

Identifiable Mail to and from Naval Personnel During World War II; 1939 – 1945

Synopsis

The purpose of this exhibit is to show identifiable censored mail to and from naval personnel and the difficulty finding such items with the hopes it will encourage others to take up the study. At least one example of unidentifiable mail will be shown and this represents most mail from navy personnel. .

On the eve of World War II thirteen ships were in the service of the Royal Canadian Navy ; six destroyers, five minesweepers, two training ships, one of which was a sailing vessel and the other a fishing vessel from the “Fisherman’s Reserve”. By the end of the war the Royal Canadian Navy had become the fourth largest Navy in the world with close to one hundred and six thousand men and women serving in eleven hundred and forty ships and shore establishments. This represented millions of pieces of mail within that five years and eight months period, most of which is unidentifiable as to as to the ship or person it comes from. **All mail to and from Naval personnel had to be examined.**

The Fisherman’s Reserve was made up of 62 vessels on the West Coast that were requisitioned by the R.C.N. to patrol the inlets along the Canadian coastline. They were tendered to HMCS Givenchy and manned for the most part by RCN personnel. The chances of invasion at that part of the country was not considered a threat allowing for most to be paid off by the end of 1942

Security was extremely tight with censoring regulations to be strictly adhered to. A letter from a naval Personnel aboard a ship was to be headed by his name, number and the Fleet Mail Office (FMO) as a return address. The name of the ship or its location was not to be included. The body of a letter was pretty much restricted to the well-being of the writer and inquiries of those to whom the letter was addressed. Censoring was done as a rule by the youngest officer on a ship with censoring devices kept under lock and key. Officers were not supposed to censor their own mail but this rule was not strictly followed.

There were four distinct types of censor markings. The tombstone markings were issued in 1940 to all Canadian ships as they arrived in British ports. There were four versions. These were followed by Canadian Navy issued oblong and rectangular markings and read From H.M.C. Ships. They were of different measurements and required the censoring officer to sign and date them. In cases where these censor markings were used by British ships, the ‘C’ was removed and read FROM H.M. SHIP. In 1943 a new censor marking was issued that read either, EXAMINED BY DB/N..... followed by a number or two lines reading FROM H.M.C. SHIP, Examined by DB/N followed by a number. Several different types and measurements are known. There was the straight single line, two line centered and two line justified. The number was designated and registered to a ship. DB was the censor code issued to Canada during the war. The forward slash followed by the letter ‘N’ indicated Navy. There was no need for a signature or date

Identifying the ship a cover comes from is very difficult. If one can read the initials from the early tombstone and oblong censors, there is a website, For Posterity’s Sake, listing all Canadian Navy officers that served in the R.C.N. and a little work does produce results as will be seen

from some of the examples in the exhibit. There is also a listing of some DB/N numbers with the ship names they represent. Occasionally there is a return address on the flap of the cover and that is the only true way of identifying the ship a piece of mail comes from. Maurice Hampson and Percy Colbeck wrote several volumes titled *The Royal Canadian Naval Postal History 1939 – 1945* in which they list DB/N numbers according to mail they have seen and I have made a spread sheet of those plus any I have been able to add to. To date, a research of World War II naval files has failed to turn up an official registered listing of DB/N numbers and the ships they were assigned to. The only thing known to date is the first five hundred numbers were assigned to Canadian shore bases and to HMCS Avalon in Newfoundland.

Those serving aboard ship or overseas, and Newfoundland was considered overseas, were granted free postage on letters up to two ounces sent surface mail. Letters sent via airmail, special delivery or registered required postage to be paid per the rate of the day. Those serving in shore establishments in Canada were required to pay full postage. Added to covers was the handstamp, RECEIVED FROM HM SHIPS. That indicated to post offices handling that piece of mail, it was entitled to be processed as it was. That was later changed to the words POST OFFICE within a hub accompanied by MARITIME MAIL H.M.C.S. Avalon, the Newfoundland Naval Base used a triangle rubber stamp to indicate the proper postage was received. These triangles were of different sizes

Those serving from HMCS Avalon in St. John's, Newfoundland were able to have an account with the post office. On mailing a letter by airmail, special delivery or registered, the appropriate amount was deducted from the account and a triangle stamp was applied reading POSTAGE PAID G.P.O. Newfoundland still being a British Colony at the time was considered as being overseas to Canadian military personnel

Although every ship was as important as the other, the exhibit is set up first of all with a research item, then a shore base, Fisherman's Reserve, an auxiliary ship, Motor Torpedo Boats, Fairmile Motor Launches, Minesweepers, Corvettes, Frigates, Destroyers and larger warships.

In addition to the references listed below, This exhibitor has not only served in the Royal Canadian Navy but has also read many accounts of naval actions during World War II. However, in forming this exhibit, the website For Posterity's Sake and The Naval Museum of Manitoba have been of the greatest assistance.

References:

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Nimbus Publishing Ltd. Halifax, NS

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The Atlantic Campaign, Dan van der Vat
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Corvettes, Mac Johnston
McGraw-Hill Ryerson, Toronto and Montreal.

Websites;

For Posterity's Sake;

Naval Museum of Manitoba

War Sailors. Com