

Mail from the wreck of the *Atlantique* 1918

Adam Hafez (ESC 747)

In 1918, while the world lived under the shadow of the First World War, the seas had become fierce battlegrounds between military surface vessels and submarines, the underwater hunters. Amid those perilous days, the French paquebot *S.S. Atlantique*, operated by the Messageries Maritimes company, sailed from Port Said, heavily laden with passengers, cargo and vast amounts of mail bound for Europe. The journey was anything but easy. Because of the lurking threat of German submarines, every maritime voyage – especially in the Mediterranean – had to proceed as convoys within the protection of fighting ships.

On 9 May 1918, close to the Tunisian coast, the convoy was ambushed by a German submarine, which launched a torpedo that struck the *Atlantique* on her starboard side. The explosion was violent, and as seawater flooded into the ship's hull both passengers and crew faced terrifying moments of panic.



Postcard: *The Atlantique* on the Mediterranean high seas near Port Said

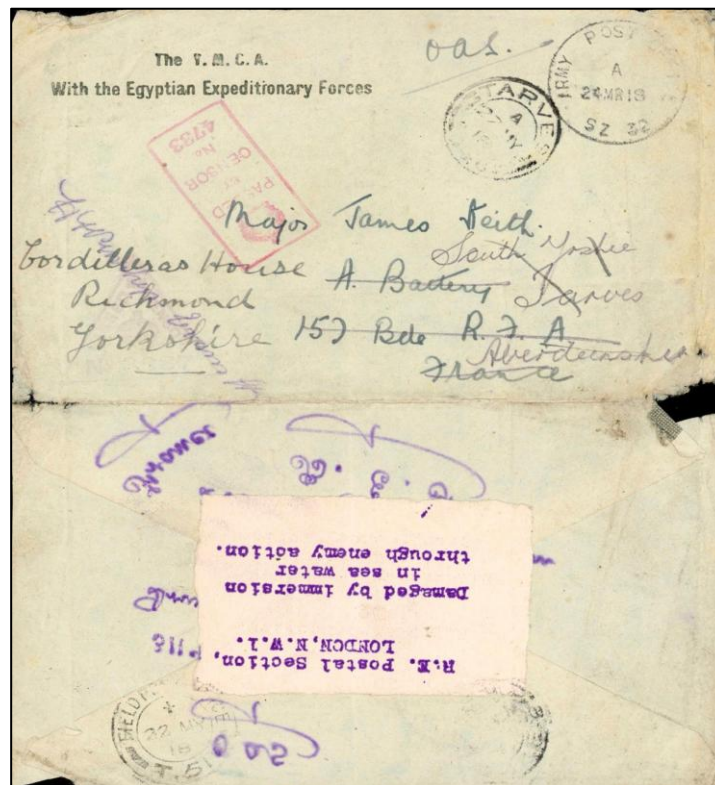
Despite the scale of the disaster, the French crew displayed extraordinary bravery. With help from three British destroyers, they managed to save the ship from sinking and towed her slowly towards the port of Bizerte in Tunisia, while she barely stayed afloat. The passengers were evacuated safely, but the ship's mail had been completely immersed in seawater.

After safety in the port was reached, the exhausting work of attempting to salvage the mail began. Letters and parcels were extracted from the hold, drenched, torn and badly damaged. Most stamps had floated off, inks had diluted out of all significance, and texts had faded into near-illegibility. Nonetheless, the postal workers were determined not to abandon these valuable shipments to the waves. The rescued letters were transported from North Africa to the French port of Marseille, where an important decision was made: every surviving piece of mail would bear a special mark to testify to its remarkable story of survival.

BATEAU NAUFRAGE MARSEILLE

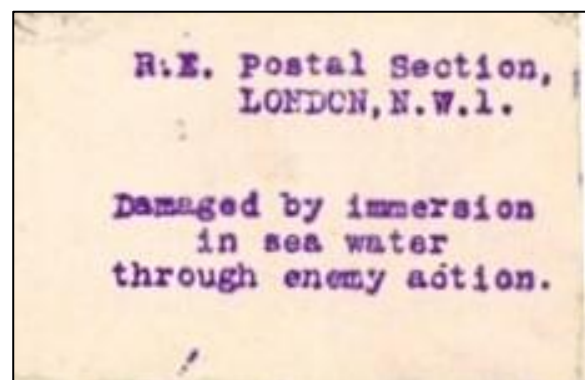
Thus appeared the now-famous handstamp: “**BATEAU NAUFRAGÉ MARSEILLE**” (meaning “Shipwreck – Marseille”). This simple mark, now recognized by all maritime postal historians and collectors, quietly told every reader: this letter endured the inferno of war at sea and survived against all odds.

Among these surviving artifacts, one cover stands out vividly. It was a YMCA printed envelope sent “On Active Service” (and so free postage) from a member of the Egyptian Expeditionary Force stationed in Egypt, dated March 24, 1918, and addressed to an artillery officer, Major James Keith, in France.



Cover from Egyptian Expeditionary Forces on 24 March 1918 showing signs of water damage from enemy action. Below, the typed label of the Royal Engineers London NW1 postal section

On its back, a typed label was affixed stating: **“Damaged by immersion / in sea water / through enemy action.”** On close examination, the effects of the seawater, the torn folds and the dissolved ink are clear. Many of the faint and indistinct markings on the back have leached from other covers during their period in the sea. It has no “Bateau Naufrage Marseille” but bears two military postmarks, for unit T51 of March 22 and SZ32 of March 34, a red military censor mark No 4733, and was readdressed to Tavers in Aberdeenshire before finding its recipient in Richmond, North Yorkshire.



Despite all that it endured, this single envelope stands as a silent witness to one of the most powerful moments of war. Wreck mail, as it is known among philatelists, represents a rare and fascinating branch of philately. Its value lies not only in its beauty or completeness but in the story it carries. Every such piece of mail is a living testimony to natural or human disasters, narrating tales of hope, struggle and survival.

Covers such as this are treasures that combine postal history with military chronicles, telling stories not only of battles and storms but also of human resilience and the spirit of communication in times of chaos.

Regarded as rare pieces of humanity’s collective memory, they are valued among philatelists and historians. The story of this cover teaches us that letters are not just ink and paper. They are living souls traveling across nations, carrying dreams, hopes and voices. Even the mightiest storms of war could not silence a letter that was destined to arrive.