



Sabretache

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A Christmas Greeting from Italy 1943

This was a Christmas card from my Uncle Fred Gale to his wife living in Calgary. He had recently caught up to his unit (The Edmonton Regiment) in Italy that fall.



This system of communicating was called “**Airgraph**” was invented by Eastman Kodak in the 1930’s. It was done in conjunction with Imperial Airways (now British Airways) and Pan-American Airways as a means of reducing the weight and bulk of mail carried by air. The airgraph forms, upon which the letter was written, were photographed and then sent as negatives on rolls of microfilm. The advantage being that thousands of letters could be reduced to a 5 oz. spool of film.

In the early months of World War II, the Ministry of Transport in Great Britain was faced with serious problems in maintaining a postal service for forces stationed in the Middle East. After the French surrender to Germany in May of 1940, and with Italy a key Axis member, the western and central Mediterranean were under Axis control, with key parts of North Africa also Axis-dominated, thus closing the short route to the Atlantic. The preferred alternative was to send mail by air, but space for mail by air was extremely limited, so letters to and from the Near and Far East were taking 3 to 6 months to reach their destination by the only method remaining - via ship around the southern tip of Africa.

The basic concept was simple. Letters were photographed on the sending end, then the negatives were sent by air to the destination end, where they were printed and delivered. The volume and weight of the film were less than one fiftieth of the volume and weight of the letters, so a large number of letters could be transported quickly at a relatively small cost.

The Kodak office in Cairo already had the equipment required to photograph the letters, and was able to start processing almost at once. Airgraph service started from Cairo on April 21, 1941, arriving in London May 13. That first shipment comprised some 70,000 letters, a testament to someone's efforts to sell the concept. About 350,000 messages were sent during the first month of the service and over 500,000 in the second month.

It took a while to establish service in the other direction, though, as getting Cairo set up to transmit had been the first priority, and getting London set up to transmit turned out to be more complicated. By the time the first dispatch left London nearly 1,000,000 Airgraph messages had been received in Britain, that from official records. The first Airgraph from the UK was sent in August by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth (wife of King George VI) to General Sir Claud Auchinleck, Commander-in-Chief, Middle East Forces, conveying a formal message to inaugurate the service.



Queen Elizabeth taking a look at an airgraph film. The Queen sent the first airgraph to launch the service in 1941.

The original forms were 11 x 8¼ inches. These were microfilmed onto 100-foot rolls of 16-millimetre film, which was sufficient for approximately 1600 forms. The film plus a 4" aluminum container weighed 5½ ounces. The equivalent quantity of ordinary letters would have weighed approximately 35 pounds and filled two mailbags.

The end product of the service, a letter delivered to the addressee, was a photographic print, 5½ x 4¼ inches, approximately one quarter the size of the original, in a crude brown envelope measuring about 3¾ by 4¾ "



Film was processed on to photographic paper, cut to size and the placed in envelopes, then mailed to recipient.

AIRGRAPH PROCESSING ABROAD

By the end of the War, Airgraph processing overseas was being carried out at the following places: - Cairo, Calcutta, Algiers, Naples, Toronto, Johannesburg, Wellington, Colombo, Bombay, Nairobi, and Melbourne.

Opening of stations was gradual, with availability of equipment and the difficulties of sea transport being the main problems. The final station was opened in Colombo, Ceylon (Sri Lanka), in September 1944

V-mail, short for Victory Mail —The United States enters the war.



The APS (Army Postal Service) was quick to see the necessity of the Airgraph system.

Sending and receiving mail was a morale-booster and a lifeline to home for service members during World War II.

However, the ever-expanding volume of mail became difficult for the postal service and military branches to move back and forth. For instance, 150,000 single-page letters took 37

mail bags to carry, and weighed about 2,575 pounds. This took up valuable cargo space on ships and planes – space needed to carry vital supplies and equipment. In June 1942, the Post Office, the War Department, and the Navy Department implemented Victory Mail or V-Mail. This was a system that had been successfully modeled by the British Airgraph Service for over a year.

The Eastman Kodak-designed service launched on June 15, 1942 and became the primary method of communication between soldiers on the front lines and family at home.

A V-mail letter would be written on a piece of standardized stationery, then photographed and transferred onto a roll of microfilm. Upon reaching its destination, the letter would be blown back up to a readable size and printed.

Each letter passed before censors before being photographed, and the process foiled the potential use of espionage tools such as invisible ink and microprinting.

Using the V-Mail process, 1,600 letters could be crammed onto a roll of film the size of a pack of cigarettes. 2,000 pounds of cargo became 20, and 37 mail bags became just one.



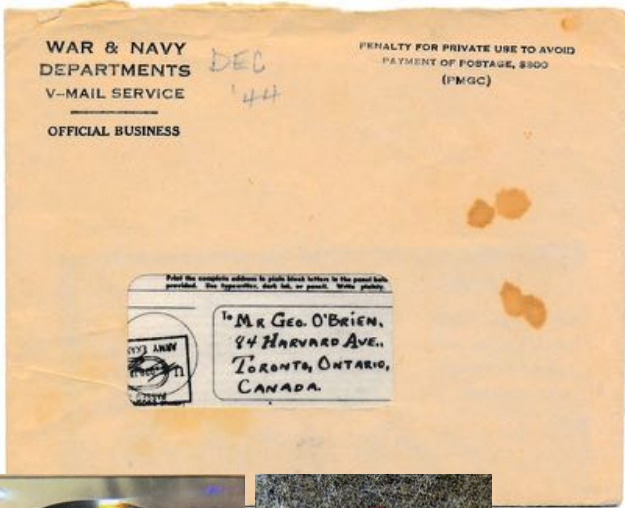
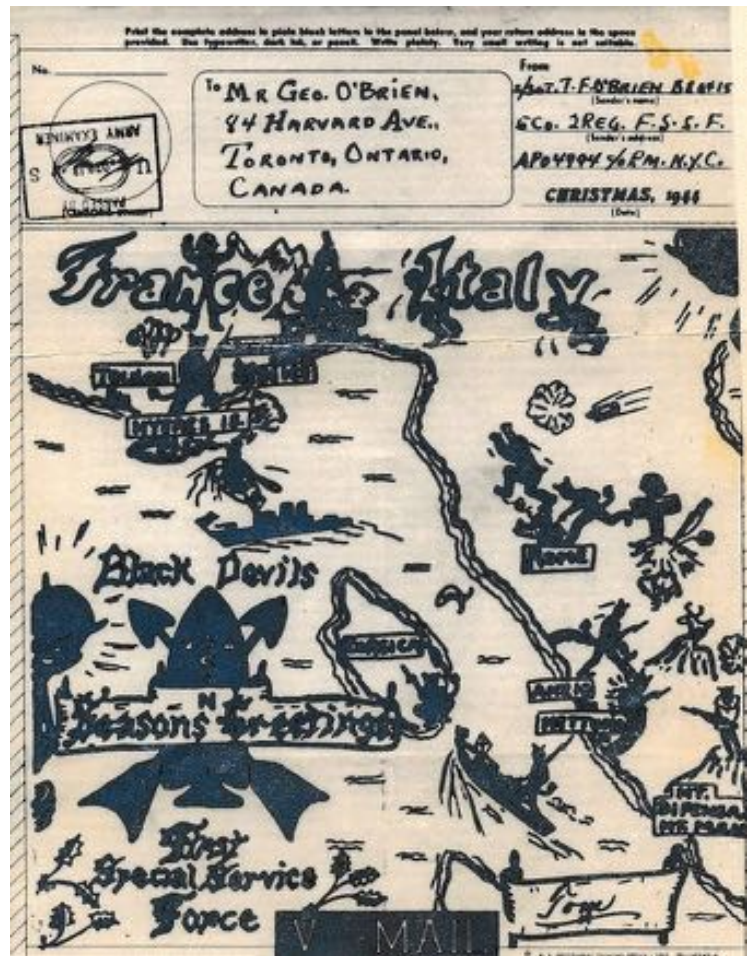
Eastman Kodak equipment used to process the V-Mail photo's

The military mail system and the amount of post flowing back and forth internationally during the war was massive. An unprecedented amount of mail was moved about during the war with Army post offices, fleet post offices and US post offices flooded with mail. Each year of the war, the number of pieces of mail increased. In 1945, 2.5 billion pieces went through the Army Postal Service and 8 million pieces through Navy post offices. To bring mail service to those serving worldwide, the military postal system required a global network and innovative practice.



V-Mail had its drawbacks. It was somewhat limiting in that only certain number of words could be used. Since the photo prints were 1/4 size of the original letter, if the print was too small then the final product was unreadable. Some stores actually sold special “V-mail readers,” magnifying glasses so that readers could decipher the reduced print. Another downside of V-mail is that one also couldn’t send enclosures (at least initially) and could not leave a personal imprint in the form of a lipstick kiss on the paper. Lipstick was referred to as the “scarlet scourge,” because it would gum up the machines used to film the letters.

Kodak advertisement explaining how they provided the key equipment used to reduce V-Mail to 16 mm



Season’s greetings from a member of the First Special Service Force operating in Italy 1944 Tom O’Brien sent this to his father.

Thomas O’Brien volunteered for a special unit, the 2nd Canadian Parachute Battalion (1st Canadian Special Service Battalion).

O’Brien went on to participate in all major engagements undertaken by the First Special Service Force; the Aleutians, Italy and Southern France. These photo’s were part of the Sabretache Newsletter January 2021 and were contributed by Member Roy Akins



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Contact Editor: David Gale
david@sunnyspotservice.ca