655 and 656. The last date of use appears to be the 5th April 1945.

The postmark with the letter B is much scarcer. It always bears sector No. 76. It was used between 7th February 1943 and 17th June 1944. According to information collected it would be the one used by the British Military Mission to Egypt (General Stone).

The cancellation bearing «Field Post Office» without either letter or rosette (star) came into use on 1st November 1939, almost at the beginning of the war. I have it with that date and sector No: 42. This type was in use throughout and after the war; it may even be employed to date in the Canal zone. It would take up too much space to detail all sector numbers since these go from No. 33, and perhaps from No: 1, to No. 800 possibly No. 900 or No. 920.

Finally, type «Field Post Officers, bearing either a rosette or a star between the heading and the date, came into use on 27th September 1940. with sector Nos 164 and 172. This type, like the preceding one, continued in the Canal zone. The numbers seen in this type also run from 30 to at least 700 if not more. We also find in this type sector No. 121, used in Palestine, probably at Jerusalem, as we have seen with the type with letter A:

I can also specify in the type without the rosette. No: 193 is the sector of the Athens (Tatoi) aerodrome, used by the British between the end of '940 and the beginning of 1941. This same number, with rosette, was also used at that aerodrome. No. 142 would be the Benghazi sector; No. 149 is the Greek sector West of Alexandria; No. 164 was used in Cyprus; Nos 172 and 174 at Beyrouth; Nos 191, 235 and 656 at Tripoli; Nos 196 in the Belgian sector near Ismailia; No. 201 is by a French sector; Nos 220 and 535 by the Greeks in Palestine; No. 245 appears to be the special British Military Mission one at Cairo Nos. 553 and 558 were apparently used in the Lebanon; No. 705 in Sicily; No. 718 in the Sudan; No. 574 was used by a Greek Corps in Italy; No. 776 was also in Italy; No. 783 in Athens after the liberation.

In the rosette type No. 164 is Jerusalem; No. 171 is French: Nos 172 and 242 at Moascar (Ismailia) ; No. 174 in Khartoum or Shendi (Sudan) and is French; Nos 186 and 187 are Alexandria (Mustafa Pasha); No. 190 is GHQ, Cairo; No. 191 the French Navy sector; No. 192 at Suda Bay, Crete between end 1940 and the beginning of 1941; No. 148 at Mersah Matruh; No. 199 at Derna; No. 201 the French Corps in Syria; No. 217 at Tobruk; No. 220 the Yugoslav sector; No. 243 a hospital sector, probably French at Dabaa; No 300 was the Civil Affairs sector at GHQ, Cairo; Nos 460 and 571 for Tunisia; No. 754 in Sicily; No 756, Irak, No. 782, Athens, after the liberation.

Another very important type of cancellation is the «EgyptPostage Prepaid». This type first appeared, generally speaking on 3rd May 1941, with No. 11 as follows: The word «Egypt». is at top, below it is the sector number, then follows the date below which is. «Postage Prepaid». The numbers appear to run from 1 to 152 or a little more. (v. fig 15.)



Fig.15.

I give below the principal locations that I have been able to fix: Nos 4 and 24, Mustafa Pasha Camp; Nos 15 and 41, Yugoslav units in the western Desert; No. 17, Suez Canal; No. 18. Command Paymaster, Egypt; Nos 21 and 64 Air Stations near Alamein; No. 22, a New Zealand Hospital; No. 37 a South African Artillery Unit near Cairo; No. 44 in Palestine; Nos 47, 70, 73 and 99, South African sectors; No. 48 a military unit in Alexandria to which was attached the Carlile Club; No. 52, a Mauritian unit; No. 57, a Belgian unit in Camp at Kassassine in 1943; No. 58 must have been in

Palestine in 1942; No. 65 in Tripoli; No. 68, a hospital near Rosetta; No.72 a hospital; No. 80, the British Military Mission; Nos 86 and 90, in Cairo; No. 93, the South African General Hospital; No. 100, at Tobruk; Nos 102 and 132, a hospital; No. 115, a Greek Sector; No. 135, a Greek Unit; No. 149 a Belgian Unit; No. 152 the British Military Mission under General Stone.



Fig.16.

Fig.17

This type seems to have gone out of use in February 1945

The «Egypt Postage Prepaid» type varied occasionally in that the number of the sector was substituted by a small star. In this form it is a machine «killer» provided with five undulating lines between the postmarks. This type first appeared in July 1942 (v. fig. 16).

In March 1943, the undulating lines were replaced by a rectangle with vertical lines and some cog design bearing the words: alt «Pays To Lend». ?? times the cancellation seems to vanish leaving only the date (vide fig. 17).

This type is more in the nature of an arrival postmark than an ordinary cancellation, but I have a few specimens used as cancellations. This type went out of use shortly after the war in September 1945.

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As an ending to this first section of my study I shall now indicate some uncommon and exceptional cancellations probably used in connection with certain units. I shall also touch upon maritime postmarks. Here are a few unusual surface cancellations:

Home Depot R.E.R.S. (1940).

Div. Supply H.Q., P.O. SPI (1941) (v. fig. 18).

Army P.O. A.M. (1941) (vide fig. 19).



Fig.18.

Fig.19.

Fig.20.

Fig.21.

Railhead P.O. R.W. 1 (1941). (vide fig. 20)

Base P.O. B.W. (1941 and 1942).

S Base A.P.O. (July 1945). (vide fig. 21).



Fig.22.

Fig.23.

A certain type of large postmark reads: «Army Signals» or «Army Telegraphs» These latter are very rare (1942), whereas the «Army Signals» are common (1941-1944). (vide figs. 22 and 23).



Fig.24.

As for Maritime Postmarks they have special shapes and are interesting:

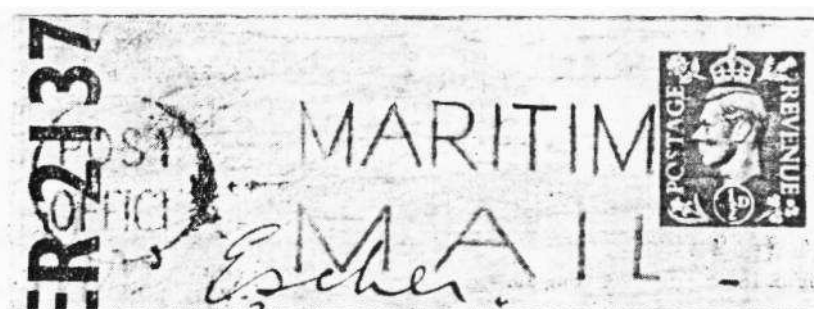


Fig.25.

«Posted on Steamer» in a rectangle (1943). (vide fig. 24). «Post Office» in a circle with the words «Maritime Mails» in large letters at right (1944). (vide fig. 25).

Lastly a less usual form consisting of a double circle similar to the Field Post Office type and reading «British Fleet Mail». I have one of these dated 25th January, 1945, on a cover posted by a Greek Sailor bearing also the round mark bearing the words «Greek Naval Censor».

II. - DOMINION AND COLONIAL FORCES

The most important among these, judging by the volume of its mails, is the Indian Army. I shall therefore begin with them.



Fig.26.

Fig.27.

The most ordinary and typical postmark of this Army is the big cancellation, about 32 mm. in diameter bearing in the centre a large number. At top are the letters F.P.O. This mark is by the way a relic of the 19141918 war, but the numbers that were very low in that war became very numerous in the 19391945 war. I believe they go from No. 1 to 194, and perhaps to 200 (vide fig. 26):

A variety of this type is when the letter R is inserted between «No.» and the figure. This may indicate the word «Registered» (vide fig. 27).

The Indian Army however also used, although more rarely, another cancellation: «C. Base Post Office», with an asterisk at bottom, and 25 mm. diameter. I believe that this mark was only used in 1942 and 1943, probably in Irak and in the Persian Gulf. (vide fig. 28).



Fig.28.

Fig.29.

Another large Indian cancellation is; «Indian Section Base Office No. 7» In diameter it is about 31 mm. and it was in use between 1942 and 1944 (see fig. 29).

A further large Indian cachet (about 32 mm.) bears: «No. 7 Advance Base Post Office» with the letters R E G.

Finally the Indian Army used two small postmarks reading: «IND. B.P.O.-Egypt»; the upper portion of this text is sometimes rounded and sometimes straight.

Let us now consider the Dominions and Colonies.

I believe that Canada must have been represented in Egypt. They used a «Egypt Postage Prepaid» cancellation, with sector No. 61 or 64.



Fig.30.

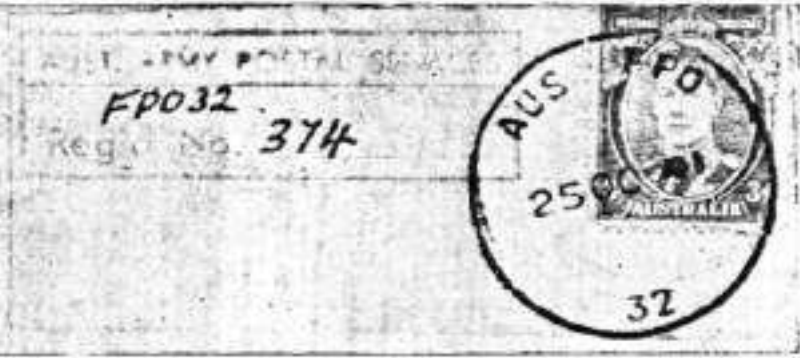


Fig.31.

The Union Defence Force also used this cancellation but with Nos. 70, 73 and 99. But they usually used their own cachet reading: «A.P.O. - UM.P.K.» with No. 30 at foot (1941-1943) (vide fig. 30).

The Australian Forces normally used a cancellation which read: «AUS.-FPO.» with or without a sector number below. The numbers known to me are: Nos. 32, 33 and 37 (vide fig. 31).



Fig.32.

Fig.33.

The New Zealand Forces used cancellations in varied forms, but all bore the typical letters «N.Z.» (vide figs. 32 and 33).

An early cachet has these initials above with the letters «F.P.O.» at foot. Another type bears these initials in an arc with the letters «F.P.O» and No. I..... (not clear) (one or 2 lines). Also, I have reason to believe that cancellations bearing the initials «KW.» mentioned above are those used by the New Zealand Forces. Finally they also employed a postmark «Egypt Postage Prepaid» with No. 30.

I know of no other Dominion or Colonial cancellations. As stated at the beginning, cancellations used by non British forces are to be studied: Egyptian, French, U.S.A., Polish, Greek, Belgian, etc. But these would be outside the scope of the present study. I hope in due course to undertake this.

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