

Examining a US Army Post Office Datestamp Used in Canada

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Fig. 1 – The date stamp standing up (note no manufacturing markings).

Fig. 2 – The date stamp on its side.

Was this item actually ever used? Where? From what previously-used datestamp was it made?

Introduction

It is not often that postal historians ever get to obtain or examine actual datestamps. A recent eBay listing provided such an opportunity. The item is pictured in Figs. 1-3.

The datestamp was mis-described on eBay by the seller as being from APO (Army Post Office) 7220 and dated 1943. On closer examination, it is 1943 but from APO 722D. This would place the item as being used in Canada during World War II as discussed below.

United States Army Post Office 722

Most Canadians and postal historians do not realize that the United States armed forces operated post offices in Canada in World War II beginning in 1942. These post offices were associated with large military operations such as the Alaska Highway, Canol Project, or Crimson Project. If one knows the post office number from the datestamp and/or the return address, it is possible to trace the location.



Fig. 3 – Close-up view of the date stamp face.

APO (Army-Air Force Post Office) 722 was located at Edmonton, Alberta according to Carter (2001)¹. It opened on October 10, 1942 and appears to have served the US military personnel who were transporting supplies for the Alaska Highway, the Northwest Service Command, US Army Division Engineer Office, and some units associated with the Canol Project. APO 722 closed June 1, 1946. It later served US troops in Alaska. Another APO served Edmonton, 462, and appears to have been associated with air transport operations.

Carter (2001)¹ notes several units and lettered 'groups' associated with APO 722. Groups lettered from A through to at least S seemed to have been used to address mail to various military and civilian personnel located in or around communities in northern Alberta (Waterways, Embarras, Fawcett, Wagner, Little Smokey, and Fort McMurray) and the Mackenzie River watershed area of the Northwest Territories (Fort Smith, Hay River, Fort Resolution, Fort Providence, Fort Simpson, Wrigley, Norman Wells, and Canol). Group D appears to have been assigned to US military units located at Fort Smith, NWT and Fort

Fitzgerald, Alberta from about December 1943 to January 1944.

On February 1, 1944, the parent office for APO 722 was switched from Seattle, Washington to Minneapolis, Minnesota, which seems to have precipitated changes in addressing incoming and outgoing mail from locations outside of Edmonton. Instead of "Group X" or simply "APO 722-X" or "APO 722X", mail was addressed to "Station X". The precise locations of the station assignments distributed throughout the APO 722 operating area remain to be revealed. The "Group" designations as a part of the mailing address to or from US military operations in the Canadian northwest appear to have started as early as late February 1943, and have been seen on covers from APO 462, 473 (Canol, NWT), 474 (Peace River and Waterways, Alberta), 722 and 999 (Fort McMurray, Edmonton, Fort Smith).

What Was Happening at APO 722, Group D?

So APO 722-D or 722D appears to have been located at Fort Smith, NWT from about December 1943 to January 1944. What was happening at Fort Smith at that time? The Canol Project, an oil pipeline from Norman Wells, NWT on the Mackenzie River to Whitehorse, Yukon, was deemed necessary to supply Alaska with a secure, inland source of petroleum products after Pearl Harbour and the invasion of the Aleutian Islands by Japan. For philatelic coverage of the Canol Project, see O'Reilly (1992)² and Thompson and O'Reilly (1986)³. US troops arrived in Waterways by train in June 1942 to begin shipping supplies for the Canol Project down

the Athabasca, Slave, and Mackenzie Rivers to Norman Wells and Canol. This was the first movement of what was known as Task Force 2600, which was charged with moving the materials and personnel for the Canol Project.

As early as June 12, 1942, US troops began to arrive at Fort Fitzgerald, the southern terminus of a road around a set of treacherous rapids on the Slave River blocking the movement of goods north for the Canol Project. The northern end of the portage road was at Fort Smith. Airfields at several northern Alberta and NWT communities were either upgraded or built by US military personnel that first season of shipping for the Canol Project. This included the airstrip at Fort Smith, which was upgraded beginning in July 1942.

Beginning about September 1942, after the summer water-shipping season was over, troops were reassigned to the winter truck transport system that started from Peace River, Alberta and went up through Hay River (note that this system bypassed Fort

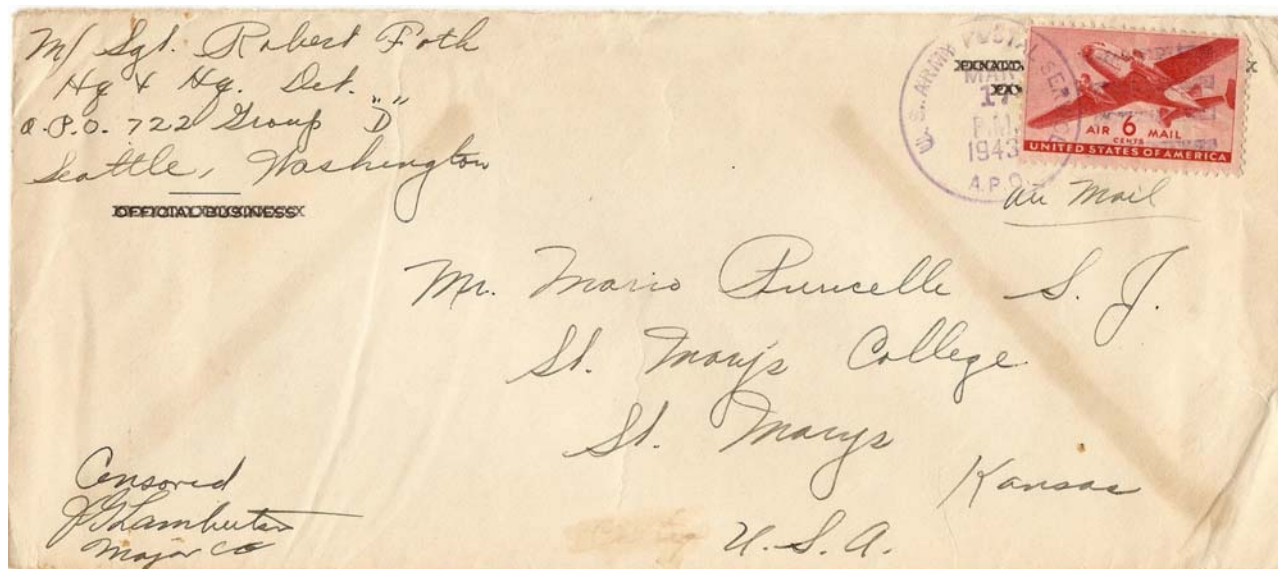
Smith). Supplies were again shipped through Fort Smith during the summer season of 1943. After this operation, the shipping was largely completed for the Canol Project as most of the construction materials were then in place. In the fall of 1943, most of the military personnel assigned to the Canol Project were withdrawn except for some residual maintenance and operational units.

Covers from APO 722-D?

What do covers from APO 722-D or APO 722, Group D look like? The earliest in my collection is dated March 17, 1943 with a date that does not show a number (see Fig. 4).

Between July 1, 1942 and March 10, 1943, the US War Department directed that the APO number not appear in the postmark, only in the

Fig. 4 – The earliest recorded cover from APO 722, Group D at Fort Smith, NWT. Note that there is no number in the cancel and that the “1” in the year date does not have a serif.

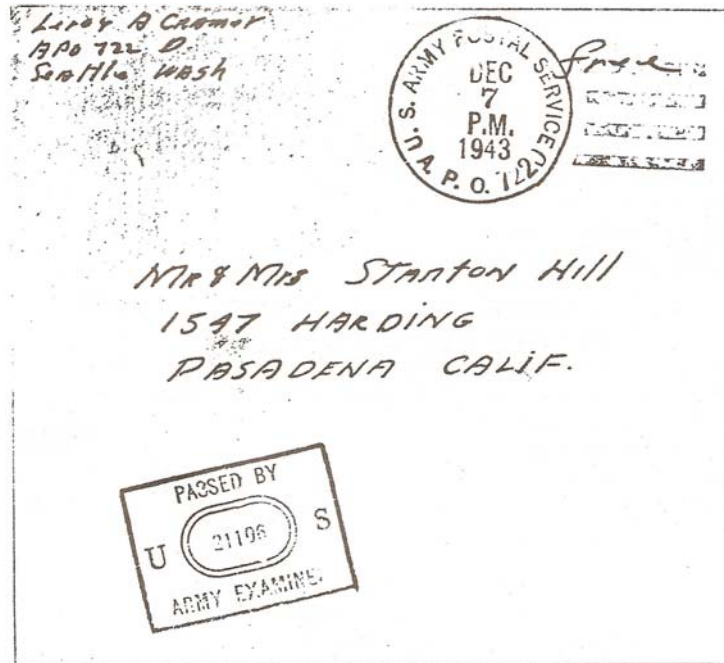


return or incoming address. It obviously took a while for this directive to be lifted and for numbers to appear in the postmark. The earliest APO 722-D cover with the number in the postmark that I have recorded is dated May 24, 1943. An example is shown in Fig. 5, which also

Fig. 5 – Two covers from the same sender. Note that the “E” in “SERVICE” appears to have been removed and that the “722” in the postmark in the bottom cover is not well struck. The “1” in the date has a serif, unlike that in Fig.



Fig. 6 – APO 722D cover illustrated in Cammarata (1993) showing unusual datestamp and censor marking 21106. With permission of The Alaskan Philatelist and Carl Cammarata.



shows a censor marking 21106. Note these covers are from the same writer and, like the cover above, are from a member of the Headquarter and Headquarters Detachment.

The datestamp used on the covers in Fig. 5 appears to have had the "E" in "SERVICE" cut out (perhaps the original letter was in error?). I have not seen this datestamp (with the missing "E", year date with a serif on "1" and this style of "722" used at any other APO 722 location or Group. The latest cover I have seen from APO 722-D is dated January 19, 1944 and bears the same censor as the lower cover in Fig. 5.

There is another interesting APO 722-D cover illustrated in a useful series of articles written by Carl Cammarata⁴ in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Cammarata's series updated Richard Helbock's⁵ 1977 listing of military postmarks of territorial Alaska. Cammarata illustrated the cover shown in Fig. 6.

It shows an unusual APO 722D datestamp and the previously shown censor marking 21106 that is also known used at APO 722D. It is unusual to have the unit number or Group designation appear in a postmark such as this, for an APO marking used in northwestern Canada. The cover in Fig. 6 bears the same datestamp with the exact same date as the item that started this article. I have

not recorded any other examples on cover, and I do not know the current owner of the cover in Fig. 6.

The APO 722D Datestamp

Let's have a closer look at the APO 722D datestamp. Fig. 7 shows a reversed close-up of its face.

There are detectable breaks in the circle frame as shown by the arrows, and the "A.P.O." portion of the datestamp has been moved closer to the "U.S." Moveable type numbers and letters have been inserted inside the repaired rim. Note that these letters and numbers do not appear to be as dark as the other parts of the lettering around the rim. The APO 722D added type has about the same wear and inking as the date above it. It appears that a normal blank datestamp was cut up to move the "A.P.O." around, and the



Fig. 7 – Reversed close-up of the APO 722D datestamp face.

two smaller pieces of the rim were then used below the inserted “722D” moveable type.

Is this a faked item or was it really ever used? I think the proof is in the cover shown in Fig. 6, which shows the datestamp used with a legitimate censor marking known from this location (APO 722D at Fort Smith, NWT). It would have been a lot of work to go through for a faker to put this datestamp together and put the marking on only one cover recorded to date, with the a proper censor marking.

So where did this item come from and why was it made? The seller on eBay told me that the previous owner—a stamp and memorabilia collector—was in the Northwest Service Command Administration during the ALCAN highway and Alaskan supply route construction. Does this datestamp look like anything else used in the area? After a careful comparison of datestamps used at APOs 473, 474, 722 and 999 (all associated with the Canol Project) I found only one that closely matched

the datestamp shown in Fig. 7. There are minute but important differences in the spacing of letters and the angle of the killer bars in most of the APO datestamps.

Fig. 8 shows a couple of APO 474 covers, one without the APO number in the postmark and one with the number in the postmark. Note the return address of the bottom, later cover as it is from a Headquarter and Headquarters Detachment, the same unit that later moved to Fort Smith, NWT or APO 722D.

These two covers appear to have been struck with the same datestamp (at least the fixed portion or outer rim and bars). When this datestamp is cleaned up a bit and overlapped with a proof strike from the datestamp shown at the beginning of the article, there is the close match shown in Fig. 9.

From this evidence it appears that the APO 474 datestamp was modified to become the APO 722D datestamp. The number at the top



Fig. 8 – Two covers from APO 474 at Waterways, Alberta.

of the APO 474 datestamp was put in with moveable type and perhaps the “7” was used with a couple of spare “2”s and a “D” from another piece month type (i.e., DEC). APO 474 was at Waterways, Alberta from May 3, 1943

until it closed on September 15, 1943. This would allow enough time for the datestamp to be taken with the Headquarters and Headquarters Detachment personnel when they moved from Waterways to Fort Smith,



Fig. 9 – Top datestamp used at APO 474, middle proof strike of the APO 722D datestamp and bottom showing overlap of the two.

NWT. It appears that when they got to Fort Smith, the datestamp was modified at some point to insert the APO 722D.

Are there other covers out there with an APO 722D datestamp? Why was the datestamp modified? Why was it not used

into January 1944? You never know what might turn up on eBay. . . .

The author would be happy to receive any correspondence about APOs in Canada or Newfoundland including the item shown in this article and can be reached at kor@theedge.ca or Box 444, Yellowknife NT X1A 2N3 Canada. ✉

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