

The History of the Aerogramme and the Start of Commercial Air Mail — Part Three

World War II

By the outbreak of the Second World War on September 3 1939 aviation in both its civil and military applications, had been highly developed. As was the case in the First World War, this was a period that witnessed tremendous progress in aeronautics. Aeroplanes developed in size, range and speed beyond anything dreamed of in pre-war years. The jet age dawned with the development, in Britain and Germany, of jet-propelled aircraft in 1941 and practical application to fighter planes came before the war in Europe had ended.

Airborne troops in the Low Countries in 1940, in Crete in 1941 and in Normandy in 1944, changed the course of whole campaigns. The great naval battles of the Pacific theatre of operations were largely fought by carrier-based aircraft. The Battle of Britain was an aerial one and it was by means of ever larger and more sophisticated bombers that total war came to have such grim meaning for the civilian populations of countries far removed from the front line.

Before the war the carriage of letters by aircraft was still regarded as something of a luxury; however, the war played an enormous part in the development of air mail. The carriage of mail for military personnel increased tremendously and the British postal authorities and military forces of the British Commonwealth throughout the world quickly adopted the Air Letter form as the most feasible method to provide troops with a fast medium of communication which was light enough to be carried by the already overtaxed capacity of military aeroplanes.

Numerous different types of form exist, some printed officially and some privately. These lightweight folding sheets which all stem from an Englishman's initiative and ingenuity, enabled our forces overseas to write to their families and friends at home, thus keeping moral high.

Special Christmas greetings forms were issued from Christmas 1942. 'So far and yet so near in our hearts as we wish you a Merry Christmas', were the words printed inside a

Middle East Command, Air Mail Letter Card of 1942. The enemy had no such links between soldier and civilian.

During the early part of the War, the Australian Government asked Mr Gumbley if he could provide a cheap and rapid means of communication between troops and their families as an aid to maintaining morale. He suggested the adaptation and use of his Iraq Air Mail Letter Card and this was readily taken up by the Australian command and they issued one form to each man every week.

The first forces Air Mail Letter Cards were introduced on April 3 1941 for the Armed Forces in the battle areas of the Middle East and Central Mediterranean. It was exclusively an Army Form bearing the imprint 'A.F.W. 3077' or 'Army Form W 3077'.

The paper was of very poor quality, in grey, stone, or buff of various different shades. The front and back panels of the forms were overlaid with a close printing of minute dots to give privacy to the correspondence on the interior of the folded sheet had no imprinted stamps and examples bear adhesive stamps of many Commonwealth countries.

It is worth noting that not one of these special sheets was printed in Great Britain to take civilian greetings out to the brave men and women in the combat zones until December 7 1942, when Air Letter forms with the 'Army Form' designation omitted and a 6d adhesive stamp affixed were put on sale for corresponding with members of the Forces serving in East Africa. The service was extended to South Africa on April 9 1943.

It was not until June 18 1943, that Air Letters with an imprinted 6d stamp were made available at all British Post Offices.

On July 21 1941, Great Britain had become the first country in Europe to issue an impressed-stamped Air Letter form. Specifically for the use of prisoners of war in Germany and Italy, the forms were printed by McCorquodale & Co Limited in their works at Wolverton.

The early forms were printed 12 to a sheet on flatbed letterpress Wharfedale machines.

The ruled lines were a separate operation, but later printings done on a reel-fed Timsons Rotary Press machine had the lines printed at the same time as the form and 2½d impressed stamp, which was on a separate cylinder.

At the end of the Second World War British air routes were reorganised. British European Airways (BEA) was established on August 1 1946 to handle domestic and European flights from British Overseas Airways Corporation (BOAC).

Imperial Airways and its principal rival, British Airways had amalgamated in November 1939 to form British Overseas Airways Corporation, which officially took over all British external air services on April 1 1940.

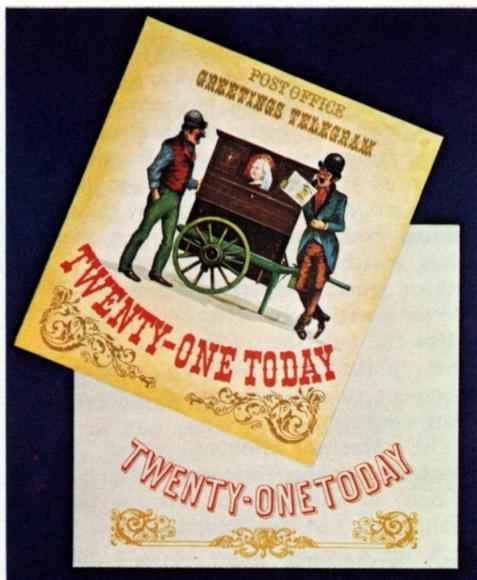
Next time, Post-War Air Letters of Great Britain up to 1966.

PETER JENNINGS

Inland Greetings Telegrams '21 Today' First Day of Issue

A new 21st birthday greetings telegram form and envelope, designed by Ken Thomas, will be introduced on 17 May to replace the existing design which has been in use since 1967 and has now become outdated. The decorative card and matching envelope will be available as a 'First Day Telegram' on this date, and customers may place orders from 10 May up to close of normal working hours on 17 May. Orders may be placed either by telephone as for a normal telegram (phonogram) or by completing an inland telegram application form at any Head Post Office.

The envelope will bear the name and address as requested by the customer, and the card will carry a first day of issue impression on the inside cover. No message will be allowed with this service. Delivery will be made by post and the charge for the facility will be £1.08 (including VAT). Overseas customers may order the item from the Philatelic Bureau, Lothian House, 124 Lothian Road, Edinburgh EH3 9BB; the charge will be



£1.25 which includes air-mail postage to the country of destination, and this must be enclosed with the order.

Book Reviews

Stanley Gibbons Great Britain Specialised Stamps Catalogue Vol 3 The Queen Elizabeth II Pre-Decimal Issues 3rd Edition

The new edition of the QE 'specialised' is the first since 1971 and is restricted for the first time to the pre-decimal issues. In making this change, the publishers have recognised the philatelic watershed created by decimalisation and the difficulty of combining in one volume the extensive pre-decimal material and the already considerable decimal issues. Indeed they can already warrant a fourth 'decimal' volume which is in preparation.

The general organisation follows the previous editions, but there has been extensive revision of the detail particularly of the sections devoted to the Wilding and Machin definitives. New discoveries have been added to the