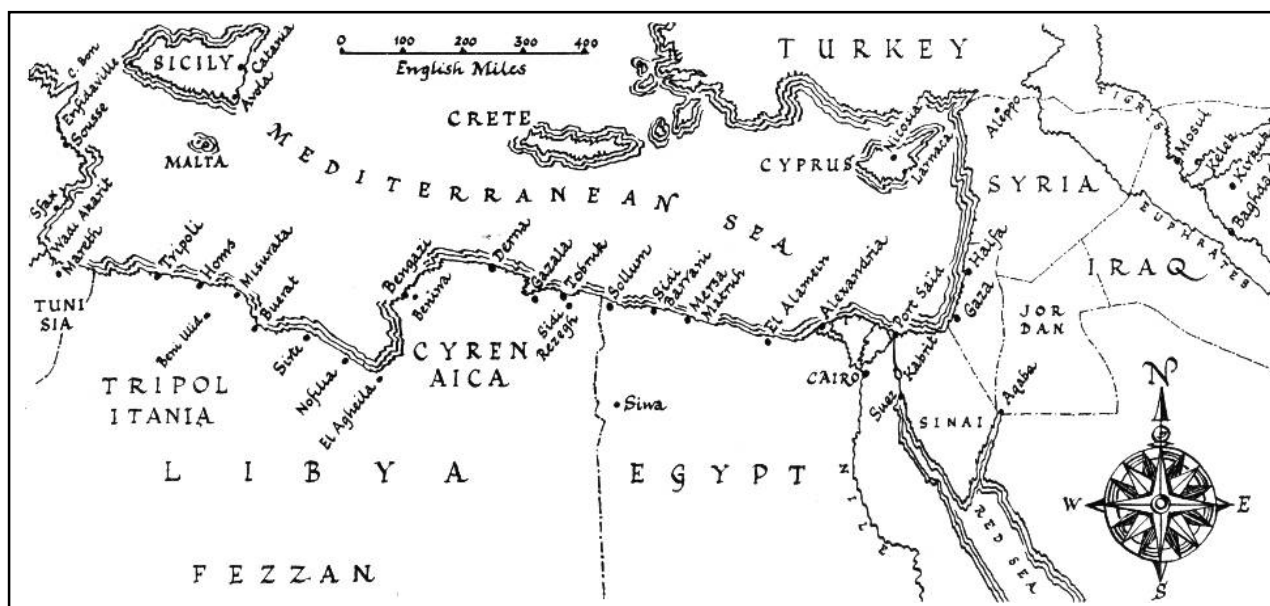


STAMP COLLECTING February 20th, 1953, 777

SOME MIDDLE EAST F.P.Os,-1941-43

By THOMAS CAIRNS



DURING the years 1941 to 1943 I served with the 6th Battalion Durham Light Infantry, 50th Division, in the Middle East and Mediterranean theatres of war.

From this period I have retained some three dozen Air Mail Letter Card fronts, most of them legibly postmarked with various Field Post Office datestamps, together with other records. From these sources I am able to give the following information which may be of interest to students of the Military Post.

First, let me say a word about the Air Mail Letter Card itself. This form of stationery competed in popularity with the Airgraph and the "Green Envelope", the latter having the advantage of privacy, being liable to censorship only at the Base. The "Green Envelope" however required a 10d. stamp for air mail transit, while the other two were despatched by air for 3d. All three were rationed.

The letter cards varied a great deal in quality of paper, style of lettering and colour of printing ink. Of those in my collection the early sheets are of good quality smooth paper and carry the words GT. BRITAIN in the address panel: this was omitted in those dating from late 1941. These early sheets were printed, I believe, in the United Kingdom, while those which succeeded them were produced in the Middle East and India, and are much poorer in quality, the paper being absorbent and easily torn. The poorest examples seem to date from the spring of 1942, and from this period onwards they vary in quality, never quite reaching the standard of the early examples.

The difference in style of lettering is obvious. I can distinguish seven distinct types in my collection. The colour of printing ink varies from deep and pale blue to ultramarine.

There is one last point I wish to make' about the air mail letter card. The sheet was so folded that the sender started his correspondence on the reverse side of the address panel; consequently the letter card front carries the sender's number, rank, name and unit on its reverse side. This means of identification -usually absent in an ordinary cover--can be of great value in establishing the letter's place of origin.

My first six letter cards come from Cyprus. The 50th Division occupied Cyprus from July 25th to November 1st, 1941, in expectation of an enemy airborne attack following the German invasion of Crete. They are franked with G.B. 3d. stamps or the equivalent in lower values, all in dark colours, and date-stamped F.P.O. 291.

The next two cards in my collection were written near the village of Kelek, on the Greater Zab River, midway between Mosul and Kirkuk in Iraq. The 151 Infantry Brigade (of which the 6th Battalion Durham Light Infantry formed part) occupied this area from mid-November 1941 until February 6th, 1942, manning positions astride the main road from Mosul to the south during that very severe winter. The threat of a German attack through the Caucasus towards the Iraqi oilfields was very real at that time. The F.P.O. of these two cards is 244, and they are franked with G.B. 3d. stamps.

In February 1942 the 151 Brigade moved overland from Iraq to the Suez Canal, reaching El Kantara on February 17th. By the end of February the three brigades of the 50th Division-69, 150 and 151-which had been separated by various duties, were united in the line at Gazala, Cyrenaica, relieving the 4th Indian Division.

My next three letter cards were posted during this occupation of the Gazala line, and a fourth, dated 22 May 42, was posted during the battle of Gazala which resulted in the 8th Army retreat to Alamein. During this battle the 150th Brigade of the 50th Division was overwhelmed and was not re-formed. These four cards are datestamped F.P.O. 244, which would suggest that this Field Post Office moved with 151 Brigade from Iraq into the Western Desert : alternatively, the letter cards from Iraq were sent to Egypt or the Western Desert for postmarking.

The next two letter cards bear the datestamp F.P.O. 143. These were posted at Amariya, near Alexandria, where the Division-now numbering only two brigades-rested and refitted. This period extended from the beginning of July until the end of August. Two changes are noticeable in the cards from Amariya. The G.B. stamps change to light colours and the censor stamp which, up till the retreat from Gazala, had been 364 enclosed in a triangle, is now replaced by No. 4868 enclosed in a circle. These changes remain constant in all the remaining cards in my collection.

On August 28th the 50th Division relieved the 2nd New Zealand Division at the southern end of the Alamein Line. The position was flanked by the Greek Brigade on the right and the 2nd Fighting French Brigade on the left. The first letter card I have from this period is dated 17 Sept. 42 and carries F.P.O. No. 143. The next three bear an "Egypt Postage Prepaid" datestamp No. 98 : the dates on these three are 27 Sept., 19 Oct. and 25 Oct., the last having been posted during the Alamein battle.

About this time I designed a Christmas Airgraph for the 44th (Home Counties) Division, incorporating a view of St. Paul's Cathedral. An acute paper shortage prevented the idea being carried out as intended, but I received the sum of two pounds for my drawing. I sometimes wonder if the design is still preserved in the archives of that splendid division which fought such a gallant action in the Deir el Munassib at Alamein.

My next nine cards bear the date stamp of F.P.O. 572 and range from Egypt to Tunisia.

The first of these is a Christmas Greetings letter card dated 18 Nov. 42: the second is an ordinary letter card dated 24 Nov. 42. Both were written at el Ommiad in the vicinity of the Alamein battlefield.

The next two, dated 13 Dec. and 27 Dec., were sent off while the battalion was camped at Sidi Rezegh: this historic spot will be remembered as a battleground during the relief of Tobruk in the winter of 1941.

Following these, come two from Benina, near Benghazi these are dated 16 Jan. and 12 Feb. 43. The division remained in this part of Cyrenaica until the end of February owing to damage caused to the port of Benghazi by severe storms and the resulting difficulty of supply. However, at the beginning of March the division moved rapidly through Libya into Tunisia and took part in the battles of Mareth and Wadi Akarit. My next three letter cards are from Tunisia, the first two from the Mareth area written on 2 Apr. and 11 Apr., and the third from Sfax on 20 Apr. 43.

From Sfax, the division moved north to Enfidaville, where it was relieved by the 56th Division, and returned by the coast road to the Canal Zone.

My next card is dated 23 May 43 and carries F.P.O. No. 370. This letter card was sent off from Kabrit in the Canal Zone, where the division trained for the invasion of Sicily. On July 8th, 1943, the 50th Division sailed

for Sicily and, at dawn on July 10th, landed on the south-east corner of the island, near the town of Avola. From here, the division advanced north by way of the east coast road to Messina, capturing the fiercely-contested Primosole Bridge south of Catania and taking part in the weeks-long struggle on the Catania plain.

I have six letter cards and a registered cover from this campaign: Unfortunately, some of these are almost illegible : such are my first two cards, dated 22 July and 7 Aug., both written from the battalion's position in the siege-lines south of Catania. The first of these datestamps seems to be that of F.P.O. 657 and the second that of F.P.O. 370.

The next two, written on 6 Sept. and 10 Sept., after the enemy evacuation of the island, bear the clear datestamp of F.P.O. 657, as does a registered cover from this same period dated 20 Sept. At this time the battalion was stationed on the outskirts of Syracuse.

Another letter card, written on 13 Sept., while the battalion was in the Syracuse area, bears the datestamp of F.P.O. 756. My, last letter card was written on 3 Oct, in the vicinity of Augusta, and bears a very faint datestamp which seems to be that of F.P.O. 238.

Towards the end of the year the division embarked from Augusta for England by way of the Straits of Gibraltar. After a further period of training, it landed in Normandy on the morning of D-Day, the 6th of June, 1944.