

Section 108

Postal Services

Introduction

The British Army Post office was extremely efficient. It could deliver mail to men at the front often before a similar letter could be delivered in the United Kingdom. In the reverse direction the need for censorship often slowed down the mail from the time it was written to the time it entered the system. There was a further check to ensure that mail from the front which had been returned because a soldier had been killed was not returned to the writer before the official telegram had been received by the next of kin.

While individual units cannot be identified from the postmarks below the Brigade level, it is generally possible to identify which letters or postcards had come from areas where various units of the Royal Berks had been serving and allied to censor marks, the signature of the censoring officer and the addressee it is often possible to pinpoint the writer.

Mail from the front was often kept for long periods by the families, especially of those who were killed. However as the immediate families have died off much of this material has filtered through to the postal history market and is readily available at stamp and postcard fairs.

In this note we provide some of the clues needed to identify mail with Royal Berks's units.

The Postal System.

It is necessary to first explain the general system whereby mail from the fighting units was handled. There were detailed changes over the years but the description which follows will indicate the main lines of the flow.

When a man had a letter or postcard ready for posting it would be collected from the trenches by a company runner and taken to the company or battalion post box. Most company, battalion, brigade and divisional HQs would also have a mail box into which mail could be placed. The first step was to censor the mail. This was a job usually given to the lowliest subaltern at the relevant HQ and he would either cross out offending material or simply destroy the correspondence. Items that passed the censorship would be given a censor stamp bearing a number and the censor would also have to sign it. Some items of mail did not need the stamp, for example a Field Post Card which the man could complete to say eg that he was well. The mail was then taken by courier to the Brigade HQ where the lowest level of Field Post Offices were located. At these FPOs a clerk of the Army Postal Service would apply a postmark consisting of a double ring with the words FIELD POST OFFICE and a number. Initially the number indicated the Brigade but when British Intelligence reconstructed almost the whole of the German Order of Battle from a consignment of mail captured in early 1916 it was ordered that handstamps had to be changed at regular intervals and this new arrangement started on 18th June 1916. There were six periods referred to as phases I to VI.

Divisional HQs also operated post offices and their postmarks incorporated the letter D to prefix the Divisional number. Corps HQ were indicated by the letter H (as cavalry brigades used the C prefix) There were also train post offices (identified by the letter T). It should be noted that 'train' was an army technical term and related to the logistics service of a Division (in the sense of a baggage train) and not to a railway train, although in some cases a railway formed part of a divisional train. Many other indicators were in use but these need not concern us.

Early in the war a slightly different system was in use. At first an Army Postal Unit would be attached to a Brigade, Division or Corps and used a handstamp bearing the words ARMY POST

OFFICE and the number of the postal unit. From 22nd Jan 1915 however there was a need to separate out the fixed post offices (which stayed in the same geographical location) from the mobile ones (which travelled with the fighting units). These latter offices were the ones redesignated Field Post Offices.

The mail flowed from Brigade to Division via the Divisional train and then to the Division's supply railhead where the Divisional train finished. Here it was placed in a special mail van attached to the back of most trains and taken to an appropriate Base Post Office for sorting. Mail for other units would be returned to the system and mail for the UK would be sent first to Le Havre and then taken via Southampton and entered the GPO system.

This is obviously a gross over-simplification of what was a very complex and sophisticated system. Arrangements were similar for other theatres of war and there were slightly different arrangements for parcels and registered mail.

One point to note however was that while in the trenches men often had little or no time to write letters or cards and often no means to write anyway. Many letters from the trenches will be found written in indelible ink from specially produced pencils which had to be moistened before use. These are easily identified from their purple colour.

It was when men were at rest camps or in hospital that they had the most time to write and so a fairly high proportion of surviving correspondence bears the marks of such places rather than the Field Post Offices. Brigade Identification.

Brigade Identification

The Brigades we will be interested in are those in which a battalion of the Royal Berks was engaged. We will not deal with Divisions or Corps as they were common to so many units. These are:-

Brigade	Battalion	from	to
1	8	7/8/1915	6/2/1918
6	1	5/8/1914	13/12/1915
10	1/4th	30/3/1915	13/5/1915
24	8	24/4/1918	26/4/1918
25	2	5/11/1914	end
35	5	30/5/1915	6/2/1918
36	5	6/2/1918	end
53	6	24/7/1915	6/2/1918
53	8	6/2/1918	end
78	7	27/9/1915	end
99	1	13/12/1915	end
145	1/4th	13/5/1915	end
184	2/4th	2/1915	end

The Postmarks

The postmarks that will be of interest are therefore:-

Identity	Brigade	Batt	from	to	Phase
APO 1	6	1	5/8/14	6/2/15	
APO 72	25	2	5/11/14	8/2/15	
FPO 1	1	8	7/8/15	17/6/16	

FPO 2	35	5	1/7/17	31/1/18	IV
FPO 3	25	2	18/6/16	30/9/16	I
FPO 3	10	1/4th	1/10/16	31/1/17	II
FPO 5	35	5	30/5/15	17/6/16	
FPO 6	6	1	6/2/15	13/12/15	
FPO 6	35	5	1/2/18	6/2/18	V
FPO 7	53	6	16/6/16	30/9/16	I
FPO 7	36	5	6/2/18	31/7/18	V
FPO 8	1	8	1/10/16	31/1/17	II
FPO 10	10	1/4th	30/3/15	17/6/16	
FPO 12	1	8	1/2/17	30/6/17	III
FPO 13	35	5	18/6/16	30/9/16	I
FPO 13	53	8	1/8/18	1/2/19	VI
FPO 20	10	1/4th	1/2/17	30/6/17	III
FPO 20	53	6	1/7/17	31/1/18	IV
FPO 23	1	8	18/6/16	30/9/16	I
FPO 25	25	2	8/2/15	17/6/16	
FPO 25	53	6	1/2/18	15/2/18	V
FPO 25	53	8	1/2/18	31/7/18	V
FPO 34	1	8	1/7/17	31/1/18	IV
FPO 42	35	5	1/10/16	31/1/17	II
FPO 42	10	1/4th	1/2/18	31/7/18	V
FPO 43	10	1/4th	1/7/17	31/1/18	IV
FPO 44	25	2	1/2/17	30/6/17	III
FPO 46	53	6	1/10/16	31/1/17	II
FPO 50	35	5	1/2/17	30/6/17	III
FPO 50	10	1/4th	1/8/18	1/2/19	VI
FPO 52	24	8	24/4/18	26/4/18	V
FPO 53	53	6	24/7/15	17/6/16	
FPO 56	10	1/4 th	18/6/16	30/9/16	I
FPO 58	25	2	1/7/17	31/1/18	IV
FPO 61	99	1	1/2/18	31/7/18	V
FPO 61	25	2	1/8/18	1/2/19	VI
FPO 68	53	6	1/2/17	30/6/17	III
FPO 78	78	7	27/9/15	1/3/19	Salonika
FPO 92	99	1	1/10/16	31/1/17	II
FPO 99	99	1	13/12/15	17/6/16	
FPO 111	99	1	1/2/17	30/6/17	III

FPO 112	145	1/4 th	1/7/17	10/11/17	IV
FPO 138	145	1/4 th	1/10/16	31/1/17	II
FPO 142	184	2/4 th	18/6/16	30/9/16	I
FPO 145	145	1/4 th	13/5/15	17/6/16	
FPO 145	145	1/4 th	11/11/17	1/3/19	Italy
FPO 166	145	1/4 th	18/6/16	30/9/16	I
FPO 177	99	1	1/7/17	31/1/18	IV
FPO 184	184	2/4 th	26/5/15	17/6/16	
FPO 190	184	2/4 th	1/7/17	31/1/18	IV
FPO 1K	25	2	1/10/16	31/1/17	II
FPO 2W	184	2/4 th	1/2/18	31/7/18	V
FPO 3SM	145	1/4 th	3/4/15	31/5/15	
FPO 3W	36	5	1/8/18	1/2/19	VI
FPO 3X	25	2	1/2/18	31/7/18	V
FPO 3Z	99	1	1/8/18	1/2/19	VI
FPO 6X	184	2/4 th	1/2/17	30/6/17	III
FPO C9	145	1/4 th	1/2/17	30/6/17	III
FPO Q4	184	2/4 th	1/8/18	1/2/19	VI
FPO SA1	99	1	18/6/16	30/9/16	I
FPO SA1	184	2/4 th	1/10/16	31/1/17	II

Censors

Each unit was supplied with an official war office censor mark. They come in a variety of shapes and were usually stamped in purple or red. Each mark bears a number and it is possible to identify the unit from this number.

The first type of censor mark used consisted of the words PASSED BY CENSOR, a crown and a number within a small circular frame. This was issued to units of the BEF as they went to France. Allocation was by Division and then strictly in accordance with the precedence each battalion had within the British Army. Only the 1st and 2nd Bns used this type and the 1st's mark (code 64) was lost during the retreat from Mons when Lt Perrott was killed.

In December 1914 the circular types were replaced by square types. It was planned again in Divisional order (for units in France) and then strictly by army precedence. This time the 1st/4th were included.

In April 1915 a triangular mark was introduced. Numbers were allocated on the same basis as before for units already in France and then followed by each new army division as it left for France. Blocks of numbers were allocated to other theatres but no Royal Berks were involved at this stage. When the 7th went to Salonika from France they took their mark with them.

In January 1916 triangular marks on the western front only were replaced by hexagonal marks. This time the numbers were issued by regiment arranged in strict order of precedence and so the several battalions of the Royal Berks all received consecutive numbers (2159 to 2165) The number 2164 intended for the 7th was not issued however as they were no longer on the western front.

In November 1916 a new vertical oval was introduced the western front and this was in its turn replaced by an upright rectangle in early 1917. These lasted until the end of the war but marks were exchanged around units for security purposes.

A seventh type in the form of a shield was introduced for the Eastern Mediterranean, including Salonika to replace their triangles and the 7th Bn got number 151. The numbers used by the Royal Berks units therefore were as follows:-

Type	Battalion	Number	Note	
Circular	1	64	Lost 10/9/14 replacement	
	1	253		
	2	1071		
Square	1	1622		
	2	1623		
	1/4th	2903		
Triangular	1	3663		
	2	3664		
	1/4th	1155		
	5	1666		
	6	1913		
	7	2228		
	8	473		
	8	473		
Hexagonal	1	2159		
	2	2160		
	1/4th	2161		
	5	2162		
	6	2163		
	7	2164		Never issued
	8	2165		
	Oval			
Rectangle			Not known	
Shield	7	151		

Bibliography

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