

Missing - Captured - Killed

Visions and Victims of Mussolini's Wars

This display is about the cost and futility of war and is illustrated by items from the mail during Benito Mussolini’s time in power in Italy, from 1922 to 1945. War can bring forth heroes but it can also bring out the worst excesses of human behaviour. The anger and bitterness left behind, in some cases, continues to this day.

Benito Amilcare Mussolini took Italy to war in 1935 in Abyssinia (Ethiopia) in the quest for a new Roman empire. He sent troops, ships and planes to support Franco’s Nationalists in the Spanish Civil War. He then joined the Axis forces in WW2 committing troops to the disastrous Russian Front and to North Africa. Inevitably, the war eventually came onto Italian soil.

It is impossible to look at this period of Italian history without feeling the presence of Mussolini. Known as “Il Duce” (the chief) he led the Fascist government of Italy, and later the Italian Social Republic (RSI), from 1922 until his death at the war’s end in 1945. His influence is everywhere in the post from his image on postcards and stamps (despite Italy being a monarchy) to his slogans and excerpts of speeches which adorned military postal stationery

When Italy capitulated and Mussolini was removed from power and imprisoned, he was rescued by the Nazis and set up as leader of the Italian Social Republic (RSI), a puppet state in North Italy and from then on, the war became a civil war for Italians within the greater World War Two.

Armies from the USA, Britain and every Commonwealth country, Israel, Poland, Germany and, of course, Italy, all clashed on Italian soil and all sent letters, sometimes to addresses behind enemy lines.



A young German soldier takes a break from the war to write a letter home.

When reading of the massive casualties of WW2 it is easy to forget that each was a person with aspirations, a family and a home. I have tried to let the voices of the people who wrote or received these messages be heard and where possible I have added some of the personal details of their lives. Their stories are reflected in the mail of the period.

Mail reached epic proportions, from soldiers writing home and, with hundreds of thousands missing, captured or killed, mail from loved ones seeking information, and yet, through all this confusion and strife, by and large, the mail went through.

One thing that stands out in Italian mail of this period is the high number of cards that were used for everyday communication. These were particularly common for use by military personnel but were also favoured by civilians as a way of sending a quick message to keep in touch. In a way, they were the equivalent of today’s text messages. To capitalise on this and Mussolini’s early popularity, the Fascists produced millions of propaganda cards, many with his image, so many in fact, that they are still commonly found eighty years later.

Another thing stands out to modern eyes. In these days when mail can arrive without even the stamps being cancelled, it is fascinating to see mail that has been postmarked at every juncture along the way it has travelled. Mail from this time tells a story and records history in a way that can never be done by modern mail .

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For anyone wishing to look further, I have added QR codes to some pages that, with the use of a smart phone, will lead to further information or pictures.

This QR is a Youtube video that I have prepared using images of the time: Missing Captured, Killed. Music: Holst, The Planets - Mars, The Bringer of War. Bernstein / New York Philharmonic Orchestra.



Acknowledgements and References.

“*La Posta Militare Italiana nella Seconda Guerra Mondiale*” by Aldo Cecchi and Beniamino Cadioli. Ufficio Storica SME Rome 1991

“*Sacrifice on the steppe : the Italian Alpine Corps in the Stalingrad Campaign, 1942-1943*” by Hope Hamilton. Havertown, Pa. Casemate, 2011.

National Archives of Australia and Commonwealth War Graves Commission.

German War Graves Web Site at <http://www.volksbund.de>. American website: <http://militaryhallofhonor.com/index.php>

Lieutenant Sacconi’s prison record (page 20) was supplied by Myrtleford Historical Society Inc.

The author gratefully acknowledges the assistance given to him by many members of the Stampboards on-line community, particularly with translations from German, Greek and Italian.

Various online sources, particularly Wikipedia, have been used and are generally credited where appropriate.

A Beginning of sorts...

My Uncle Ted fought in North Africa and up through Italy in World War Two and sent lots of postcards home. Because he could not talk about where he was, he simply numbered all the cards and wrote the details in his diary for when he came home.

Christmas parties were often at his house when I was young and Uncle Ted always had jokes and stories to tell, often about his army days. It was his way of dealing with the horror he had lived through, I suppose.

My mother me some of his postcards as, even back then I was a collector of anything I found interesting. When he saw this card, he was laughing because the censor had blocked out the name of the place. Even at nine years old, I knew it was from Rome.

Uncle Ted said that was called Military Intelligence.

Many years later, I started collecting other postal items from that time. I still have Uncle Ted's card though he died many years ago. It seems fitting that this should be the first item as a reminder of the lack of intelligence that saw the world tear itself apart with war.

The most vicious fighting and the greatest loss of life in that war happened in Italy yet the Italian part in WW2 hardly rates a mention in the history books and some of it was deliberately left out.

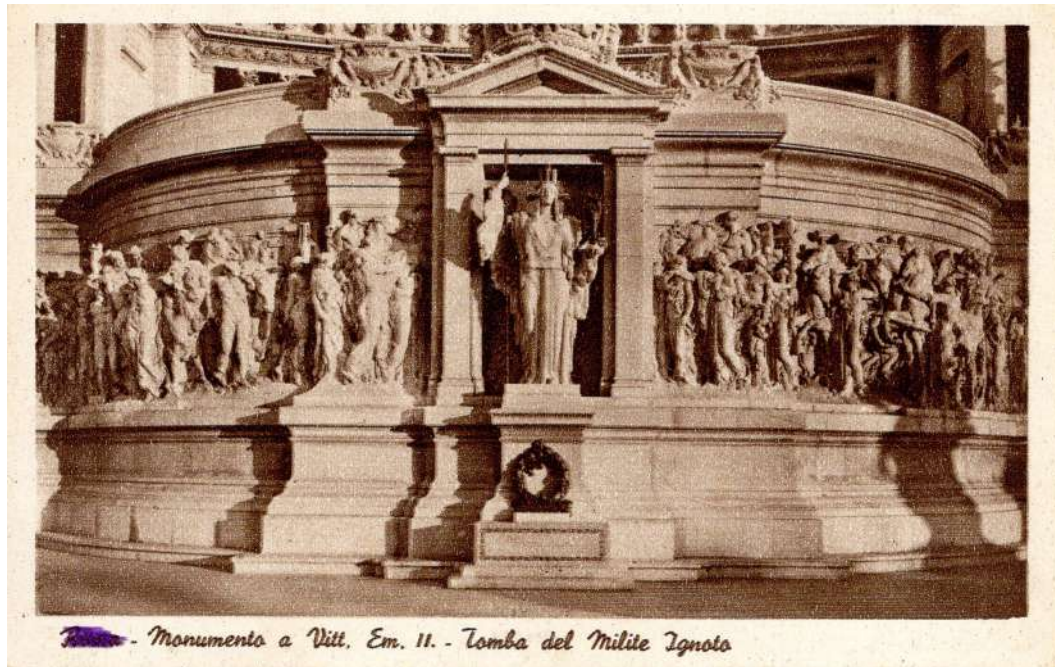
Background

In 1938 when Mussolini signed the "Pact of Steel" with Hitler, he made it clear that Italy could not be ready for war before 1943. By June 1940, however, Mussolini became convinced that the war was almost over and fearing that Italy stood to lose her share of the spoils, declared war on Britain and France. Italy was a fairly poor country with little heavy industry, impoverished soils and a largely peasant population.

Mussolini's Fascists dreamed of a return to the glorious days of the Roman Empire. To the south they had annexed lands in the north of Africa and the Middle East where the intention was to transplant Italian farmers and re-create the food bowl that had existed in the days of Rome. The British and French had opposed this and Hitler had promised to support Italian plans in Africa in return for support in Europe.



1941 cover from Chios bearing Greek and Italian postmarks and Italian censor stamp.



Monumento a Vitt. Em. II. - Tomba del Milite Ignoto

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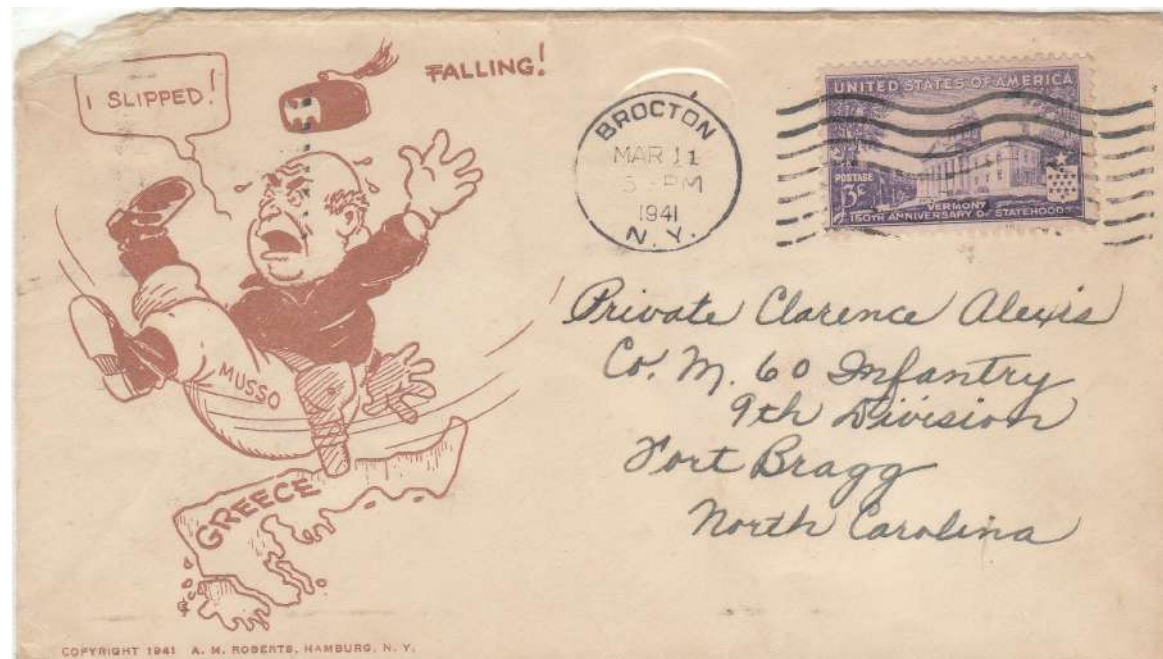
The Pact of Steel commemorated on an Italian stamp

Around the Adriatic, Italy expanded into Albania and Montenegro and occupied several Greek islands early in the war, continuing a policy of annexing islands that began after WW1.

Plans to expand westward into areas of France were thwarted when France collapsed and the Vichy government signed an armistice with Germany.

When Hitler invaded Romania without notice, Mussolini felt insulted to have not been told so without Hitler's approval, the Italians invaded Greece but were stopped by determined Greek resistance. Hitler sent in German troops to finish the job and from then on, Italy was relegated to a junior partnership in the alliance.

The invasion caused widespread famine as the Germans requisitioned all the food. In the Winter of 1941-2, 100,000 Greeks starved to death.



As with any war, truth was the first casualty. A propaganda cover popular with US soldiers.



Left: Italian and Albanian stamps overprinted for use in Albania.



Right: Italian stamp overprinted for use in Montenegro.



Things went from bad to worse for the Italians. With much of their equipment obsolete, Italy suffered defeat after defeat. Despite this, contemporary reports from people like Rommel and General Alexander praise the courage and determination of the Italian soldiers. It is unfortunate that the propaganda, such as the above, and what was printed in the British and American press has endured. It showed the Italians as comical, even cowardly. This was far from the truth.

In the battles in North Africa, the Italians fought bravely but were defeated by a stronger and better equipped force, finally surrendering and posing an enormous problem for the Allies who had to deal with hundreds of thousands of prisoners of war.

On the Russian front, 190,000 Italian soldiers died alongside their German allies. The Italian regiments at Stalingrad were virtually destroyed with only ten per cent surviving.



Within a year, Russian stamps were issued to celebrate the Russian victory at Stalingrad

As the war moved onto Italian soil, German battalions were sent to strengthen the Italians but by 1943, the Italians negotiated an armistice with the Allies in the south of the country. Germany then invaded the north, rescued Mussolini from the Allied prison and set up the Italian Social Republic.

Italian regiments in the North were virtually captured by the Germans and given the choice between fighting with Germany or internment. Many chose the prison camps rather than join what had now become a civil war within the greater conflict. The Italian soldiers who stayed on soon found themselves fighting on all sides, including fighting other Italians in the south who had joined the Allies in their push northwards against the Germans. To the north west, they found themselves facing Italian partisans who had taken to the mountains from where they fought a guerrilla war. To the north-east they faced opposition from Yugoslav partisans.

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The Birth of Fascism

Benito Mussolini was born in Predappio, a small village near Forlì. His father was a Socialist who named his son after the left-wing President of Mexico, Benito Juárez.



Benito Juárez

Until 1914, Mussolini was a prominent and enthusiastic Socialist but was expelled from the party for supporting Italy's involvement in WW1.

He rejected the internationalist ideas of the Socialists and formed a new party based on a mix of socialism and nationalism which he named Fascism after the Fasces, an axe with a handle of a bunch of rods that was the symbol of authority in Ancient Rome.

During the turbulent years after WW1, the Fascists grew in power, often using violence and intimidation against political rivals.

In 1922, having seized power in much of the country, they marched on Rome bringing the city to a standstill.

King Victor Emmanuel III was expected to declare martial law to deal with the Fascists. Instead, he appointed Mussolini as Prime Minister and asked him to form a government. Within five years, this had become a dictatorship.



Predappio Nuova - Casa ove nacque I. E. Benito Mussolini.



Above: Mussolini's birthplace

Left: Stamps issued by Mussolini's Fascist government in 1923 to mark the first anniversary of the March on Rome

The First Fascist Stamps



The 1923 stamp set showing Fascist symbolism.

Shortly after gaining power, The Fascists announced the fact to the world by releasing a set of stamps showing the Ancient Roman symbol of authority, the Fasces, an axe whose handle is a bundle of rods. This has been proven to be stronger than a single shaft, hence the symbolism. Mussolini was not the only one to use this symbol. It also appears on the United States Mercury dime, symbolic of the Union being stronger than the individual parts. This is not to say that the U.S.A. was approving Fascism. The Mercury dime was designed in 1916, three years before Mussolini chose the same symbol. Even so, after 1945 the design was changed and the axe was replaced by a bunch of rods topped with a flame.



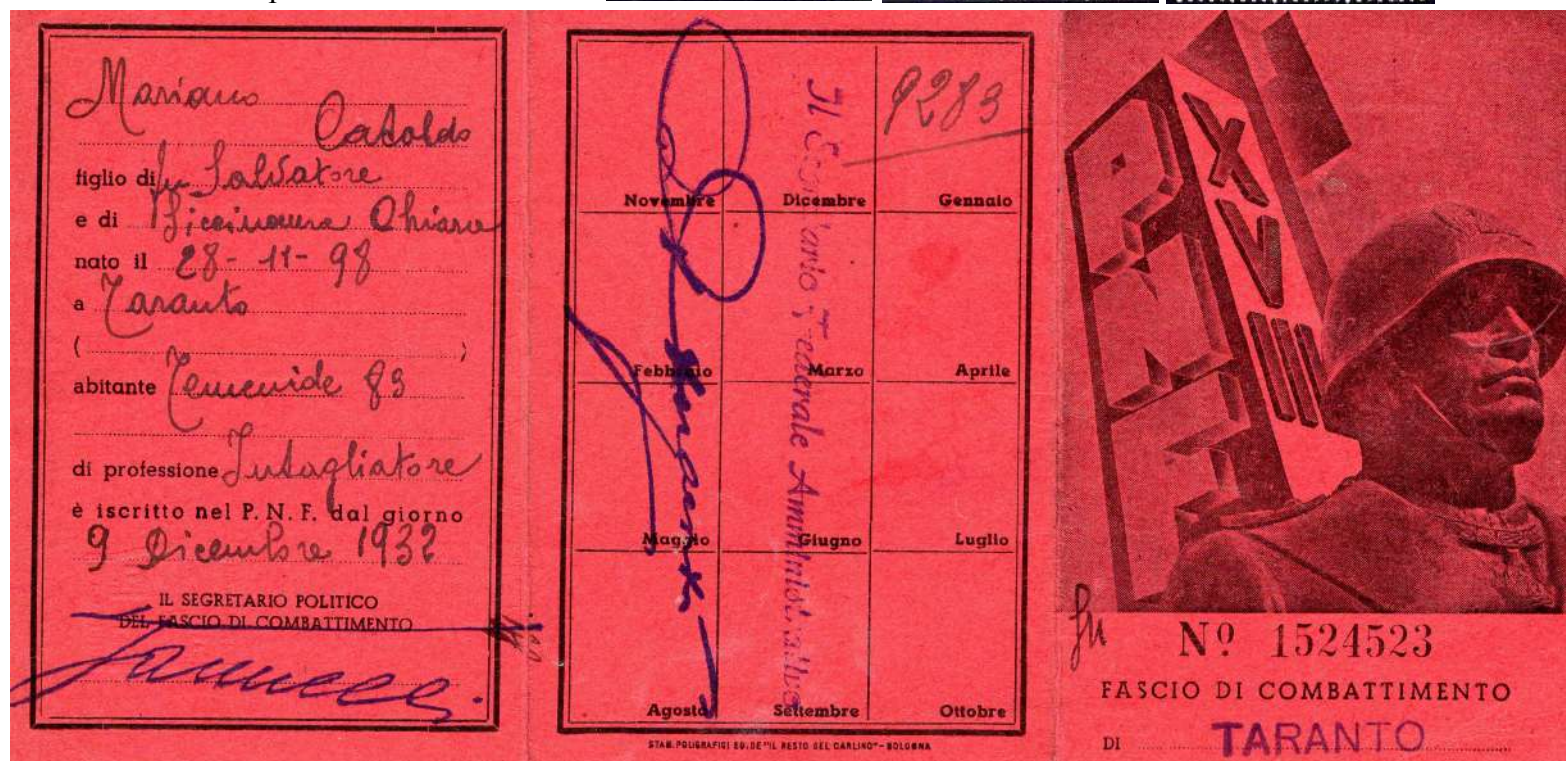
The Mercury Dime (top) and the post-1945 design (below)

Papal Approval

In 1870, following the unification of the rest of Italy, the Piedmont-led forces annexed Rome and confiscated much of the territory that had formerly been the Papal States. This led to a stand-off between the Catholic Church and the state that was to last for almost sixty years. The Church saw, in Fascism, a possible protection from the growth of Communism which encouraged members to leave the Church and seek their rewards on earth.

In 1929, Mussolini negotiated the Lateran Treaty with the Church which gave it the area around the Vatican (roughly 25Ha) as an independent State in return for the Church's blessing of the Fascists and recognition of the King of Italy, which until then, they had refused to do.

The Vatican remained neutral in WW2 but had a major role in assisting families of prisoners and shielding refugees. Statehood also allowed them to produce their own stamps and coins which became a source of income.



Members of the National Fascist Party (PNF) carried a card (above) which was renewed annually. It included a military wing (Fasci Italiani di Combattimento), one of the leaders of which was Mussolini's brother, Arnaldo.



Above scan: The 1940 card at left was stamped on the reverse with a special Cinderella produced for the purpose.

Below: The 1943 stamp produced for this purpose showed Mussolini in profile.



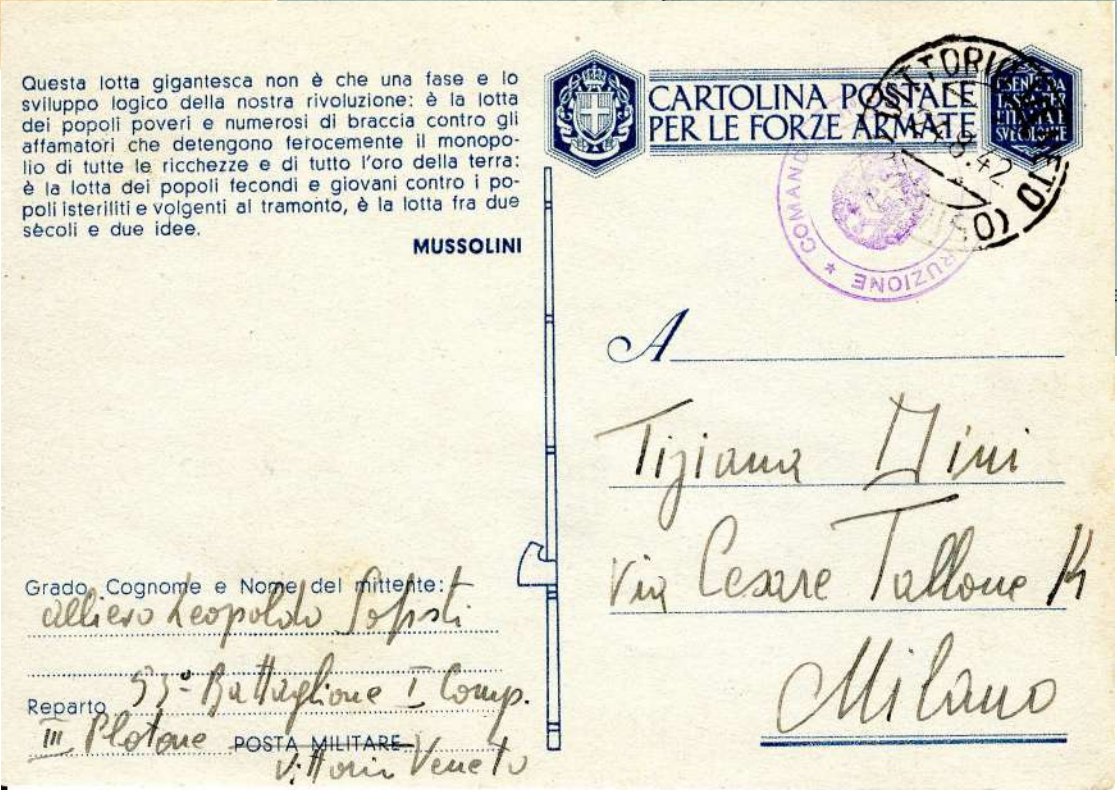
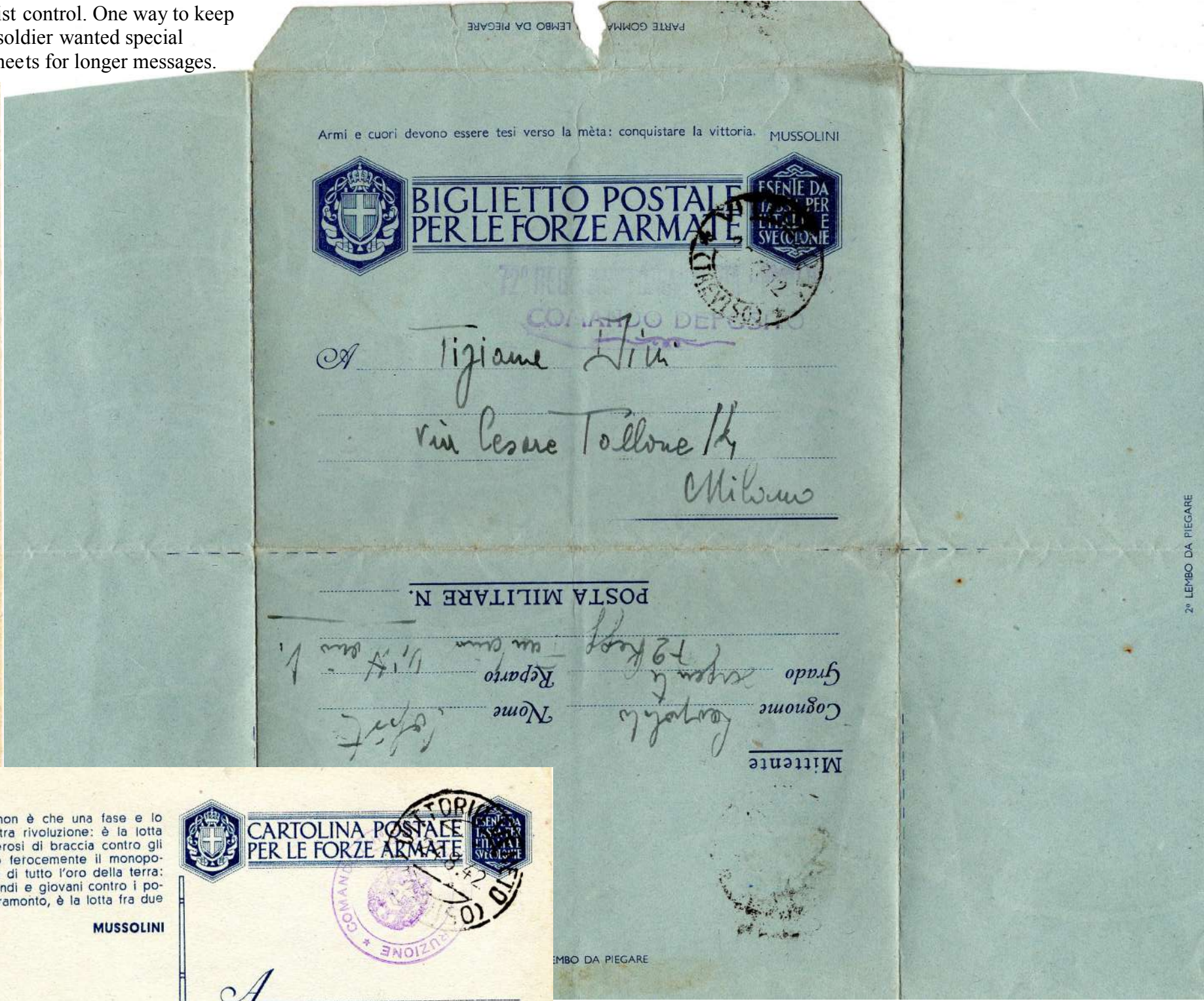
Philatelically inspired cover to Switzerland bearing the first stamps issued by the Vatican in 1929.

News From Home: Types of military stationery

Keeping the military onside was essential to the Fascists plans, particularly early on before they fell totally under Fascist control. One way to keep soldiers happy was to make sure that they received plenty of news from home. Military mail was carried free unless a soldier wanted special treatment, such as registration or express post. A range of stationery was available, cards for short messages or letter sheets for longer messages.



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This letter sheet (above) was for sending news from home to the armed forces and travelled free. One flap was glued so that it could also be used as an envelope for longer messages but this writer has simply used it as a letter sheet. The address was printed on the reverse.

Above: Aerogram type letter sheet on thin hard paper suitable for long messages. The entire reverse side could be used and if needed, the fronts of the fold-in flaps as well. It was light enough to be suitable for air mail.

Left: The simple card at left has the back blank for the message. These usually carried one of the quotations from Mussolini, as shown here. For even shorter messages, the reverse carried a picture (see next page) and the message was written on the small space to the left of the address.

Scan of message inside.

Italian Military Issue Propaganda Postcards



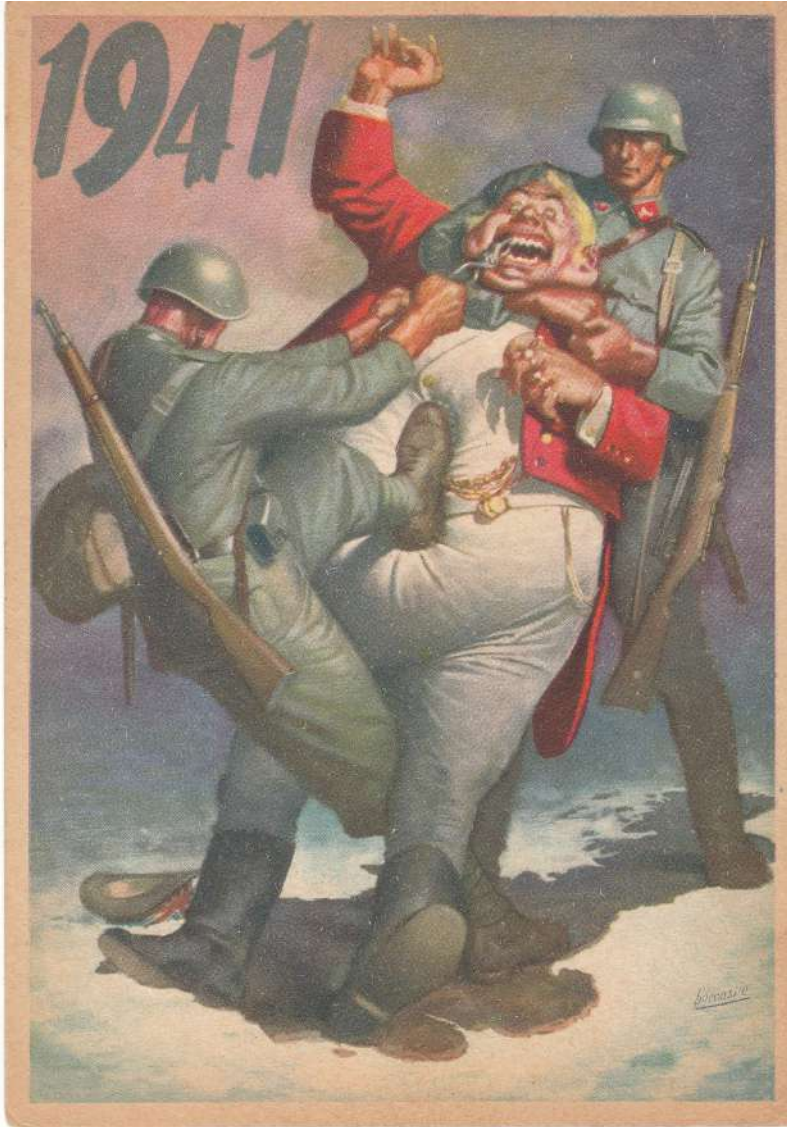
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Scan of reverse view of card at left



Scan of reverse view of card below



Two types of card issued for armed service personnel use depicting the image the Fascists wanted to project of the brave Italian and German soldiers.

Left: Pulling the teeth of the British Empire, depicted as a fat John Bull. Mussolini wanted Italy to dominate the Mediterranean and resented British naval presence there.

Below: Protecting the home from attack by the Communists, depicted as a cross between a Russian Bear and a demon and carrying a hammer and sickle. while the haloed mother holds the baby and looks on..



The card below shows Churchill depicted as a “gozunda” pot for night-time toilet use. The use of humour for propaganda purposes was a powerful weapon. This card was produced by the PNF for general use rather than just for the military but has been used by a soldier stationed in Albania at PM 49. Mussolini particularly resented the British naval domination of the Mediterranean.



Above: Cards that showed the Italians in action were very popular and some regiments even produced their own. The lower of these two was produced for students at the Central Artillery School.

The top card was posted to a Sergeant Major in the Livorno Division on 14th May 1943 but was returned to sender. Livorno were at the time in Sicily and in July that year, bore the brunt of the Allied attack.

Between the time this card was written and the Allied landing on 9th July, the Allies flew 42,227 sorties against Southern Italy so it is quite possible that the reason the card was returned was that the soldier had been killed.



Scan of reverse view of above cards

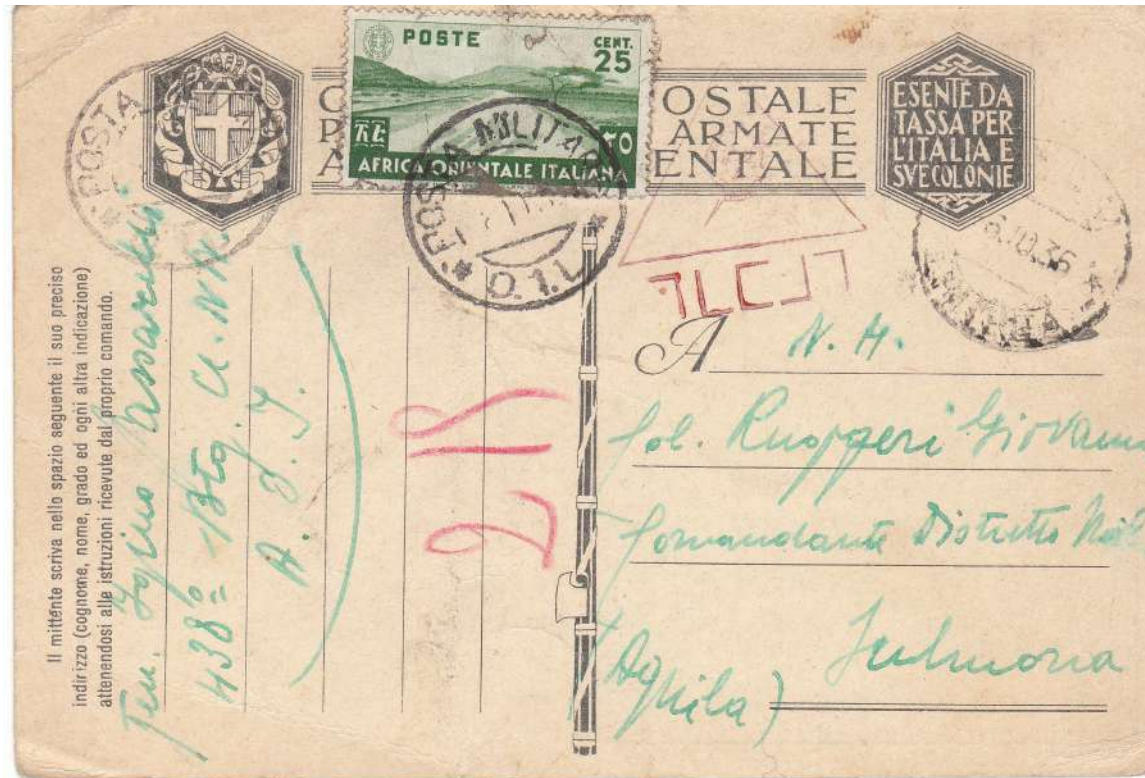
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Fascist Date System

The Fascists came to power in Italy after the “March on Rome” in 1922. Symbolically they began a Fascist calendar from that time so that 1923 became year 1.

The dates were shown in Roman numerals, generally after the normal depiction of the date so a date stamp from 1941 might show 1.6.41 XIX.

After the armistice and the removal of the Fascist government in the south this calendar was dropped but it continued in the Italian Socialist Republic in the north.



Armed Forces card to Italy after Ethiopia became part of the Italian East African Empire

The Italian-Abyssinian War of 1935-6

In 1930 Italian forces crossed the border between Italian Somalia and Abyssinia (Ethiopia) and built fortifications at the Welwel Oasis, a flagrant rejection of the League of Nations and the border agreement between the two parties. In December 1934 tensions over this incursion erupted into violence which left two Italians and one hundred and fifty Ethiopians dead.

Hitler's Germany supported the Italian expansion while Britain and France abstained from comment as at this time they still wanted Italy as an ally against an expanding German power. In October 1935 Italy invaded. The Abyssinian army, though large had little equipment and the outcome was never in doubt. Parts of the Abyssinian army were armed with spears and bows and arrows. Many had never seen a plane while the Italians used their air force to devastating effect. An estimated 10,000 Italians died, compared with 275,000 Abyssinians.



Reverse of card shows the extent of Italian colonies in East Africa



To justify their claims of empire, Mussolini's Fascists produced stamps with images of Ancient Rome for Italian East Africa - Ethiopia, Eritrea and Somalia.



Italy used its air force to devastating effect when annexing Ethiopia on 9th May 1936, proclaiming King Victor Emmanuel III as Emperor.



Wikipedia:
The Italo-Abyssinian War



Reverse sides. The card like most of these also carried a quotation from Mussolini's propaganda



Many thousands of postcards showed how Mussolini was loved by the Italian people.

Victory in Ethiopia in 1936 was the zenith of Mussolini's popularity with thousands cheering his appearances.

This envelope is covered with slogans such as “God Save the Chief and the Romans”

The victory was followed by such a massive investment in infrastructure in the new colony the Italian economy was left unable to properly finance the modernisation of their armed forces

It also gave the Italian populace an unrealistic view of their armed forces which wavered during the Spanish Civil War and was shattered a few years later when Italy joined WW2, allied to Germany.

Few would have guessed that by war's end Mussolini would be one of the victims.

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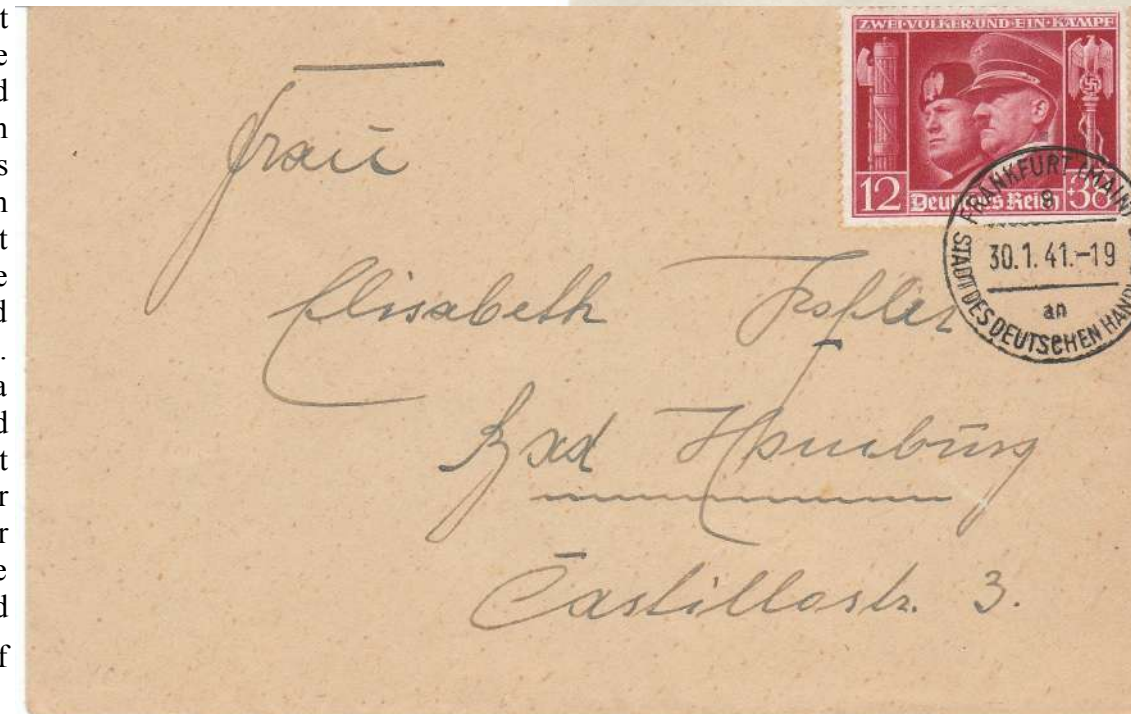
Courting Mussolini



Official report envelope addressed to Benito Mussolini

Perhaps it was due to his background as both a school teacher and a newspaper editor that Mussolini was a voracious reader. It was said that he read every message and report that came to his office himself and decided what action to take. Reports addressed to him personally are not rare. They were usually in red envelopes. Unfortunately, a culture developed of telling him what he wanted to hear in reports rather than what he needed to hear and

Although Hitler modelled his version of Fascism on Mussolini's Italy, the two parties were very different, reflecting the differences in German and Italian temperaments and culture.



German postal expressions of regard for Mussolini.

Hitler understood that an Italian army guarding his southern borders was desirable. Despite both nations being Fascist, this did not guarantee that they would be aligned. Italy had a history of conflict with Austria and Hitler was Austrian. Italy had fought the Germans in the WW1, only eighteen years before.

Hitler was a wily politician. What he could not get by threats he would pursue with flattery and in Mussolini he found a willing target. Mussolini was feted by the German leader with parades, military shows and grandiose displays of Germany's massive rebuilding programme. Special stamps, postmarks and souvenir cards were produced by the thousands to help lure Mussolini into the German fold.

The pledges were taken and the marriage was arranged but unfortunately for Italy, the honeymoon was soon over. Mussolini took his nation into a war that he could not afford and most Italians did not want.

he may not have been totally aware of the parlous state of his army. He did not like Hitler, and in private, called him a "monkey" but he was overwhelmed by the German military machine when he visited Munich in 1936 and signed the "Pact of Steel" believing the German army was invincible. Sensing a coming war, Mussolini said he only needed a few thousand dead to be able to sit at the negotiating table and gain a share of the spoils.



Scan of reverse of card



German card with Mussolini and Hitler in Munich, 1936. The decision to ally with Germany was unpopular with many Italians who saw Germans as no different to their traditional enemies in Austria.



Front of German card 7

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The Spanish Civil War

The 1920s and 1930s saw the growth of both extremes of the political spectrum. Following the Russian revolution, Communism spread around the globe while in some countries, strong right wing movements, often modelled after Mussolini's Fascists, grew in opposition. The two opposing ideologies eventually clashed in Spain in 1936 when the Socialist Republican government, which was weakened by disunity, was overthrown by the Nationalist forces of General Franco.

Mussolini and Hitler supported Franco while the Soviet Union and International Brigades, made up of left wing idealists from many countries, backed the Republicans. In return for military aid, Franco granted Germany mining concessions in Spain and supported Mussolini's plan for naval domination of the Mediterranean.

The Italian military ran their own postal system between Spain and Italy. They used Italian stamps and bore official postmarks giving the office number. Though more efficient and safe than the chaotic Spanish post of the time, it did not reach all areas.



Unused postcard portraying the German and Italian support for Franco.

Hitler used the war to test his "blitzkrieg" style of warfare including the first large scale bombing of a civilian population at Guernica, by the German Condor Legion and the Fascist Aviazione Legionaria from Italy. This brought international condemnation but no action by the major powers which encouraged Hitler to use the same tactics in the attack on Poland,



This WWI Italian cinderella entitled "War From The Sky" condemns the bombing of civilians and is one of a set of ten showing the horrors of war.

Despite this popular view, Italian planes took part in the bombing at Guernica

The cover at right bears two different censor stamps and was sealed with ordinary tape.

The lower cover has been censored locally in Seville, probably handed for post unsealed as no tape used. It has a patriotic Seville local label that has been added to the flap when sealing.

Neither the sender nor the recipient in Italy have typically Italian names.



These two letters were sent by the regular mail system but still passed through the military censors.



This letter was carried through the official army postal system



Guernica was memorialised by Picasso's stark depiction of the terror of the attack. It has been reproduced on several stamps including the one above from Czechoslovakia. Picasso was said to be so impressed by Josef Hercik's engraving on this stamp, he wrote to congratulate him.



Above: Scan of part of the cover at left showing the patriotic label and receiving post mark.



This death letter was sent from Spain during the Spanish Civil War to a priest in Italy. The family may have needed the priest to read the news of a lost soldier for them.

Of the international forces, Italy lost more men in the Spanish Civil War (4000) than any other country. A few days after the Italian Brigade took the city of Guadalajara, they were defeated by the counter-attacking Republican army at Madrid.

Italian losses were so great, the three Italian divisions had to be consolidated into two. The nature of the war and the large loss of men made this an unpopular war amongst Italians. The cost was almost 20% of the Italian annual budget and left Italy substantially weakened when they entered World War Two.

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Controlling The Adriatic

By 1941, Italy had annexed or subjugated almost the entire eastern coastline of the Adriatic.

Istria and Trieste had been annexed by Italy earlier and had a large Italian population.

The Italian subjugation of Yugoslavia, supported by a German invasion from the north was resisted and the Italians brutally avenged any actions against them by partisans.

At the war's end, Yugoslavia took revenge by evicting the entire Italian population of Istria with reportedly high loss of life.

The bitterness has lasted to the present day and only recently have efforts at reconciliation been seriously attempted.

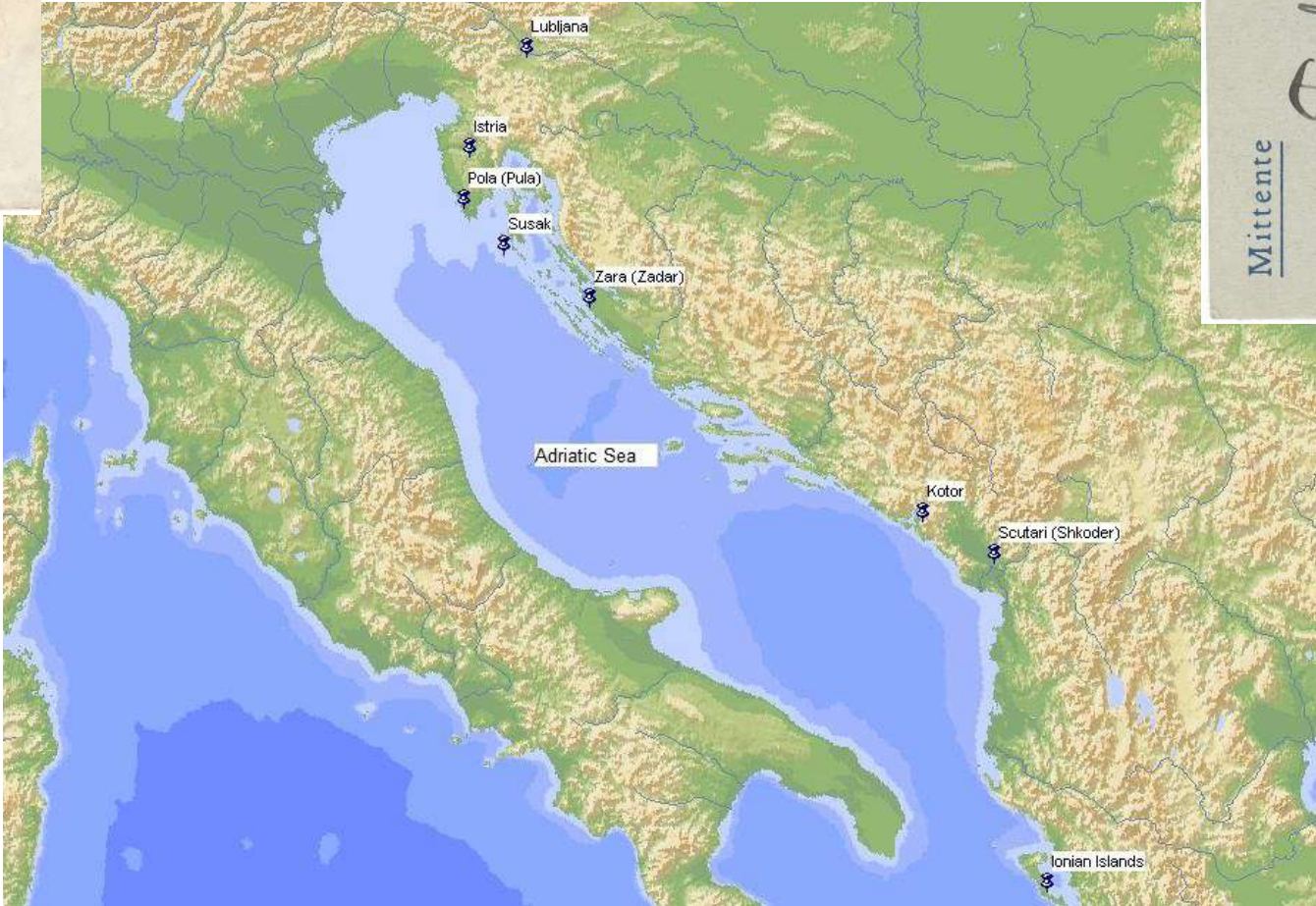


The 1941 cover (above) is from a soldier in the Tridentina division which had moved into Lubljana (PM46). It should have travelled free but for some reason has a 50c postage due stamp on the reverse. Left: Scan of part of reverse of envelope.



Above: Stamps of Italy and Yugoslavia overprinted for Lubljana. (now in Slovenia)

Right: Map showing how Italian gains early in the war gave them control of the Adriatic.



Although the Italian presence was either welcomed or tolerated in Albania and parts of Istria where there was a large Italian population, in much of Yugoslavia and Dalmatia they were resented by a large percentage of the population and faced violent opposition from local partisan groups, especially the communists.

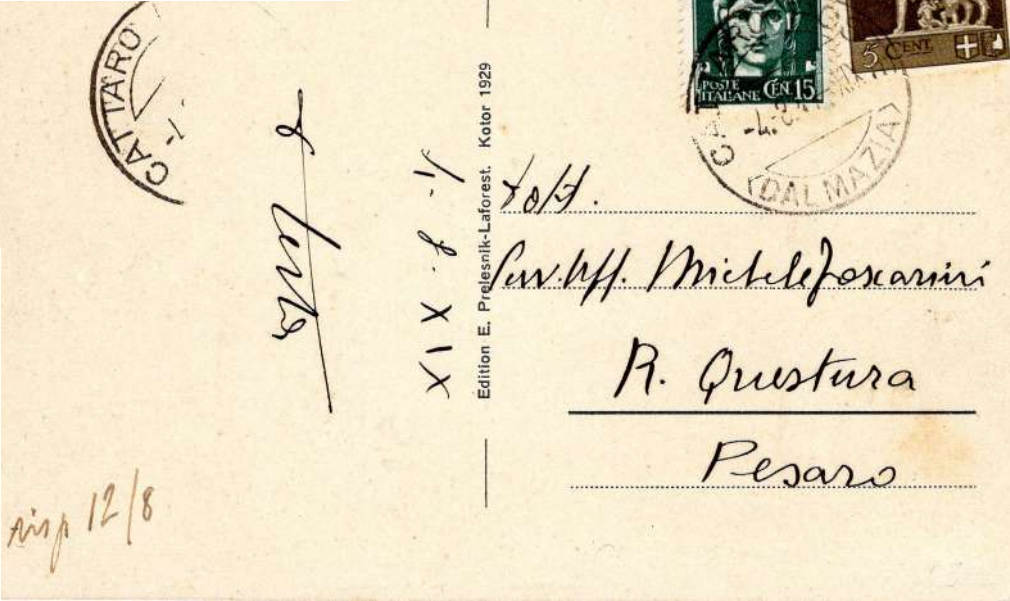
This meant that a strong and expensive military presence was necessary to maintain order. Areas, such as Ljubljana, where the partisans were supported were dealt with ruthlessly.



Above: A military card from Susak, Yugoslavia (PM10), this carries a purple stamp denoting free postage

Left: A military card from Pola (Pula), Istria, now part of Croatia. This card carries a purple stamp from the Naval military hospital.

Right: Card from Mt Lovcen overlooking Kotor, renamed Cattaro by the Italians. It was in Dalmatia, then part of Yugoslavia but now part of Montenegro. Both place names appear on the card.



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Controlling the Adriatic: Dalmatia and Serbia

Parts of Dalmatia had been under Italian control since WW1, particularly around Zara. After the German invasion of Yugoslavia in 1941, supported by Italian troops moving north from Albania, all of the Dalmatian coastal areas came under Italian control.

In the occupied areas of Serbia, money had to bear the Italian verification stamp to be valid (Right)



In Cattaro (Kotor), Dalmatia, the population was predominantly Yugoslavian and the Italian presence was resented and resisted. Small envelopes, like the one at left were used to post business or appointment cards to clients. The stamps bearing the portraits of both Hitler and Mussolini would have been strong reminders to the local population of who was in charge. The Envelope bears Italian stamps and is postmarked Cattaro, the Italian name for Kotor.



The 1940 card at left was posted from PM141 which was stationed at Zara (Zadar) in Dalmatia.

PM141 remained at Zara until the day after the armistice was signed, when it was closed.



After the armistice, German troops took control. Italian stamps were given German overprints and soon the Italian military post was replaced by the German Feldpost system

Controlling the Adriatic: Albania

Italy has had a long association with Albania going back to the Roman Empire. After WW1, Albania gained independence from the Turks coming under Italian protection. Italy offered assistance and large loans to help Albania rebuild but with the emergence of the destructive regime of self-styled King Zog, Albania was in crisis.

When in 1939, Zog stated that Albania would never repay the Italian loans, Mussolini sent troops to Albania and Zog fled, taking as much gold as he could carry.

The Albanian occupation was not greatly resisted and was welcomed in many quarters. The Italians brought infrastructure and education to a country that was still living in the middle ages in many ways.

The large military presence in Albania gave Mussolini control of both sides of the entrance to the Adriatic sea. Albania was also the source of much of Italy's oil supply and a strong presence was needed to defend this.

Croatia and Montenegro



An 1942 Christmas card conveying the army's greetings to the families of fighters. Sent from Gospic, a mountainous region of Croatia.



Above: Card to a soldier in the 3rd Alpine Division "Julia" stationed at Scutari, Albania (PM 202). The Alpini were elite Italian troops trained for war in the mountains. It carries the common purple censor stamp.

Right: Part envelope with stamps of Albania with Italian occupation overprint. King Zog is in the Guinness Book of Records as the world's heaviest smoker at 225 a day.



Below: Yugoslav stamps overprinted for use in Montenegro



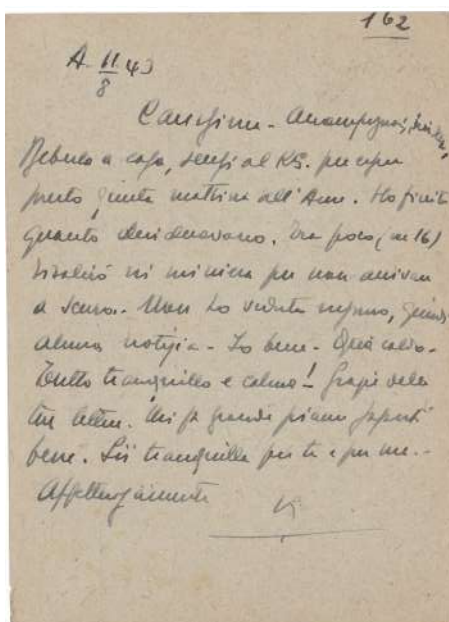
Missing - Captured - Killed Visions and Victims of Mussolini's Wars

Controlling The Adriatic: Greece

Mussolini was annoyed when, without warning him Hitler invaded Romania, which was within the Italian sphere of influence and a rich source of oil, so he in turn launched an attack on Greece.

His generals assured him that the Greek government was unpopular and that Greece would capitulate within two weeks.

Unfortunately the resistance from the Greeks was so strong that the Italians were unable to make any useful gains. Hitler sent German divisions in from the north and Greece was taken but at a loss of prestige for the Italians who were left to administer the area.



Above: Scan of reverse of card

Right: This card was sent from PM23 which serviced the Army Command Headquarters in Athens. It bears a 50c air mail stamp that is overprinted PM. These stamps were only issued in June 1943 and were discontinued in September after the Armistice. Generally, only garrisons in Greece and areas that remained under German domination still used these.



This magazine cutting from "Panorama", (Yugoslavia 1940) says: G. CIANO Italy Minister of Foreign Affairs has personally participated in the first air strikes in Thessaloniki. Ciano was also Mussolini's son in law.



Left: This small envelope contained a card dated 21.11.40 with a short message. It was posted from Patrai (Patras), three weeks after Italy began the invasion. Patrai was heavily bombed and the card bears a purple Greek censor stamp (ΛΟΓΟΚΡΙΣΙΑ ΠΑΤΡΩΝ means CENSORSHIP PATRAI) but the tone of the message suggests that life was continuing pretty much as usual.

This letter to Catanzaro in Sicily was sent from PM28 at Tebe (Thebes), about 60km NW of Athens. This post office had the responsibility of delivering mail to the front lines. It carries the battalion stamp and has travelled by air at a cost of L1.00 with one 50c air mail stamp and one ordinary 50c stamp.



Scan of reverse of envelope at right

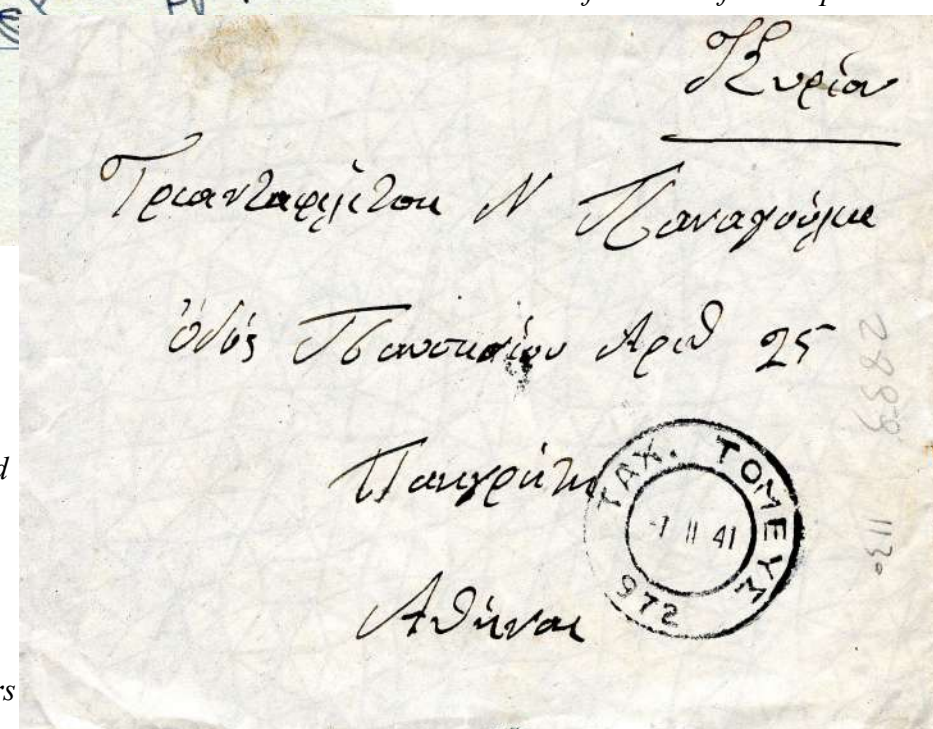


Above: Italian card from PM62, which had taken over the former British Consulate premises on Samos.

Right: Letter from a Greek soldier, Private Gallis Ioannis to Mrs Triantaffylidou Panagoula, his sister. It was sent via the Military Post Office and all censor and postmarks are Greek. He wrote the letter on 24 May 1940, after the Italians had been repulsed, but the postmark says 4 Feb 41, before the German invasion. The discrepancy is strange. Ioannis may have carried the letter for a long time before being in a position to post it but more likely, this was part of a group of letters and the envelopes have been mixed up



Scan of reverse of envelope below



Missing - Captured - Killed
Visions and Victims of Mussolini's Wars



Left: This Italian military cover bears an Italian stamp overprinted Tripolitania and was sent from Tobruk to Palermo in 1940. Tobruk was a deep water port, vital to both sides for supplies to North Africa. Three months after this letter was sent the port was captured by the Allies.

Below: Scan of reverse of letter dated three months before the Allies took the port.



Below: P.M. 34 was in Tobruk briefly in June 1942 when Rommel retook the port, but was moved shortly afterwards to an abandoned barracks in Marsa Matruk, Egypt in July 1942. A few days after this letter was sent from Bergamo, near Milan in N. Italy, P.M. 34 reported: "During the night the headquarters office was damaged by English aerial bombing. Services resumed in the morning." One can imagine them sorting through the rubble for lost mail. Posties were tough back then!



Air letter sent from Italy to P.M. 34 in North Africa 8.9.42

An Unusual Military Card



Scan of front of card celebrates incorporation of Sudetenland into Germany.

Left: This card was sent from PM221 by an Italian soldier to his girlfriend in Italy. The message says his friend Hans has moved on and left him his cards.

The card was issued originally to commemorate the incorporation of the Sudetenland into the Reich. Hence the map on the other side.

Later, on 28 April 1939, it was reissued for May Day with the date 4 December 1938 blotted out and an additional inscription under Postkarte "Zum 1 Mai Großdeutschlands", which is hidden in this example behind the Italian stamp.

It is interesting that Luigi gives his address simply as Zona di guerra rather than stating his name and unit as was normal.

Also interesting is that the year has been blocked out on the postmark. The card was only valid until 31.3.40 (which may be why Hans gave it away) but the stamp was not issued until 30.1.41.

The PM221 postmark was used in 1940 and 1942 and was cancelled mid 1943. Hans being moved may have been with the arrival of the Afrika Corp in 1941 but PM221 was not used in 1941 so 1942 is the most probable year.

In August 1942, PM221 was 125 km to the east of Marsa Matruk (Egypt). between Sidi Abd Er Rahman and El Alamein. Both Hans and Luigi could have fought at El Alamein.

My thanks to Andrea Grimaldi in Rome and other Stampboards members for the above information.



Above: Card from P.M.133 which was moving to Diano Marino on the coast near the French border at the time of posting. Malta was critical to both sides as a staging point for North Africa. Mussolini considered it to be Italian and these soldiers were getting ready to either invade Malta or fight in North Africa. Instead, many were diverted to Russia with no change of equipment and no winter clothing causing many to freeze to death in the Russian winter. Above Right: scan of reverse of card.



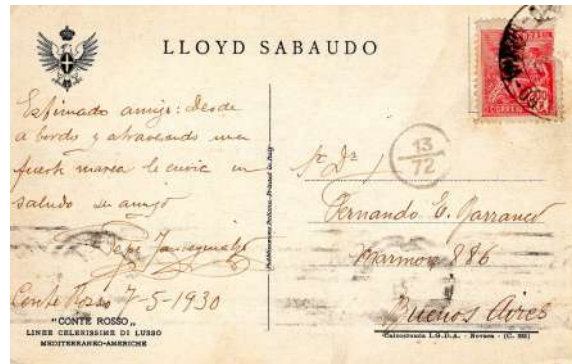
Missing - Captured - Killed

The Awful Toll Begins

Some soldiers died before they even reached the battlefield. The Conte Rosso was a luxury liner that was converted to a troop carrier during the war.

She was carrying Italian soldiers to North Africa when on 24 May 1941, she was torpedoed and sunk by HMS Upholder off the coast of Sicily.

1,300 of the 2,729 soldiers and crew aboard were killed, only 100 less than died on the Titanic but who remembers the Conte Rosso tragedy?



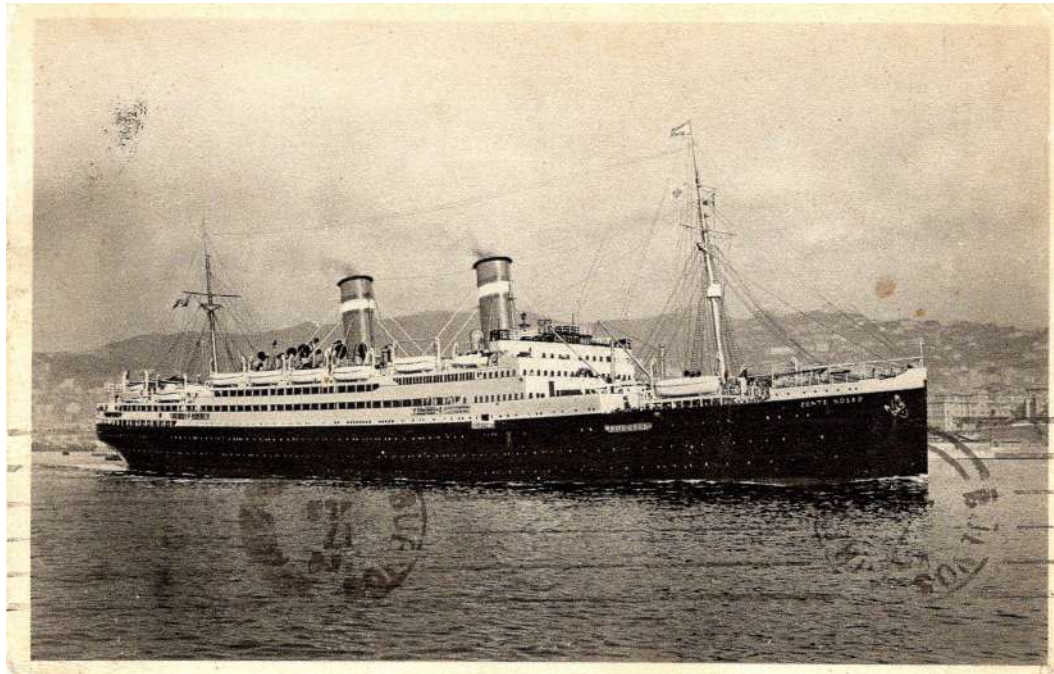
Italian Mourning Letters

457,000 Italians died as a direct result of the fighting in World War 2. Almost as soon as Italy entered the war, the mourning letters began to appear.

During the North African campaign, German and Italian casualties numbered 620,000 including 40,000 who died in Tunisia.



1943 mourning letter to Signora Gina Stipo, a common sight in the post by then.



The Conte Rosso in happier times shown on this ship's postcard from Buenos Aires, Brazil in 1930 (with scan of rear).



This mourning letter above from Tunis in 1942 to Pietro Scaduto in Sicily possibly carried the news of the loss of one of those Italian soldiers. A few months later the fighting was over and 267,000 German and Italian soldiers became prisoners of war.

A Tale of Two Sister Ships

The Conte Biancamano, built in Glasgow in 1925 and the Conte Grande, built in Trieste in 1927, were sister ships built for the Lloyd Sabaudo line in Italy to provide luxury travel to New York. Lloyd Sabaudo was merged into the Italian Line in 1932. They were almost identical in appearance and after the merger, both were transferred to the South American run.

This card was sent from the Conte Grande, using one of the ship's own cards. It was sent while the ship was interned and is probably from a crew member used to contact family back in Italy. It has only been censored on arrival in Italy.

At right is a scan of the front of the card showing the ship.



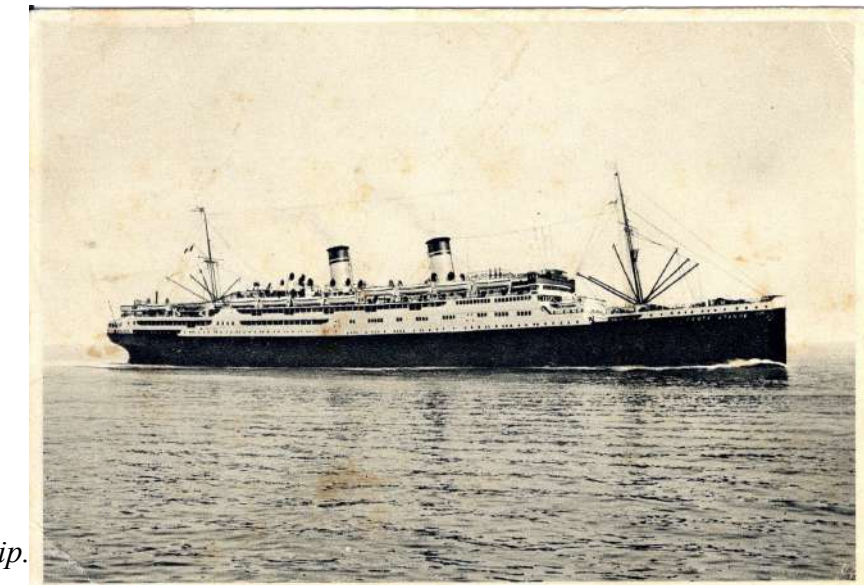
Conte Grande

In June 1940, the ship was in Santos, Brazil on a South American cruise when Italy entered the war, siding with Hitler. Brazil was aligned with the Allies and while the Captain of the Conte Grande deliberated on what his next move should be, the Brazilian authorities arrested the ship and interned the Italian crew.

The ship, which could sleep around 7000 people was used as a floating internment and prisoner of war camp. The crew remained in Brazil for the duration of the war. Conditions could not have been too bad as after the war many of them chose to stay.

In 1942, Brazil transferred the prisoners to other camps and sold the ship to the United States who added guns and converted it to a troop carrier. Throughout the war it continued in this capacity and was renamed USS Monticello.

After the war, The US government removed the armaments and Conte Grande was used to repatriate Italian prisoners of war while Conte Biancamano was used to transport U.S. troops home from Europe. Both were then returned to their original owners. They were given their old names back and went back to taking cruise passengers.



The Conte Biancamano is the ship shown on this 1939 stamp from Chile.

Conte Biancamano

The Conte Biancamano had a similar story. She was at Cristobal in the Canal Zone and was siezed by the Americans. After that though, the fate of their crews was somewhat different. Her crew considered themselves at war. They remained on board and managed to sabotage her steam turbines. They were therefore considered dangerous and shipped to Ellis Island and on to high security camps in the USA.

She too was refitted with guns as a troop carrier and renamed USS Hermitage.



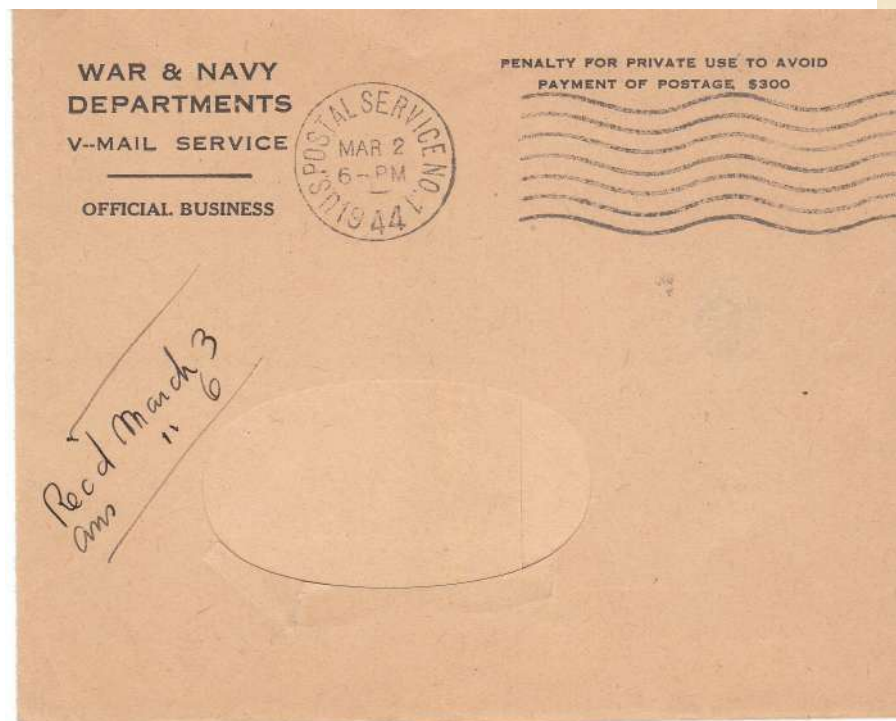
*Home movies taken aboard
Conte Biancamano before
and after the war.*

Missing - Captured - Killed Visions and Victims of Mussolini's Wars

The Airgraph/V-mail system



Illustrated airgraphs were a popular form of Allied propaganda and were used to send a short note or greeting when there was no news, or none that could be told.



Airgraphs, or V-mail as they were called in the US, were a way of sending mail more quickly and efficiently than usual. The message was written onto a special form which was then photographed and saved on microfilm. This film was then transported to the destination where it was printed out onto the airgraph sheet and delivered.

Aproximately 4500 negatives of microfilm weighed one pound freeing up valuable space for armaments and supplies.

When the US entered the war, they copied the British Airgraph system (the technology was American but it was first used in Britain).

In America it was called V-mail but Airgraphs were not the only postal item to be given that name. There were also V-mail post cards. V-mail used a different form than the Airgraph system that could also be used as a normal letter sheet if there was no recording machine in the area.



This press clipping from the News Chronicle on 13th Nov 1942 gives an idea of the scale of the operation in Britain.

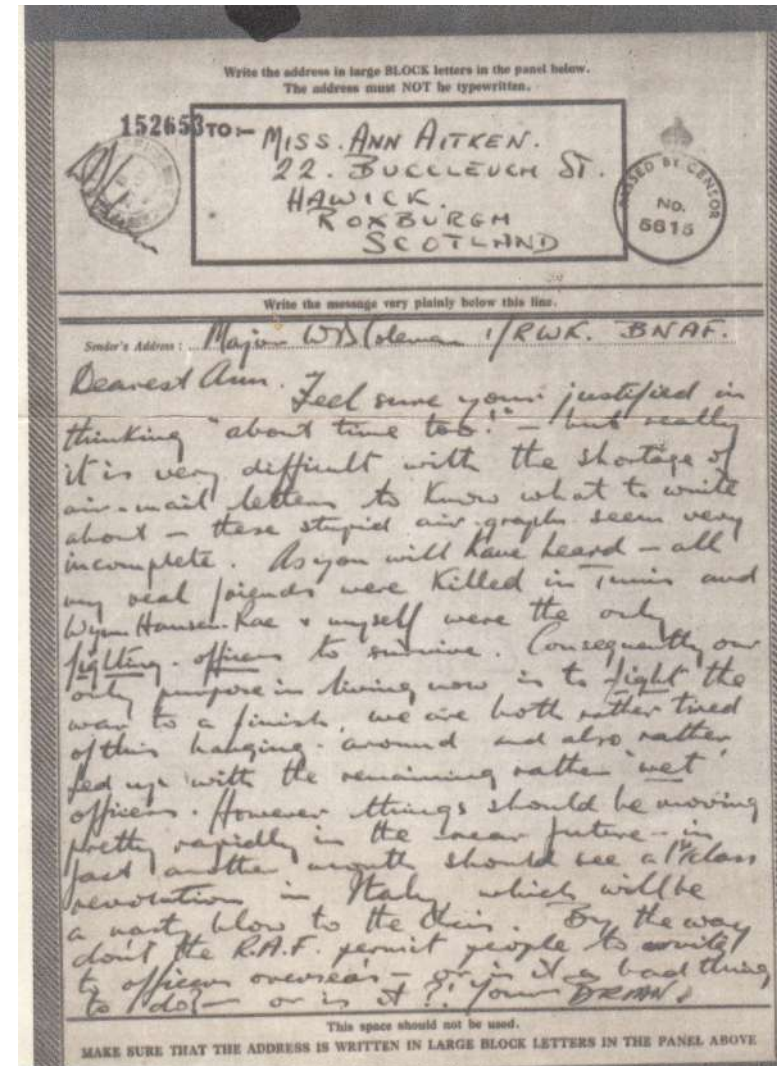
At left: Airgraphs were folded so that the address at the top fitted the cut out in the front of the envelope.



Airgraph Microfilm



More Airgraph Photos



Dear Uncle Mac,
Please excuse this left hand scrawl I have developed as an artillery shell landed much too close to yours truly on the nite of Jan 24th and put my right arm on the retired list, temporarily I hope...

... I am back in N. Africa now, plenty far from the front line in Italy. The weeks I spent with a unit in the line will surely long be remembered. I never cared about getting medals especially the Purple Heart. I'm pretty darn lucky to have gotten away with this arm injury. Write soon. Hope all is going swell for you. Sincerely yours, Bill

Allied Casualties

The dead and wounded mounted up on all sides. This soldier wrote to a girl in Scotland:

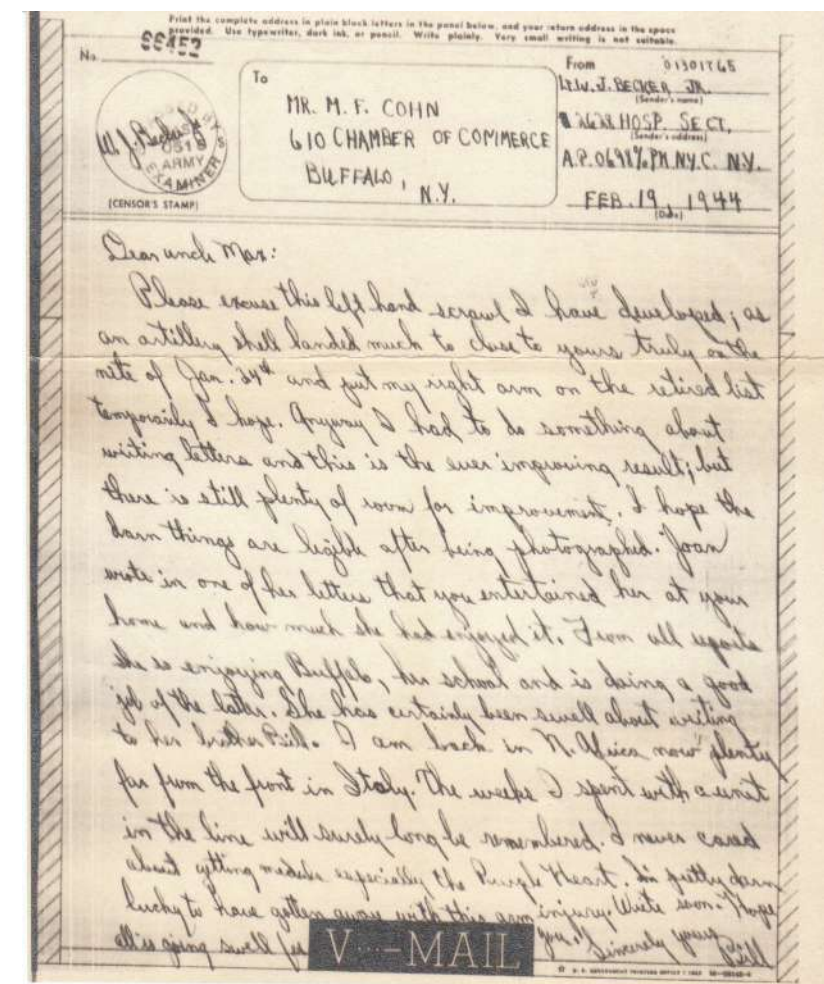
“As you will have heard, all my real friends were killed in Tunis and Wynne Hansen-Rae and myself were the only fighting officers to survive. Consequently our only purpose in living now is to fight the war to a finish. We are both tired of this hanging around.”

He was not a fan of the Airgraph system writing, “...these stupid airgraphs seem very incomplete.”

Major Walter Brian Coleman of the Queen's Own Royal West Kent Regiment, was himself killed, fighting in Italy, on 11th March 1944. He was 28 years old.

He is buried at Minturno War Cemetery in Italy

His fellow officer, Major Holger Wynne Hansen-Raae (correct spelling) was killed during the final battle at Montecassino on 14th May 1944 and is buried at Cassino. He was 27 years old.



Fronte Russo-The Russian Front

On June 22nd 1941, Hitler attacked the Soviet Union. Although the Germans made no request for Italian support, Mussolini ordered the Royal Army to get ready for the Eastern Front. Both armies were short on fuel and Mussolini wanted a share of the Caucasian oil fields.

The first contingent, the CSIR arrived in southern Russia between July and August 1941. They fought as part of the German 11th army, with initial success, reaching the Don River.



Alpini verso

Right: Air mail letter sent from PM 88, Kasciari near Millerovo which supported the CSIR units that had just been integrated into the ARMIR.



Scan of reverse of letter.



Above: Card sent to a soldier in the 5th Alpine Regt. Tridentina, part of CSIR. At the time of posting they were in Botsani, Romania on the way to Russia

Left: Alpine troops in training. Despite the rigours they can still smile.



In July 1942, Mussolini increased the Italian contingent to full army size against the advice of General Messe who controlled the CSIR and argued that they could not equip an army that size for Russian conditions.

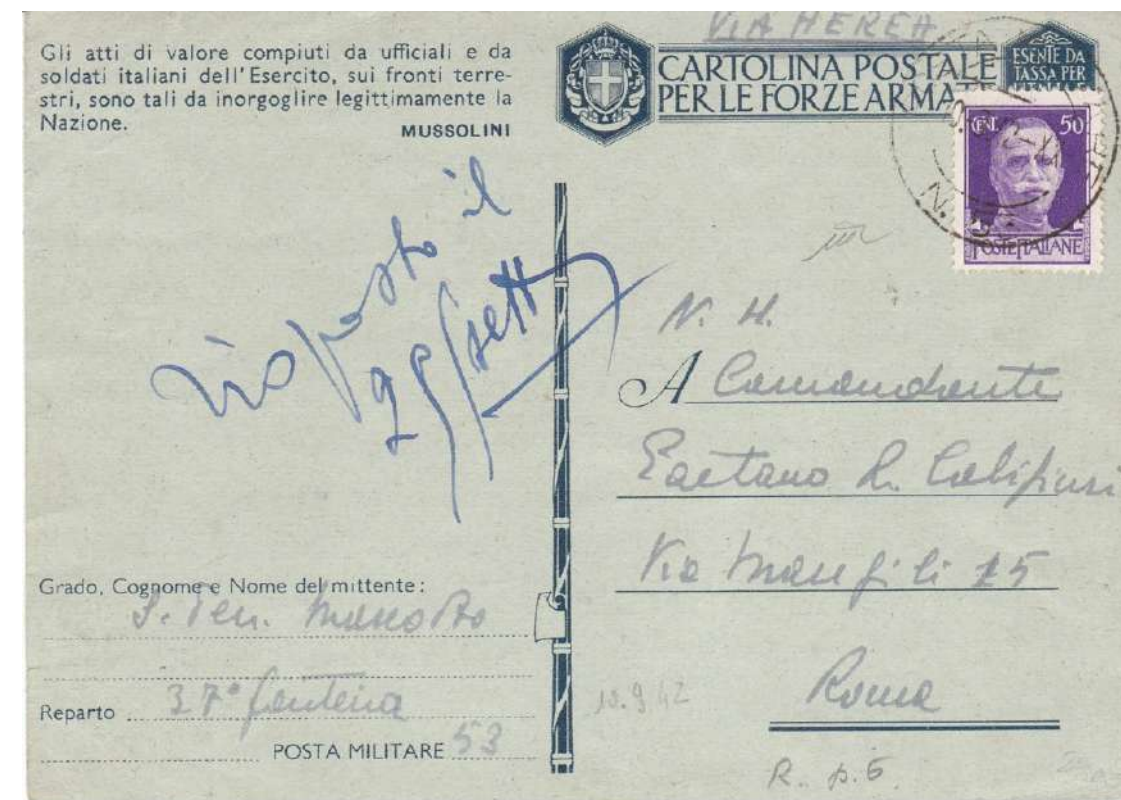
Mussolini sacked and replaced Messe and went ahead. This then became the ARMIR (Armata Italiana in Russia). They held a 250km front along the Don River but were spread very thinly.

This card was sent by Franco, a soldier of the 3rd Division "Ravenna", from PM 53, based in Russia at Tverdokhlebovo, to Comandante Gaetano Caligiuri (Nino) in which he thanks the comandante for kindness to his mother when she visited him.

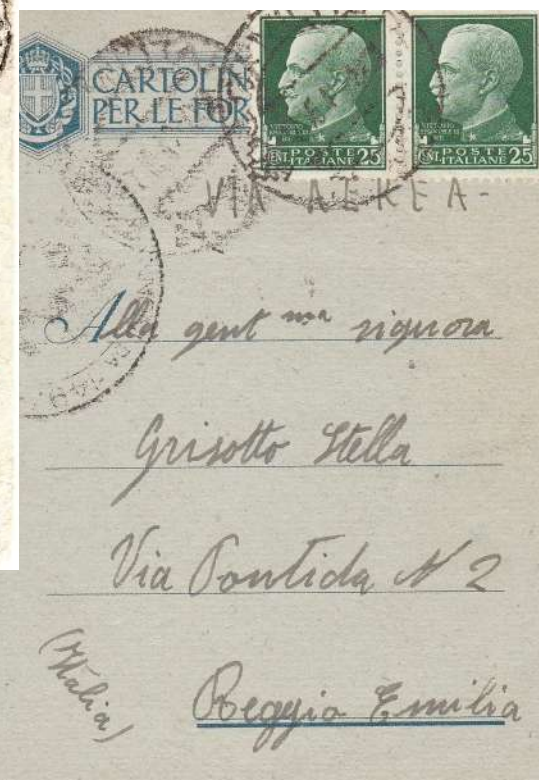
What the card does not say is that a few days earlier, Ravenna was fighting the Russians in the First Battle of the Don, famous for the Cavalry Charge of Isbuschenskij, the last Italian cavalry charge of the war. Both sides used horses extensively. He also asks for the address of Marco a soldier in Div. "Pasubio" and it seems from the letter that all three men were relatives. Both Pasubio and Ravenna were annihilated in the coming battles. Although Franco and Marco probably did not both survive as their chances were one in ten, members of the Caligiuri family are still living at the Rome address.



Right: The ARMIR was also known as the 8th Army. This card was posted from PM6, at Millerovo at that time



Left: Card posted from PM 83 in Russia. At this time the post office was moving almost every day. On 27.7.42 it was at Vorosilovgrad in Ukraine, on the Russian border.



Missing - Captured - Killed Visions and Victims of Mussolini's Wars

Fronte Russo-The Russian Front

This card was sent to a soldier in Div. Ravenna in March and April 1943. By then, Ravenna had been annihilated and the pristine condition of this card suggests that it was never handled by a soldier in the field.

Ravenna were highly trained mountain fighters headed for the Caucasus mountains as part of the push to capture the Caucasian oil fields. Hitler changed his plan and sent them to attack Stalingrad instead, where their equipment and mules were completely unsuitable.



This card, sent in March 1943 from a soldier in Italy to a friend at PM 20, Gomel shows an angel guarding a soldier. He would soon need it. Gomel was where the German army administration was based but in November that year, the Russians retook the town.



Eighty per cent of Gomel was destroyed in the fighting and of the 140,000 living there in 1940, only 15,000 survived.

After the war, the town was completely rebuilt, only to be again devastated by the Chernobyl disaster in 1986. In recent years there has been a slow regrowth in population and it is now the second largest city in Belorussia.

Left: Scan of front of card

The card at left shows Mussolini reviewing the ARMIR on the way to the Russian front.

On the day it was posted, the Russians launched their major counter-offensive that completely destroyed the Italian force.

Of an original 235,000 men who went to Russia, 115,000 died there, either fighting or in captivity where the Russians had no ability to feed them as the Germans had taken all the food. The survivors who got home were in such bad shape, Mussolini's popularity was over.



Scan of reverse of card.

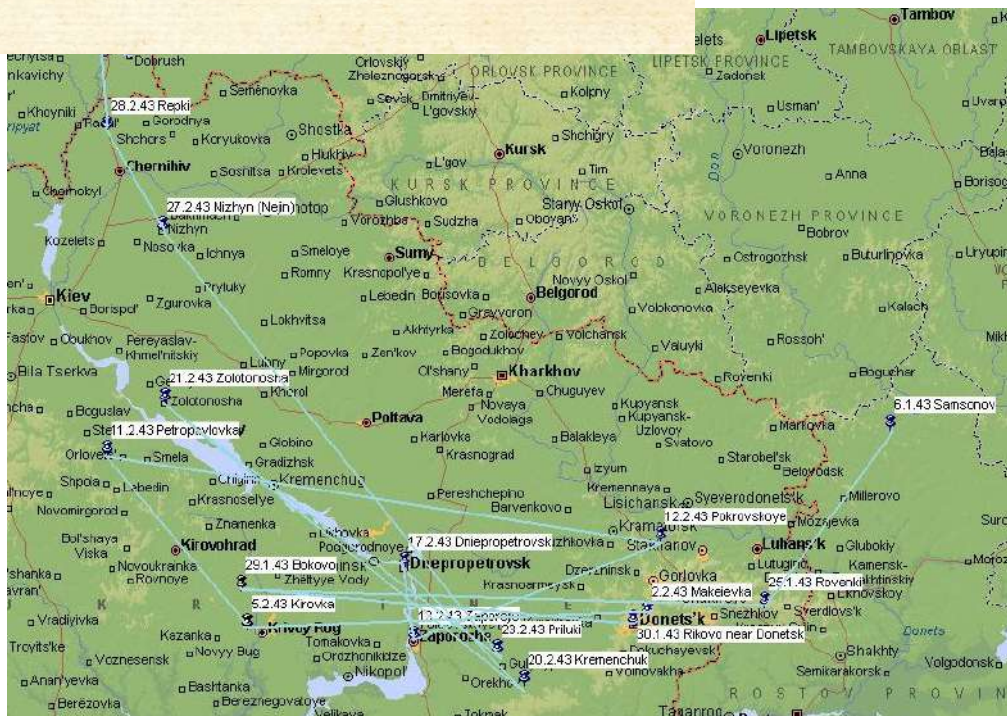


The top card has a postmark saying, TACI! OGNI NOTIZIA GIOVA AL NEMICO! which translates as, "Silence! All news helps the enemy. "Vinceremo" means "We will win"

Left: Card from the Vatican Information Office to a family telling them that they were unable at this time to get any information from the Russian Front.

The 3rd Mountain Infantry Division (Ravenna)

This division was mobilized in October 1939. They took part in the Italian invasion of France and later in the Invasion of Yugoslavia as part of the Italian XI Corps. The division was one of the twelve divisions that served on the Eastern Front as part of the ARMIR. They were destroyed in Operation Little Saturn, the Red Army's offensive operation in the defence of Stalingrad, encircling 130,000 soldiers of the Italian 8th Army on the Don.



Map showing the chaotic movements of PM 53 during the retreat.

PM 53

After Stalingrad, the remains of the ARMIR was in a chaotic state of retreat. PM 53 serviced the Ravenna division and the movements of the post office between 6.1.43 and 1.3.43 show the degree of that chaos. By the end of March Ravenna no longer warranted its own post office and in April it was withdrawn to Italy



Missing - Captured - Killed
Visions and Victims of Mussolini's Wars

Capture Cards

PRISONER OF WAR POST
POSTA PRIGIONIERI DI GUERRA

Postage free
Franchi di porto

EAST 156

CARD OF CAPTURE FOR ITALIAN PRISONERS OF WAR
CARTOLINA DI CATTURA PER PRIGIONIERI DI GUERRA ITALIANI

IMPORTANT

This card must be filled in by each prisoner immediately after his capture, and only once in Egypt.

This card is in addition to the special one which the prisoner of war is allowed to write to his family

IMPORTANT

Questa cartolina dev'essere riempita da ogni prigioniero subito dopo la sua cattura una sola volta in Egitto.

Il prigioniero invierà alla famiglia un'altra cartolina speciale.

AU COMITE INTERNATIONAL
DE LA CROIX-ROUGE

AGENCE CENTRALE DES
PRISONNIERS DE GUERRE

GENÈVE
(Suisse)

These two cards give details of Italian soldiers captured in 1943 and held at Camps in the Middle East. Prisoners were transferred from these camps as they were a drain on military resources needed for the fighting.

The Vatican operated a similar system to the Red Cross, holding two million casualty and capture files. The two organisations shared their information.

Allied prisoners were usually sent to Italy as the Germans delegated this job to the Italians while Italian and German prisoners could be sent almost anywhere.

930102 - 30

Scrivere leggibilmente ed a carattere stampato! Write clearly and in printed letters!

Cognome — Surname Saccardi Nome — First Name Giuseppe Nome del padre — Father's Name Di Torello

Date of birth 18-10-14 Place of birth Casellina e Gori (Firenze)

Rank Cap. Magg Unit 125° Regg. I

Grado Grado

Army number No. matricola Last civilian residence Brozzi - Firenze

Ultima residenza civile

Family's address Sig. Saccardi Torello

Indirizzo della famiglia Via Di Brozzi 355 - Brozzi

Coming from (camp No., hospital No., etc) 313 - ME 58 P

Vengo dal (campo No., ospedale No., ecc)

Captured: unwounded* slightly wounded*

Sono stato catturato: illeso* ferito*

Am well* Am: recovered* convalescent* ill* M.

Sto bene* Sono guarito* convalescente* ammalato

Present address: P.O.W. number 370021 Camp No. 308

Mio indirizzo attuale: No. prigionia Campo No.

Date 3-5-43 Signature Saccardi Giuseppe

Data Firma

*=Cancel what does not apply No further details permitted See explanation on reverse side

*=Cancellare se non corrisponde - Non aggiungere indicazioni non richieste - Vedi spiegazioni a tergo

Red Cross notification to families

When a soldier went missing it could take many months to find out any news. The Red Cross and the Vatican Information Office handled thousands of enquiries every month.

All armies sent whatever records they had of casualties and prisoners to these offices where they were collated on file cards and checked against enquiries from families.

Sometimes, of course, there were no records as the power of the ordinance and bombs meant that many soldiers died without a trace.

With the chaos of wartime postage, it was also possible that the message from a prisoner did not reach the family.

Families that had lived in a house for generations were being uprooted by the war as bombing and ground fighting came to Italy.

In these situations, the family might contact the Vatican, through their local priest, or the Red Cross in Geneva in search of information.

One can imagine the joy in the household when they received this letter from the Red Cross in answer to their enquiry.

It translates (roughly), "As a result of research done by the writer, notice is hereby given that the object of the search is a prisoner in Egypt".

Domenico was alive!

N. 14-014

CROCE ROSSA ITALIANA

UFFICIO PRIGIONIERI RICERCHE E SERVIZI CONNESSI
(SEGRETERIATO INTERNAZIONALE INFORMAZIONI PRIVATE)

ROMA - Via PUGLIE, 6 - Tel. 41-530 - Telegr.: CROCIROSSA ROMA

16932

Prot. N. Roma, li 8 MAG. 1943

Risposta N. Rinaldi Angela

Oggetto Giuseppe Domenico Via Mennia 1

Allegati P. Giovanni Potondo (Joggia)

In seguito alle ricerche fatte dall'Ufficio scrivente si comunica che il nominativo all'Oggetto risulta prigioniero. in Egitto

UFFICIO PRIGIONIERI - RICERCHE E SERVIZI (C. 533) Via Puglia, 6 - ROMA

IL CARO UFFICIO PRIGIONIERI (C.A.S. - MESSINA - CASSARO)

(4104821) Roma, 1943 XIX - Istituto Poligr. dello Stato - G. C. (Copie 100.000)

Missing - Captured - Killed
Visions and Victims of Mussolini's Wars

Capture Cards and Prisoner's Letters

Right and below:
Two capture cards which were sent to the families of prisoners. The prisoner was allowed a short message on the reverse to say I am a prisoner and I am well. The sender then had to hope the card made it through but depending on the destination, this could take months.
Right: Prisoner notification card from Camp 304 to Udine, Italy. Camp 304 was in Helwan, Egypt, now part of Greater Cairo. It held Italian and German prisoners. After the war, the repatriation was slow and the cause of much anguish. Most Italians were repatriated by the end of 1946 but German prisoners were still held there until the end of 1948 and possibly into 1949.
The reason given was a lack of shipping. British soldiers were also kept there after the war possibly to counter a perceived Russian threat in Europe. Once the war was over, everyone just wanted to go home!

AF. W. 3054 (Substitute)
CARD TO BE USED FOR NOTIFICATION OF CAPTURE ONLY
PRISONER OF WAR
Postage Free
Franco di Bollo

Nome *Diego Vincenzo*
Cognome *Diego*
No. Matr. *1111*
Grado *Conte*
Unità *138. R. Aut. D. B.*
Data e luogo di nascita: *Calabria 16-11-312*
Nome padre: *Diego*
Nome madre: *Graci Giuseppe*
No. dell' Internato: *111198*
Indirizzo: *Diego Vincenzo*
Italian Prisoners of War Camp.
413 - PMEO - 40.000. - 1/41 Egypt.

UFFICIO PRIGIONIERI - RICERCH
E SERVIZI CONNESSI
Via Puglia, 6 - ROMA
VERIFICATO
PER CENSURA
144
I
aux soins du
COMITÉ INTERNATIONAL
de la CROIX ROUGE
Agence Centrale
des prisonniers de Guerre
GENÈVE

The card above has been forwarded through the Red Cross and appears to have only been subject to Italian censorship.
Right: Many camps supplied prisoners with standard forms on which to write. This South African letter sheet is numbered P.O.W. 9 and is printed in Italian. (P.O.W. 10 was a card.) It has flaps at each end that fold over for sealing and the reverse when unused is blank. This one has a hand written letter to the soldier's wife on the reverse. It has both English and Afrikaans censor stamps.

P.O.W. 9
CORRISPONDENZA - PRIGIONIERI DI GUERRA
PRISONNIERS DE GUERRE
POSTAGE FREE
FRANCO DI BOLLO

Alla Signora Talia Vincenzo
Strada *Via Soldato Talia 13*
Città *Favara*
Provincia *Agrigento*
Paesa *Sicilia*

A.F. W. 3054 (Substitute)
CARD TO BE USED FOR NOTIFICATION OF CAPTURE ONLY
PRISONER OF WAR
Postage Free
Franco di Bollo

Nome *GIUSEPPE*
Cognome *RONCHESE*
No. Matr. *13740*
Grado *SOLDATO*
Unità *9^e BERSAGLIERE*
Data e luogo di nascita: *20-5-1921*
BRUGNERA
Nome padre: *ANTONIO*
Nome madre: *DIANNA REGINA*
No. dell' Internato: *345774*
Indirizzo: *BER. RONCHESE GIUSEPPE*
Italian Prisoners of War Camp, 304

Sig. *RONCHESE ANTONIO*
PRATA di PORDENONE
VIA GILRANO.
UDINE
ITALIA.
aux soins du
COMITÉ INTERNATIONAL
de la CROIX ROUGE
Agence Centrale
des prisonniers de Guerre

The prisoner in Kenya (top right) has used a single page of note paper folded for postage with no envelope. Despite being flimsy it has survived for seventy years. Stamped P/W Post and Postage Free and P/W East Africa 009 and "Written In" followed by handwritten word "Italian"
Letters were permitted to and from prisoners under the Geneva Convention. In most cases letters from prisoners travelled free of charge and were often written on cards or letter sheets provided for the purpose. Letters were censored to varying degrees and could take months to reach their destinations.

P/W POST
POSTAGE FREE
P/W EAST AFRICA 009
Kenya
WRITTEN IN Italian
geom. Muti Giuseppe
Via Salvatore Rosa, 327
Napoli

Letter from Italian prisoner in camp in Kenya.

POSTA PER PRIGIONIERI E INTERNATI CIVILI DI GUERRA

Al *SERGEANTE MAGGIORE*
GRADO DEL DESTINATARIO
SANTAGUIDA ALDO di Luigi
Cognome Nome Paternità del destinatario
Matricola M. *NA/T 2754 = PRIGIONIERO*
Di seguito scrivere: « PRIGIONIERO GUERRA » Oppure « INTERNATO CIVILE »
Campo N. *208 P.O.W. CAMP*
Riportare tutte le indicazioni relative al numero e nome del campo sezione di campo, ecc. secondo le indicazioni fornite dal prigioniero di guerra o internato civile
410 IT ORD RET STORES
A L G I E R S (Algeria)
Stato o Paese di destinazione

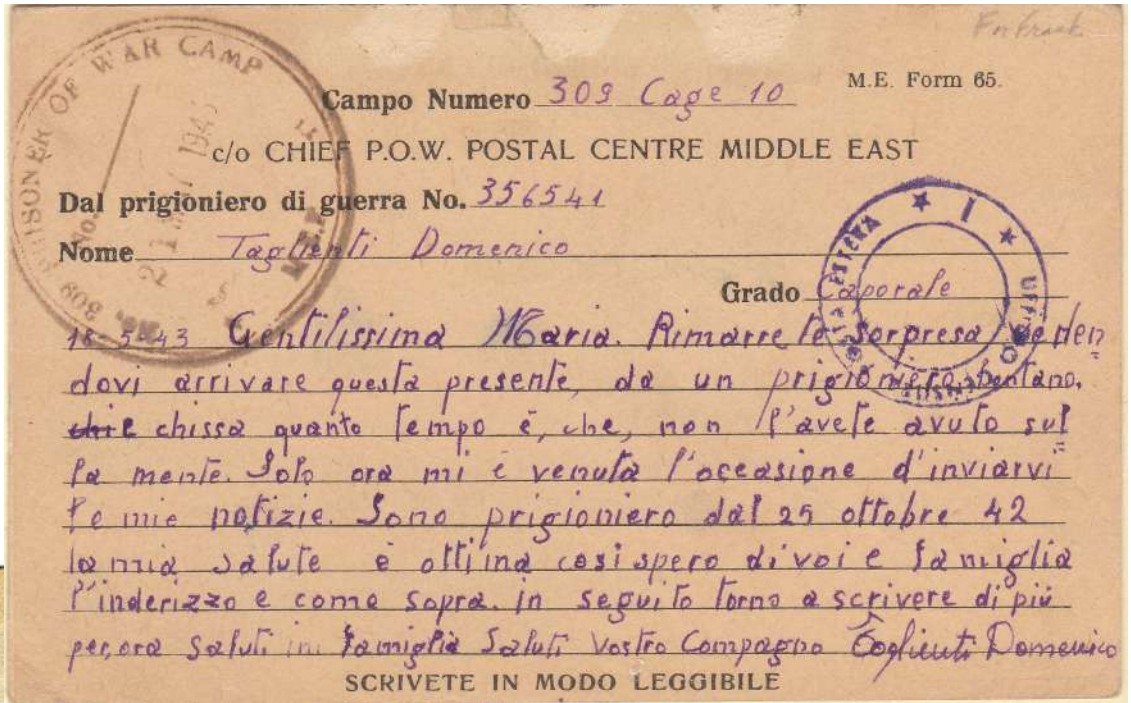
Above: Letter from Italian prisoner, Sgt Major Santaguida, held by the Americans in Algeria to Maria Santaguida, presumably his wife, in Lecce on official prisoner post form (part) with free postage. Receipt postmarked Lecce on 30.11.44 which should be XXII but after the armistice, the Fascist numbering system was abandoned and they have not changed the obliterator.
The stamp "U.S. ARMY PW RELEASED" refers to the letter being released for transmission by the censor rather than the release of the prisoner himself. The handwritten note 410 IT ORD RET STORES appears on more than one of these in my collection but I have not been able to find out the significance of this.

Prisoners of the British Empire

Letter sheet from Italian prisoner in camps 305, Tell El Kebir (at right) and card from 303 Cage 10 (below with scan of front), both run by the British Army in the Middle East. The top letter carries the Red Cross stamp. For many families, the Red Cross was the main source of information about the plight of family members.



Missing - Captured - Killed
Visions and Victims of Mussolini's Wars

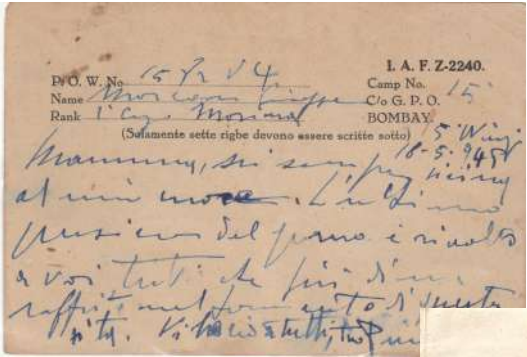


These cards allowed a maximum of ten lines of script and had to be legible for the censor. This could be a problem as some soldiers on both sides were poorly educated and did not write well. My own father, from Scotland, was one of the first generation of his family to learn to read and write.

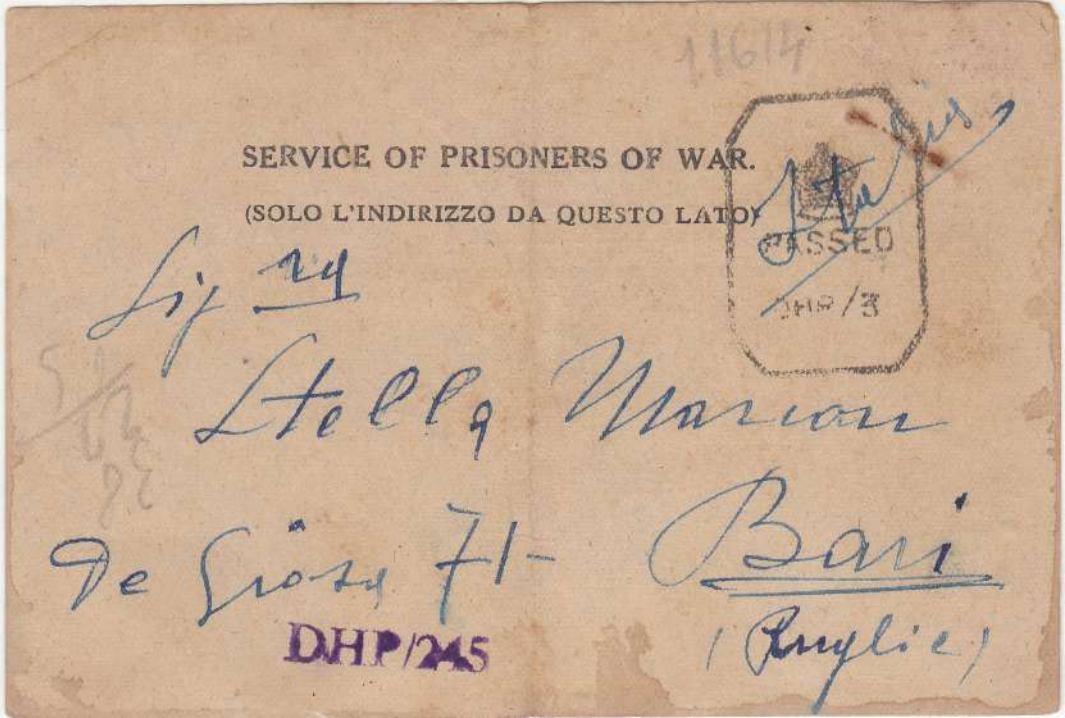
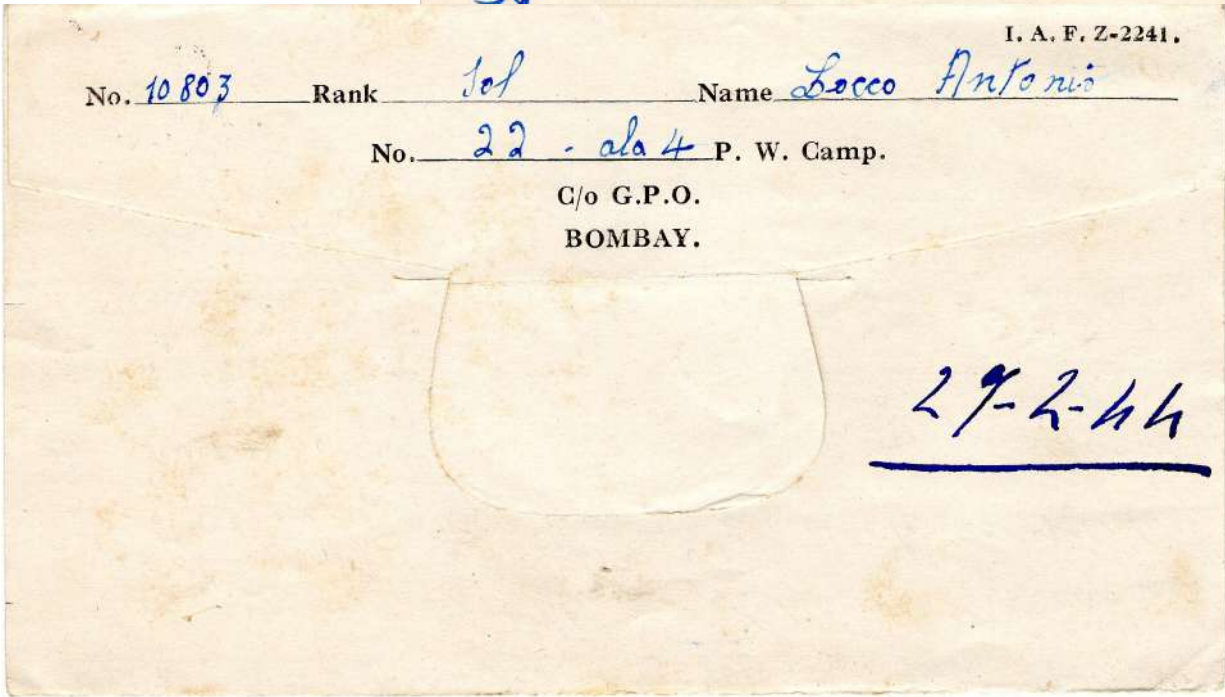
The soldier's letters at left and top right shows why censors, like postal clerks could have trouble reading handwriting.

Most parts of the Empire accepted prisoners of war. The prisoners (right and below) were shipped to Bombay, India. There were two types of stationery available to prisoners in camps in Bombay, India, cards which only allowed a few lines and letter sheets which folded in three for longer messages.

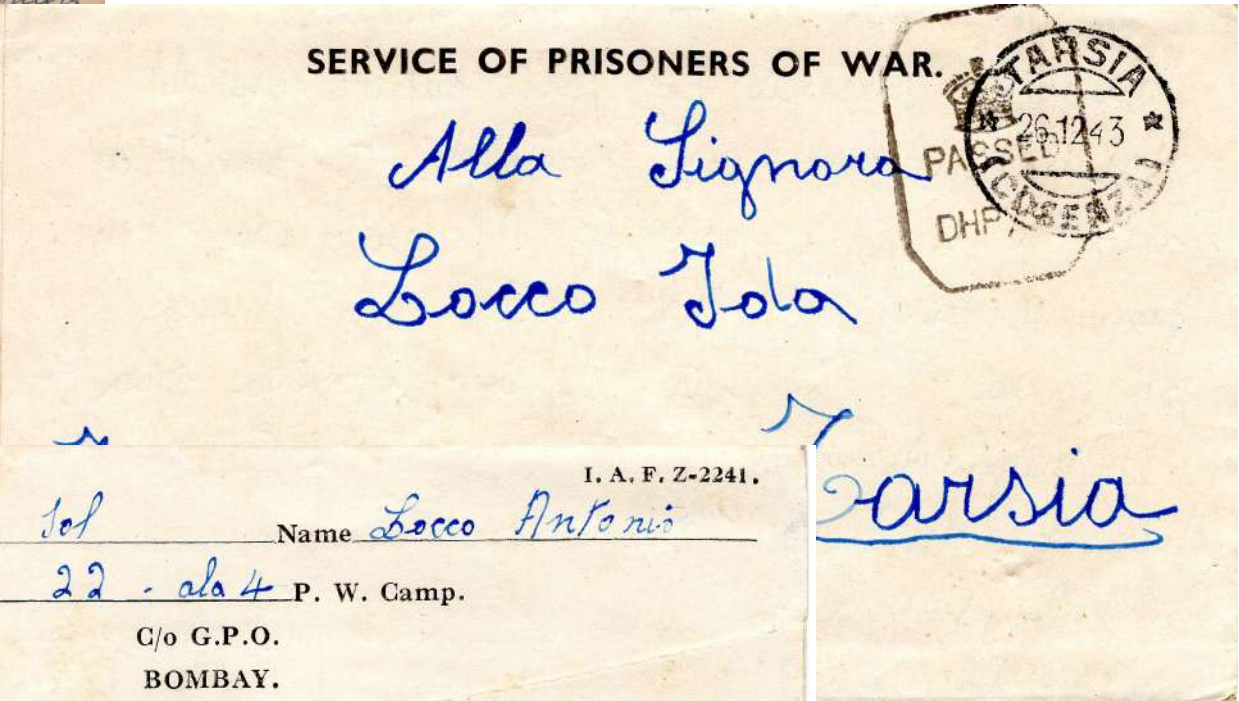
After the armistice, the prisoner at right's home came under German control in the Italian Social Republic (RSI) so previous mail would have been slow. This card is dated 18.5.45. by which time, Mussolini was dead and the war in Italy was over.



Right: Folding letter sheets. This prisoner was from Tarsia in Calabria, Southern Italy which was under Allied control so the letters should have had a speedier transit.



Above: Card for short messages. Left: Scan of reverse



An Australian Prisoner in Italy

1941 “Clipper” Air Mail cover from Australia to Captain T. H. Vincent, Australian prisoner of war in Camp PG 17 at Rezzanello, near Piacenza in the Emilio-Romagna area of Northern Italy.

It is paid at the air mail rate for Italy of 5s 8d. The Clipper route is shown as Australia, USA, UK by air then the letter would have travelled through prisoner of war post to Italy. It has a purple censor stamp from Australia on the front plus a “3 Opened by Censor” sticker on the reverse and also an Italian censor stamp and sticker on the reverse.

The Clippers were Boeing 314 long range flying boats produced between 1938 and 1941. They flew Atlantic and Pacific routes providing a luxury service for the super rich.

They were withdrawn from service after the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbour when some were transferred to military use but still with their original flight crews. The last flight from Australia was in December 1941.

By war’s end, they were basically obsolete, replaced by land based planes such as the Lockheed Constellation



Reverse scan showing Italian and Australian censor marks and tape.

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WAR CASUALTIES

Word has been received by Mr. W. Ferguson, Lyttleton-street, Launceston, that his son-in-law, Captain T. H. Vincent, who was previously reported missing, is a prisoner of war in Italy. Captain Vincent is the only son of Mrs. J. E. Vincent, of New Town.

A.I.F. HONOUR ROLL

Relatives of soldiers

Scan of Launceston Examiner 15.8.41

Missing - Captured - Killed
Visions and Victims of Mussolini's Wars

From 1788 to 1861, Great Britain transported prisoners to jails in Australia. In WW2 this began again.

This letter to Italy is from a prison camp in Myrtleford, Victoria. Several thousand prisoners were brought to Australia where they were often released onto farms as cheap labourers. Many returned to Australia after the war as migrants.

Lieutenant Silvio Sacconi was an artillery officer who was captured at Tobruk (Libya) on 22.1.41. He had been a clerk with the ministry of agriculture in Rome before joining the army. He had fair hair and blue eyes and was 5 feet 9 inches tall.

He was shipped to Australia on the Queen Mary, arriving in Sydney on the 16.8.41. He was initially sent to Murchison camp but was transferred to Myrtleford on 10.6.42 arriving there after a nine day march. Although some prisoners were sent to work on local farms, he spent the rest of the war at the camp, except for a three week stay in hospital.

Prisoners at Myrtleford were not repatriated until the end of the war. Silvio Sacconi was among the first batch of 195 prisoners repatriated to Italy on 4.8.45 aboard the RMS Andes. Unlike many other ex-prisoners, it seems that he never returned.

The letter, on a standard prisoner form, is to his wife, Pina and carries one shilling postage, the air mail rate for prisoners to Italy. It carries an Australian diamond shaped censor stamp and the camp commandant’s approval stamp plus an Italian censor stamp and a stamp showing it is written in Italian. The stamp is postmarked with the Myrtleford Military Post Office CDS, dated 20.5 43, four months before the Armistice.

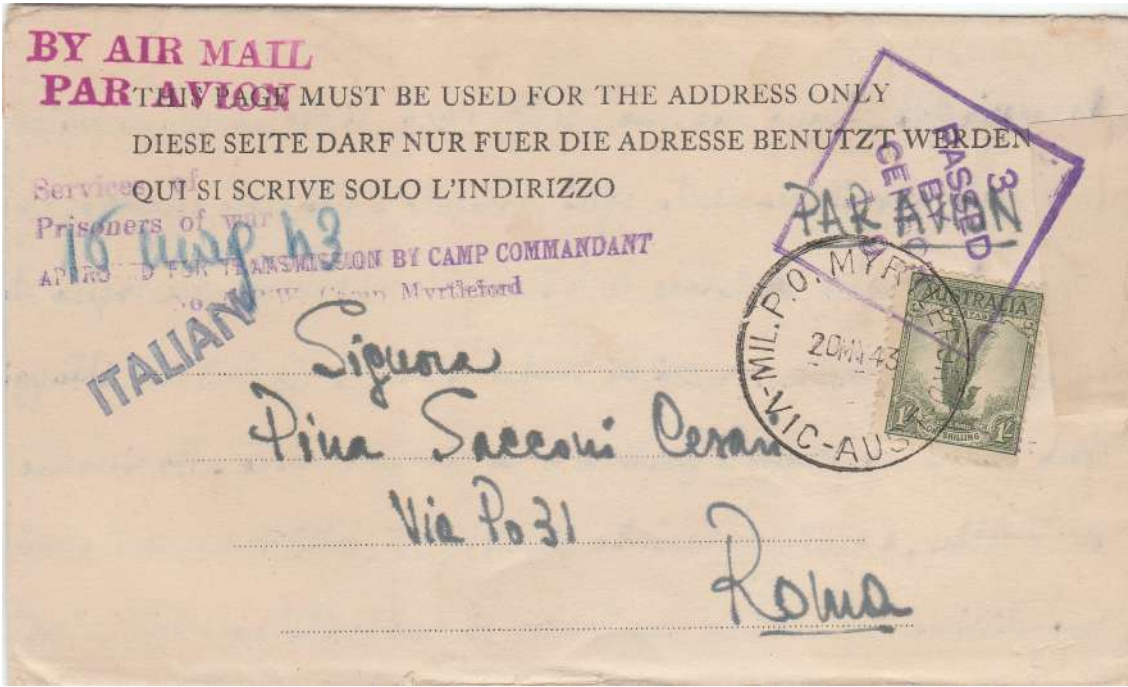


RMS Andes finally took this soldier home



National Archives
Silvio's POW File

An Italian ‘Transported’ to Australia



Scan of reverse of letter



Group photo of Italian prisoners of war at Myrtleford Camp. Lieut. Silvio Saccone is in the front row, second from the left. Photo: Australian War Museum.

Missing - Captured - Killed Visions and Victims of Mussolini's Wars

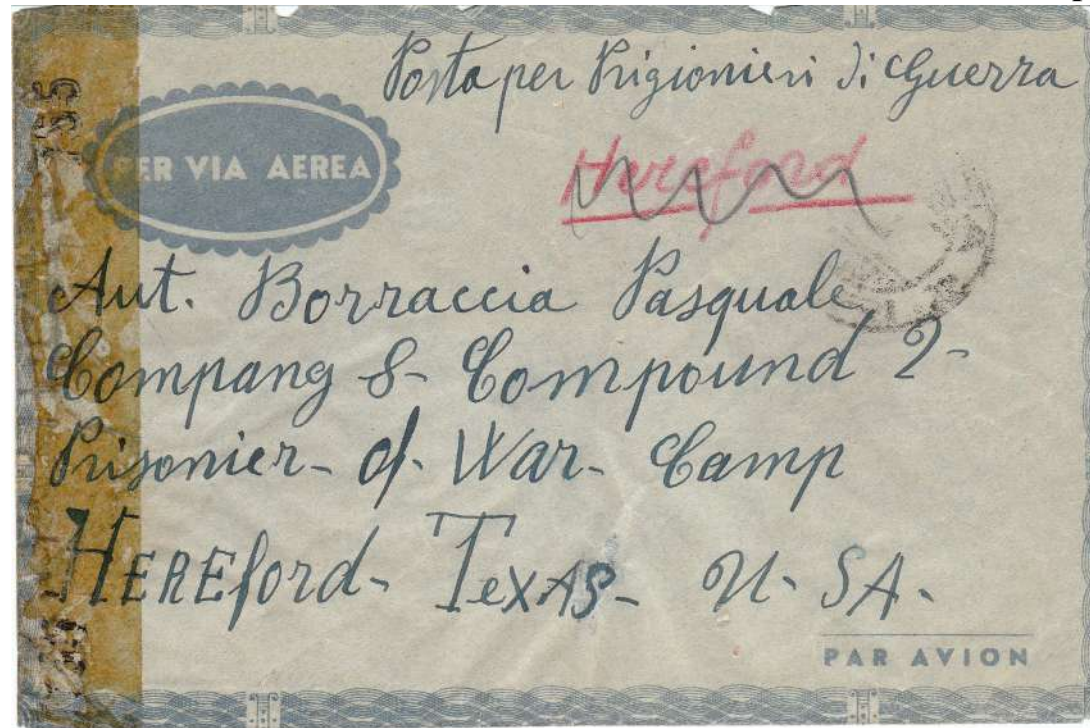
Italian card - French prisoner with a Greek name in a German camp.

This Italian postcard (on right) was sent to Lieut. Costia Zafiropulo, a French officer prisoner of war in Oflag IV D (Elsterhorst). Oflag is short for *Offizier Lager*, an officer's camp. The card was sent from Perugia, Italy 24.12.40 (Christmas Eve). He was later sent to the fort at Colditz (Oflag IVC) and remained there till 1943.

He escaped three times. The first time on 10.12.41 disguised as a German interpreter, then twice with Nicolas Bykhovetz, on 8.6.42 when they were discovered by sentries during the escape and on 22-5-44 but they were recaptured one month later. He returned to France after the war and was married in 1946 to Micheline Borelli. They had two daughters. He died in Lausanne in 2001.

The message is written on a normal pre-stamped postcard and appears to have had another stamp added but this has been since lost. The card bears the Oflag IVD stamp with a number 11 and the circled Ad in red that shows it was sent via Munich.

Italian Prisoner - American Camp



Italian prisoners often found themselves a long way from home. This letter was sent to an Italian soldier in a prisoner of war camp in Hereford, Texas, USA but by the time it arrived he had been moved. It is back stamped Internment Camp Coolidge Arizona showing his new address.

At Right: Scan of Camp Coolidge stamp on reverse.



An Italian card to French prisoner with a Greek name in a German camp.

British Prisoners in Italy

The Italian card (at right) was for Allied prisoner use. Posted in 1942 from Campo 59 at Servigliano which began as a camp for Jewish refugees then was changed to a prisoner of war camp for 3000 Greeks and later 2000 more British and American troops. When the camp became part of the Italian Social Republic in 1943 after the Armistice, the prisoners escaped through a hole in the wall before the German troops arrived,

Posted by Corporal Robert Charles Perkins, Royal Engineers to London, England with free prisoner postage. It has three Italian and one octagonal British censor stamps. It reads:

“Dear Lily and Walter. Hello there you two, you will probably be surprised to see my change of address, but it isn't quite so bad as it seems. I do hope you are both OK. I have been in “captivity” now since 28.12.41 so am getting an old hand. Must now close. Cheerio, all the best. Bob.



Above: Prepaid letter sheet for sending to British prisoners of war in German and Italian camps. It was sent from London, England in June 1943 to Camp 53, Settore, Italy but the camp number has been crossed out and it was redirected to Camp 148, a labour camp at Bussolengo, near Verona. After the Armistice was announced in September that year, the guards left and there was a mass breakout of prisoners, after which camp 148 was closed.



Above: Unused Italian Red Cross card for the use of allied prisoners of war in Italy. Cards like this only allowed a brief message to be sent.

This is the first unused card I have seen and was sent to me by a friend in Canada. One has to wonder what caused someone to keep one of these for so many years but in those days, stamp collecting was a universal hobby. Many of the covers I find have been carefully prepared with future collection in mind.

Missing - Captured - Killed Visions and Victims of Mussolini's Wars

Yugoslav Prisoners in Italian Camps

Italian treatment of Yugoslav prisoners and civilian internees showed the dark side of the Italian Fascist regime.

The Italian army commander, Mario Roatta, planned to kill or deport all the inhabitants of the Slovenian Province of Ljubljana and replace them with Italian settlers in response to Slovene partisan resistance in the province.



Above: This card was sent to a Yugoslav prisoner at Gonars concentration camp, Udine, by his wife in Ljubljana. A child has also signed the card in coloured pencil. They have used a prepaid Italian card and added an express stamp to expedite delivery.



Above: Card from Ljubljana to prisoner at Arbe (Rab) camp

At the camp on the island of Arbe (Rab), now in Croatia, the death toll at 18% was higher than Buchenwald, one of the worst German camps. A Vatican enquiry found that 3500 died there, many of them children. The prisoner who received the above card probably survived as he kept his cards.

Jews were held separately at Rab and were treated relatively better, survivors said. They had access to radio and newspapers and were better fed. Anton Vratusa, a former prisoner at Rab who went on to be Yugoslavia's ambassador at the United Nations, said. "We were prisoners; they were protected people. We used their assistance."

On 23 February 1942 the Italians established a concentration camp at Gonars, near the Yugoslav border. 5343 prisoners (including 1643 children) were brought there two days later from Ljubljana and the camps at Rab and Monigo. Around 500 prisoners died there over the next eighteen months, allegedly from starvation and torture. The camp was closed after the Armistice.

After the war, Yugoslav partisans took bloody revenge, killing thousands and forcing all Italians in their midst to flee to Italy.

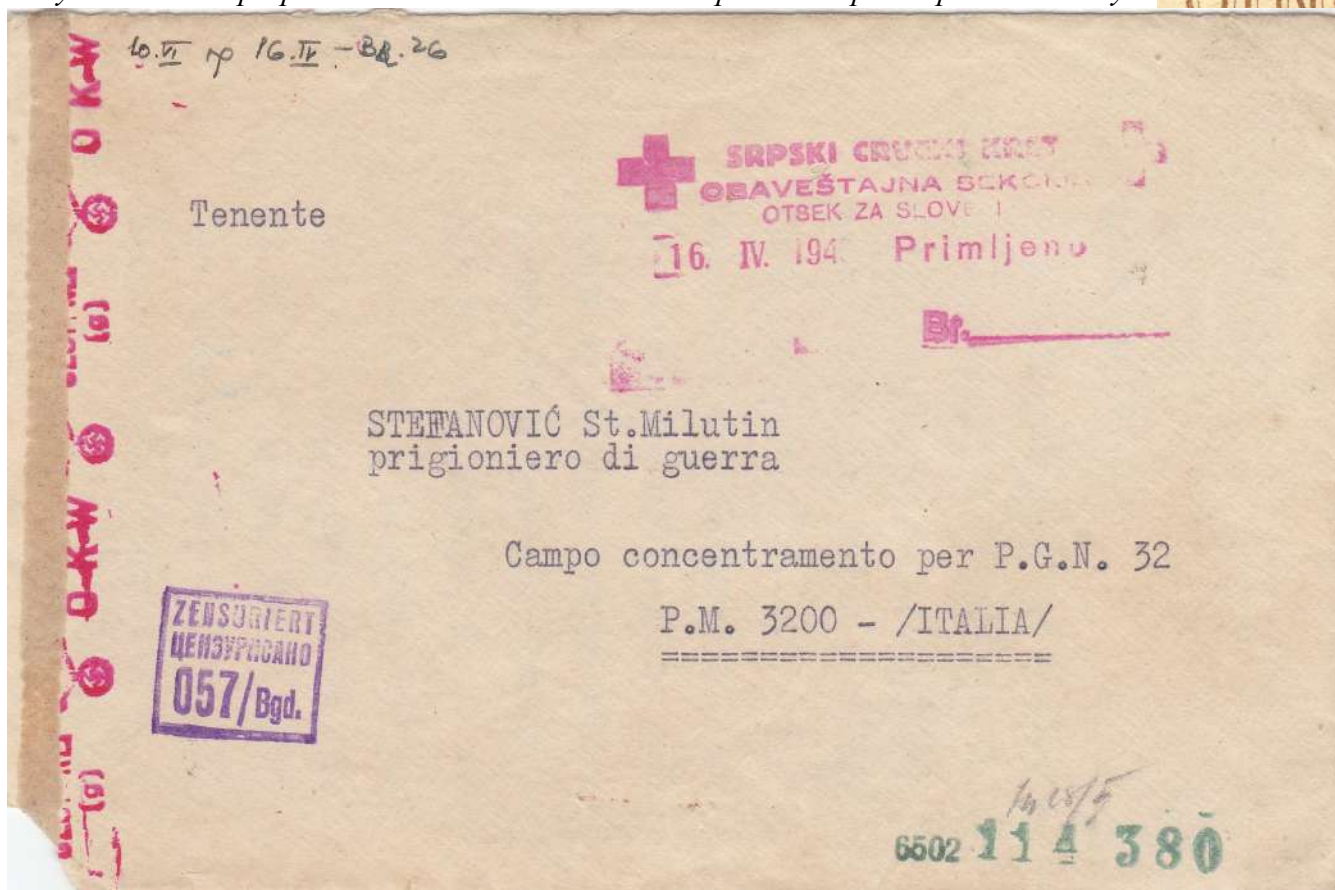
Silvio Berlusconi, when prime minister of Italy, told an Italian newspaper that the Fascist government of Benito Mussolini "never killed anyone." "Mussolini used to send people on vacation in internal exile," Berlusconi was quoted as saying in La Voce di Rimini, an Italian newspaper.

This revisionist view is a direct result of the British and American decision not to prosecute Italians for war crimes. After 1945, the "Cold War" focused on Italy and these men were needed in the fight against communism. Of the 1200 accused by Yugoslavia and Ethiopia, only a few were charged for murdering British or American prisoners. The Italian camps were conveniently left out of the history books.



Above: Card to Croatia from a prisoner at the Monigo concentration camp near Treviso

Below: Card from Dalmatia to a prisoner at Sulmona concentration camp near Rome. Later this camp was converted to house British officer prisoners of war and other prisoners were moved.



1943 letter from Beograd, Serbia via the Red Cross to a prisoner in camp P.G. 32 in Bogliaco near Brescia. Opened in June 1941 for officers of the Yugoslav army, it was administered by the Royal Army in Milan. Unlike many camps for Yugoslav soldiers which only had tents, the buildings were masonry but though designed for 132 prisoners, it averaged 170 for most of the time it was open. The letter carries a purple Serbian censor stamp on the front and an Italian censor stamp on the rear. It has been opened and resealed with German censor tape.

Missing - Captured - Killed Visions and Victims of Mussolini's Wars

Tracing the missing: Red Cross Letters

When a soldier went missing, sometimes the first indication for the family was a returned letter such as that at right. Their main recourse was to contact the International Red Cross or the Vatican Office of Information. These organisations had offices in Geneva and shared data.

Thousands of letters flooded into them each year to be cross matched against details of prisoners taken. They also received identification details of dead soldiers from all the armies. Both sides sent evidence of any soldiers killed, such as dog-tags, no matter which army they came from.



Above: RTS letter with cancel saying addressee was a prisoner of war

Left and Below: Two letters to the Red Cross from the Italian Social Republic. The left example has been sealed by German censorship tape as well as having Italian censor stamps. Families would often pay more for express or registered mail in their search for news.

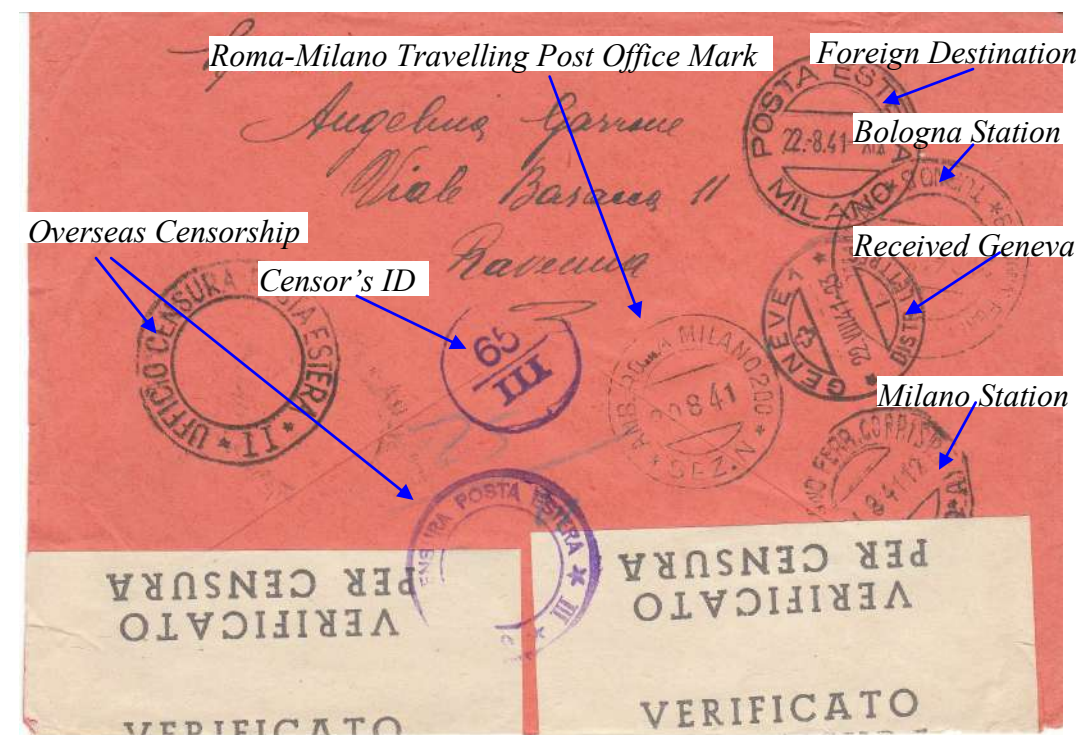


Below: Express letter to the International Red Cross from Rome, posted before the Armistice. It is back-stamped Milan Foreign Post and bears an unusual octagonal Geneva receipt stamp (below right).



ICRC Prisoner letter from Ravenna to Geneva including section by railway TPO

This 1941 censored letter from Ravenna to Geneva was posted on 18.8.41. Postage was L2.75. It bears a Railway Travelling Post Office mark - AMB (Ambulante = travelling) ROMA MILANO (the stations at each end of the route) 200 which is the number of the train dated 20.8.41 and Estera meaning it was destined overseas. It has two overseas censorship marks and tape, all Italian. It also has postmarks from Bologna (21.8.41), where it would have met the Rome-Milan train, Milano (22.8.41) and Geneva, also 22.8.41. This shows that it went by air from Milan to Geneva.



Scan of reverse postal markings producing a cover we can only dream about today

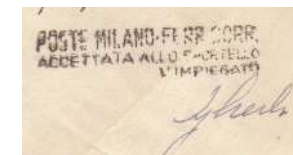
Missing - Captured - Killed Visions and Victims of Mussolini's Wars

Red Cross Letters



This letter to the International Red Cross from a family in Schiavi D'Abruzzo in central Italy was sent registered but still took 48 days to get as far as Milan. It then had to be processed by the Red Cross before a reply could be sent. This meant that families waiting for news of a loved one could be waiting for months. This letter is unusual in that it is addressed to the American Red Cross as well as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). Perhaps the prisoner had been captured by the Americans.

Two letters from The Italian Social Republic to Geneva. The top letter is registered and carries L2.75 postage. It has Italian censor marks and is sealed with German censor tape.



There is a stamp on the back that says it was accepted for registration "at the door" (over the counter) with the signature being the clerk who accepted it.

This was posted just one month after the Armistice and shows that stamps had not yet been overprinted to deface the king's image.



The route taken is shown by the back stamps. The letter was posted in Schiavi d'Abruzzo, on 5.12.42. It then went north to Chieti, west of Venice where it was postmarked 22.12.42 (17 days) then to Milan where it is postmarked 23.1.43 (31 days) arriving at Geneva the same day so air lifted on this leg, the whole trip taking 48 days.

It has a censor mark and registration stamp on the front and two different censor marks and censor tape on the reverse. All censor marks and tape are Italian as the Germans did not move into the area until later in the year.



Scan of reverse of cover showing postal marks

Cover posted at Pescantina, Verona (100k west of Venice) from the Italian Social Republic in 1944. It carries three L1.25 stamps that have been overprinted with red Fasces. The king was not popular in the RSI as he had sacked Mussolini and banned the Fascist party when he signed the armistice with the Allies. Although stamps bearing his image were still used, many were overprinted with symbols over his image. It carries Italian censor marks and is resealed with German censor tape.

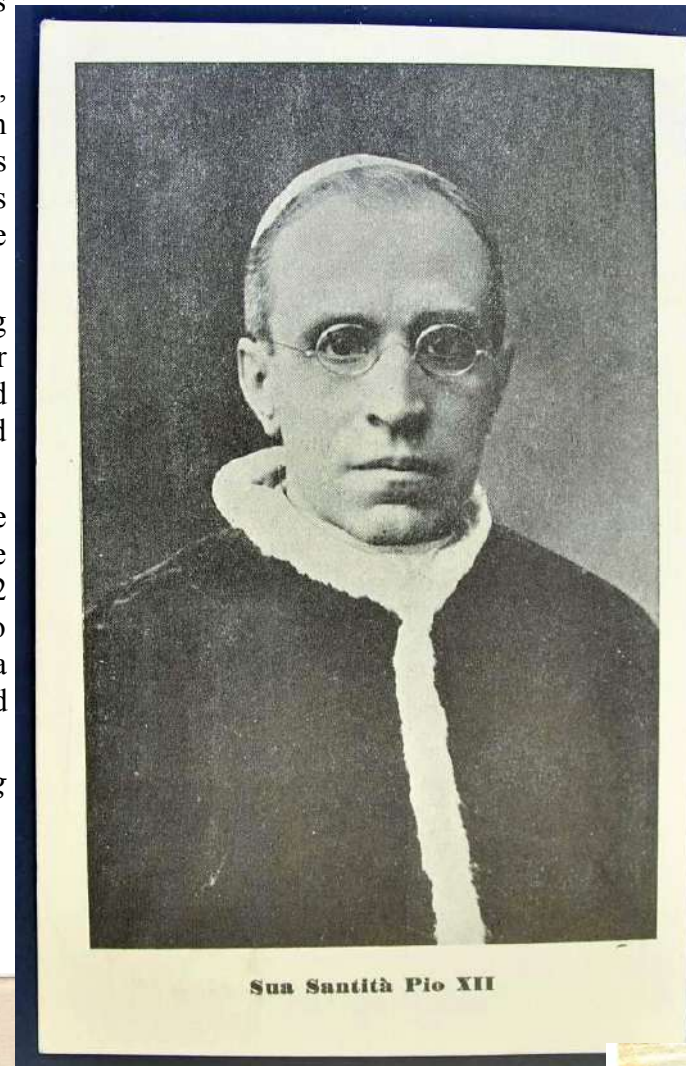


Missing - Captured - Killed Visions and Victims of Mussolini's Wars

He was a compassionate, courageous man who helped Catholics, Non-believers and Jews, working in secret as he knew that each time he tried to intervene publicly it was answered with reprisals against those he wished to protect. Over 200,000 Jewish refugees were sheltered in the Vatican at the Pope's order throughout the war.

When his many diplomatic attempts to prevent WW2 failed, Pope Pius immediately reopened this office and during the course of the war, they handled over 20 million queries from families and held 2 million data cards with details of missing servicemen. They also

Below Right: Stamps with Pius XII image



Before they were repatriated, the Italian prisoners built a chapel in memory of five prisoners who died there. The chapel is all that remains of the camp which has been returned to farm land and in recent years, the chapel was restored with some of the ex-prisoners returning from Italy for the dedication.

Mod. 9

Nell'ulteriore corrispondenza riferire sempre il N. del foglio

Allegato 4 - Captiv - 944

Data 29-2-944 N.

SEGRETERIA DI STATO

UFFICIO INFORMAZIONI

Destinatario

Se civile, titolo

Se militare, grado

Se prigioniero, N.

Prisoner of War

S.TENENTE

8W-I-7747

11052

U.S. CENSOR

Cognome e nome

CASTIGLIA BELARDINO

Paternità

nato il

Luogo di nascita

ultime notizie il

Indirizzo del ricercato

8W-I-7747 COMP.1 COMPOUND -

HEREFORD - PRISONER OF WAR CAMP. BOX 20 - GENERAL

POST. OFFICE - NEW YORK - N.Y. U.S.A.

Richiedente: (Grado di parentela)

padre

Indirizzo completo

Castiglia Odorico

Via Brionale - Borgata Altaria -

Roma - Italia

Messaggio (non superare 25 parole)

Noi benissimo. così auguriamo di te.

Ricevute tue notizie. Auguri. pensieri

affettuosi. baci. abbracci.

Mamma. Luigina. Adriana

di Stato - Ufficio Informazioni - Città del Vaticano

Sua S

R BOZZOLO
3407

Comitato internazionale
Ufficio informazioni
Agenzia centrale dei Prigionieri di guerra
Svizzera) Ginevra

8



UFFICIO REGIONALE INFORMAZIONI
DEL VATICANO

Prigionieri * Internati * Civili

Via Arcivescovado 12 - TORINO 101 (Italia)
Telefono 44.969 C. C. P. 2128710

Messa per i prigionieri
di Prigionerie Civili
per le famiglie
(Impost. sul N. 28363/1038)
5-1-1945 Dir. Prov. Poste - TORINO

Sig.

Rabbia = Bertolomeo

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III A - 21
20-6

Verzuolo

TIP. RAMONDINI - TORINO

Three postage stamps from Vatican City, 1962, featuring Pope John XXIII. The stamps are green, orange, and blue. Each stamp has the inscription "FLAGRANTE BELLO MUOVERE SUPER TYBHAM" at the top and "POSTE VATICANE MCMXLIII" at the bottom. The stamps are valued at 1.25 lire.

25

Missing - Captured - Killed Visions and Victims of Mussolini's Wars

Does this simple message tell a story?



The message written in German from Salvatore Scrivano to Frau Mathilde Schreiber in Germany simply says, “Greetings to you and Willi”. It has been sent express which shows the writer’s anxiety to get it to Frau Schreiber as quickly as possible so what is going on here?

Scrivano and Schreiber are both words meaning “Writer” in Italian and German. Schreiber was also considered a Jewish name in Germany and this was early 1942, not a good time for German Jews.

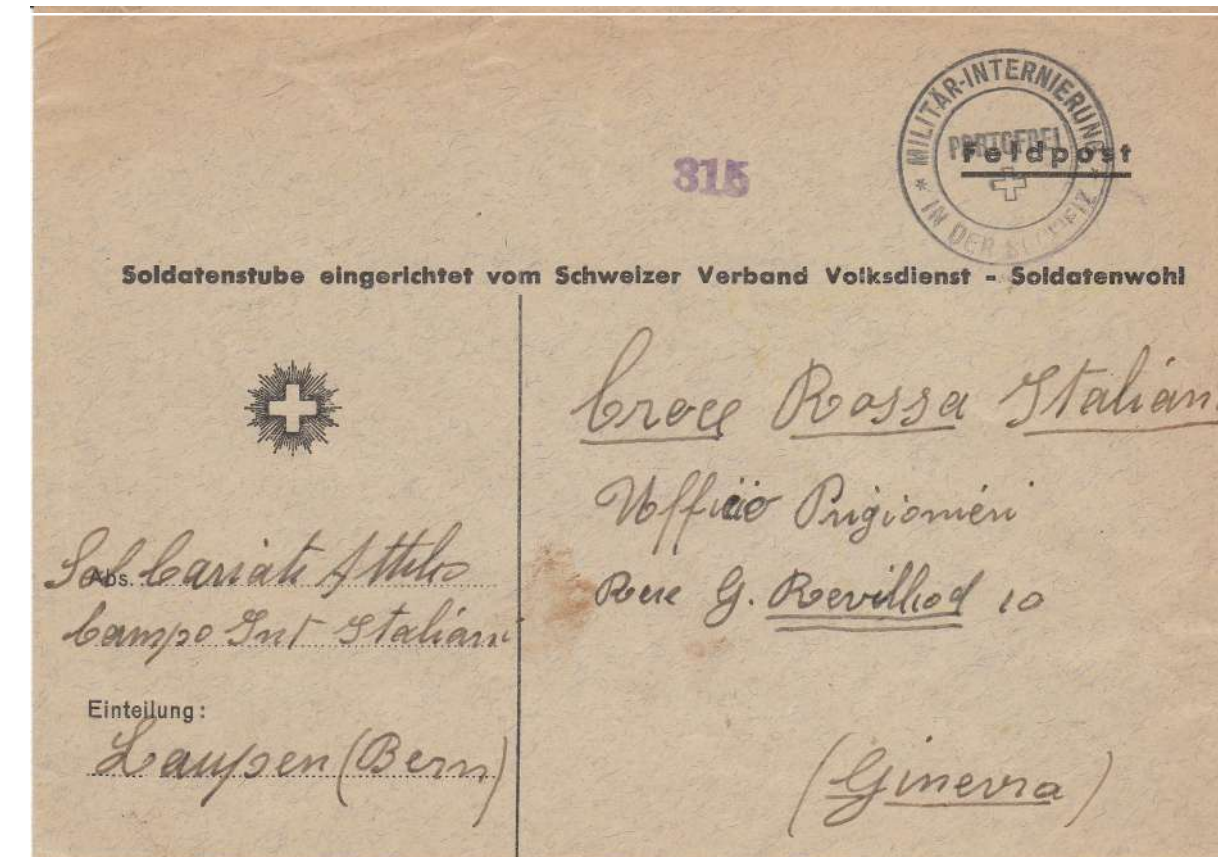
Many Jews left Germany in the 1930s and it was Fascist policy that those who settled in the more tolerant Italy should have to translate their names into Italian.

It seems probable, therefore that the sender and addressee were the same family. Is this an attempt at finding news of a Jewish family member in Germany or a message home from a refugee family to say they have arrived safely?

The handwritten date is 16.2.41 but this could be a mistake as the Rome postmark is 1.3.42. This could simply be a case of the writer forgetting the year had changed. There is a German censor mark which shows it arrived in Germany. Mail between the two countries was fairly good as this was well before the Italian armistice, but there are no dated German postmarks.

It is therefore impossible to say whether the message arrived or whether the Schreibers were able to respond however they do not appear among the four million names on the Holocaust register and the name Schreiber is still found in Fulda.

Swiss Prisoner of War Camps

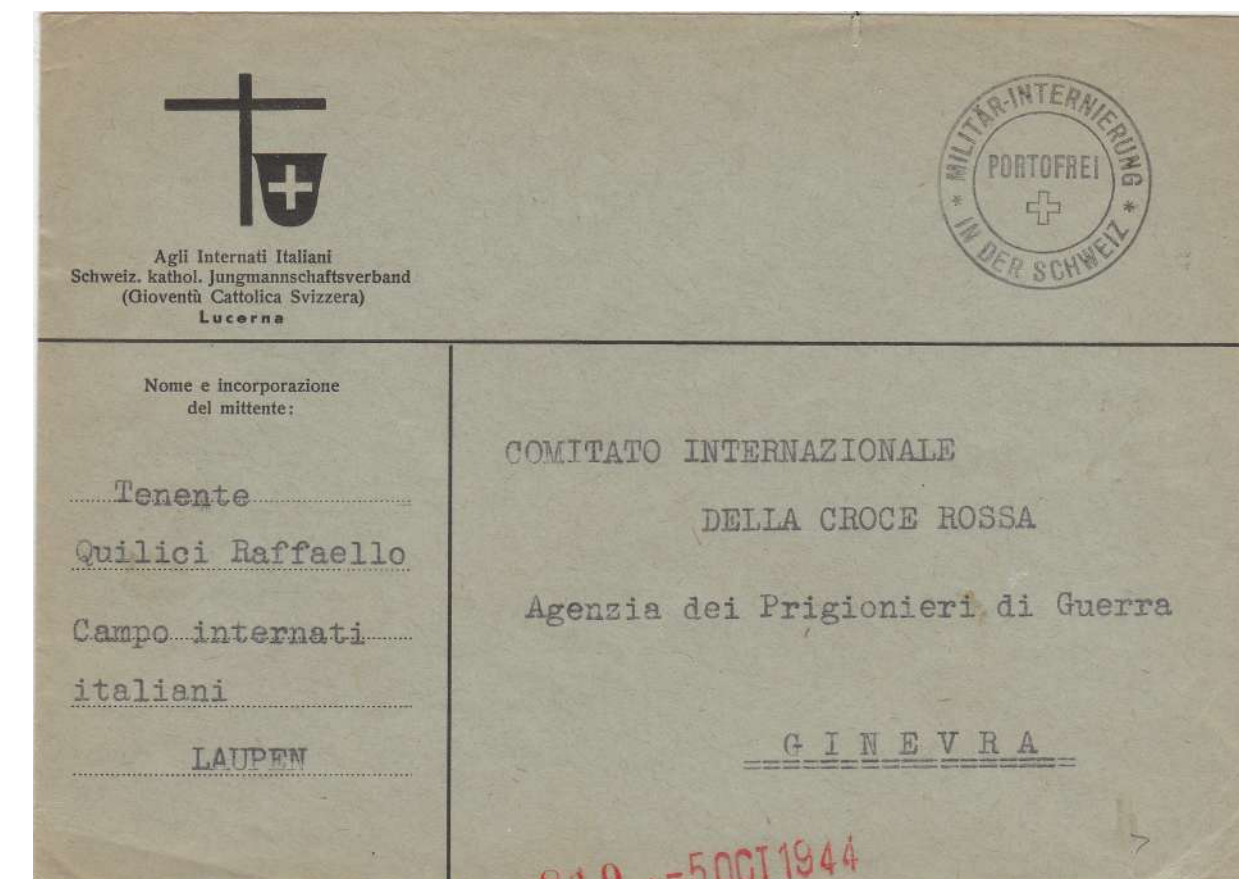


It is surprising to realise that there were prisoner of war camps in Switzerland. The Swiss, though neutral, were in a precarious position, surrounded by the Axis countries. They also had a large percentage of their population who were German speaking and this alone could have led to them being annexed by Germany.

Internment camps were to appease their German neighbours. Internees included Allied escaped prisoners, Jewish refugees and Italian soldiers either deserting or escaping from the Fascist forces.

Some Jewish survivors told of being robbed by Swiss border guards before being sent to the camps.

These are two official envelopes for writing to prisoners at Laupen camp near Berne. The name of the prisoner is on the front. The top envelope was supplied by the Red Cross and the lower example came from the Catholic Church. There were large numbers of Italians at Laupen.



Missing - Captured - Killed Visions and Victims of Mussolini's Wars

The Jews in Italy: The Pentcho Story and Ferramonti di Tarsia

In her diaries, Mussolini's mistress, Clara Petacci claimed that he was a racist who approved of the German plan to annihilate the entire Jewish race. Though Mussolini was certainly no saint, this could be a lie driven by jealousy of his earlier mistress, Margherita Sarfatti, one of the founders of Fascism who helped him plan the March on Rome, and was Jewish. Most Italians were appalled by the German view and in many cases actively hid or protected their Jewish neighbours. German Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop complained to Benito Mussolini that "Italian military circles... lack a proper understanding of the Jewish question." The Ferramonti Jews would have been given to Ribbentrop as he requested if Mussolini had wished it.

Ladislav Quastler was a Jew from Czechoslovakia in a group of five hundred Jews trying to get to Israel to escape the Nazis. They travelled down the Danube from Bratislava, intending to meet a ship at the Rumanian port of Sulina on the Black Sea. Missing the ship, they were faced with either going on or returning. They chose to try to sail to Israel, even though their boat, the Pentcho, was only a small river paddle steamer. They were intercepted by the Italian Navy who informed them that they were in the middle of a minefield and escorted them to safety. Later on, their boiler failed and the ship was wrecked but they managed to get ashore on a rock island, from which they were again rescued by the Italian Navy and taken to Rhodes. Later they were shipped to the camp at Ferramonti di Tarsia where this letter was written. One family chose to stay in Rhodes with friends. Later, when German troops took over the island, all the Jews on Rhodes were sent to Auschwitz. In 1944, the Pentcho survivors finally completed their journey to Israel.



Letter from Ferramonti di Tarsia internment camp bearing the round camp stamp and an unusual striped rectangular cancel.

Ladislav Quastler's name appears on the list of Pentcho survivors and on lists of internees at Ferramonti. He was 27 years old when the voyage started. His father is listed as Richard Quastler who is listed elsewhere as a survivor of a Nazi death camp.

Three other members of the Quastler family from Bratislava are named in the Shoah (Holocaust) lists. They were undoubtedly relatives. They were:

Adolf Quastler, murdered 1942 in Bratislava aged 62
Milan Quastler, son of Adolf, died at Majdanek death camp, Poland, aged 18.
Edit Quastler, daughter of Adolf, died at Auschwitz aged 16.



The Pentcho on the rocks after her boiler blew. She was old and only meant for river cruising.



Scan of reverse of envelope showing name of the writer.

The complete, story written by a Pentcho survivor can be read here. It includes the quote:



"There were many many examples of Italian humanitarianism. They actually saved the Pentcho people four times: - when we were led out of the mine-fields; when we were rescued from the island of Kamila-Nisi, after the ship sank; when we were transferred to Ferramonti (because all the Jews of Rhodes, including one of our families who stayed there, were sent to Auschwitz); and their refusal to the Nazi Foreign Minister, Ribbentrop, to give the Jews of Ferramonti (summer of 1942) over to the Germans.

In 1938, Isaak Klein had tried to migrate to America from Vienna. Possibly while he was waiting the situation there deteriorated rapidly and he moved to Rome where he tried to follow up his migration application, with the initially negative result shown in this letter. He was interned at Ferramonti di Tarsia and was issued with the identity card below.



The War Comes to Italy

The Italian campaign was the costliest theatre of war for casualties on both sides in all of WW2.

By the end of 1942, after the loss at El Alamein, the Italian army's luck had changed. First Libya then Tunisia were lost and in May 1943, the allies invaded Sicily.

Two covers using the allied postage stamps issued for Sicily. Below: an Italian official letter containing birth certificate details. Right: a US soldier's letter home



In order to control inflation and corruption, the allies issued special banknotes and stamps for Sicily (above on covers) and overprinted Italian stamps for the military government on the mainland.



Despite the setbacks, in June 1943, Italy released special stamps overprinted PM for the military. These had a very short usage except in Greece but did get used when stamps were short. This envelope, probably carrying a press notice (comunicato stampa) from Allied Control (ACS), was posted from Southern Italy almost a year after the Armistice .

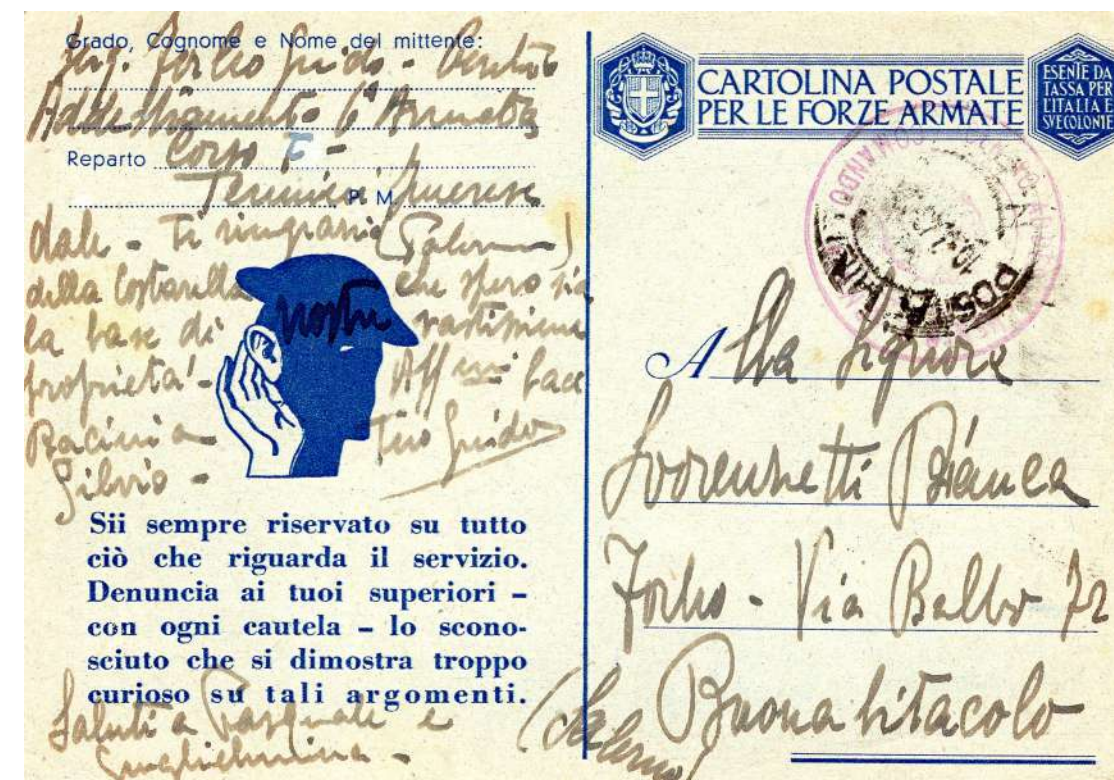
Missing - Captured - Killed Visions and Victims of Mussolini's Wars

This curious card was a propaganda card issued to soldiers and depicting the Italian army at the Russian Front. It has not been posted from there as the date 5.5.43 was after the Italian withdrawal from Russia. Writing materials were generally hard to get so this soldier was probably using up an old card. He lists his Division (Reparto) as Livorno.

Livorno division was the 4th Mountain Infantry Division, rated as one of the best Italian Divisions. After early posting to France it was returned to Italy and prepared for the abandoned invasion of Malta.



Scan of reverse of card showing Italian soldiers in Russia



Livorno fought defending Sicily against the Allied invasion in July 1943. They fought the US army at Gela and may have pushed the invaders back into the sea if the bombardment from ships off the coast had not taken such a heavy toll. There were up to 147,000 Italian casualties in Sicily compared to 20,000 German and 25,000 Allied soldiers killed, wounded or captured.

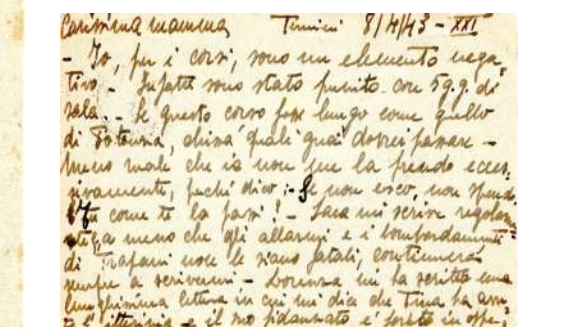
The regiment is listed as 55 or 56. There was no 55 in Livorno but 56 was the bakery squadron. Perhaps this soldier was a cook.

The card is not postmarked. This was a mobile squadron and the card may have been carried in the soldier's pack for a while. Once the chaos of the invasion started, the postmark could have been missed or the card may never have been sent.

The Censors missed this one

Guido Forli a training sergeant with the 6th Armata in Sicily wrote this to his mother. He spoke of getting into trouble and being confined for five days but joked that at least he wouldn't be spending money.

He went on to say, "Sara writes to me regularly and **unless the alarms and the bombing of Trapani are fatal to her**, she will continue to write to me as always." That should have been censored.



Reverse scan of card

Missing - Captured - Killed Visions and Victims of Mussolini's Wars



German Military Posts in Italy
After the Armistice, the Italian Military Post in the Social Republic was replaced by the German Feldpost system.

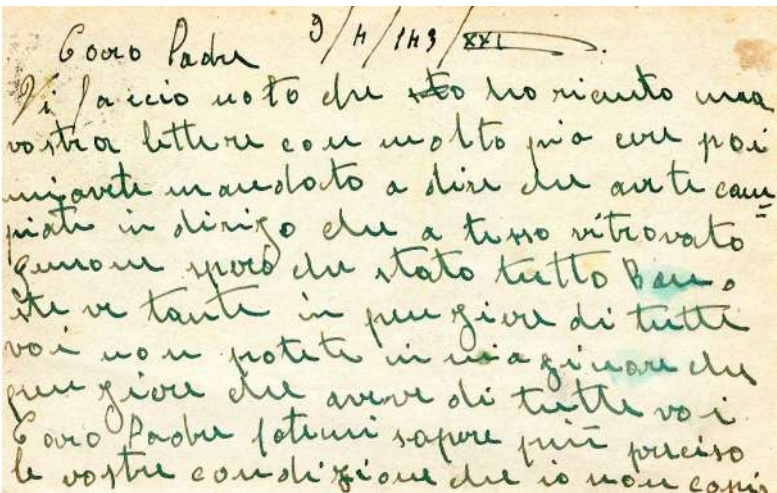


Armistice

In July 1943, the King sacked and arrested Mussolini and on the 3rd of September, the King signed the Armistice then he and Bodaglio, the new prime minister, fled to Brindisi, located in the “heel” of Italy, to await the British landing that was to coincide with the announcement of the armistice.

This card was sent by a soldier in the 2nd Artillery Regiment Messina at Brindisi to Udine. The regimental post office, PM91 was a short distance away at Francavilla Fontana. It was posted on the 4th September, the day after the Armistice was signed but four days before it was broadcast to the troops, however, soldiers at Brindisi would have known as there was to be no Italian aggression towards the British troops who were scheduled to land as soon as the announcement was made.

By this time, Mussolini was under arrest (he was rescued by the Germans eight days after this was posted) and it is notable that on this card the usual Mussolini quotation has been scrubbed out and the card has not been subjected to censorship.



Above: Scan of reverse of card. The writer has used the American date form and kept the Fascist date system, probably out of habit.



After the armistice was signed a new stamp was released without Fascist symbols and old designs had fascist symbols removed. In the North of Italy, the Germans took over control of the military post but the puppet Italian Social Republic issued stamps for general mail as a sign of the regime’s legitimacy.



A Feldpost number (FPN) was attached to a specific unit but if a unit was destroyed, the number was re-assigned to another unit. The suffix A-E referred to areas within the unit with A usually designating headquarters.

Right: Letter home from Italian soldier attached to the 745 Grenadier Division of the German army. Feldpost 17137B. The red Ad stamp shows that it has travelled via Munich.



Stationery was scarce so the older envelopes and cards were still used but in the case of the card above, the Italian details have been crossed out and the Feldpost stamp has been applied over them.

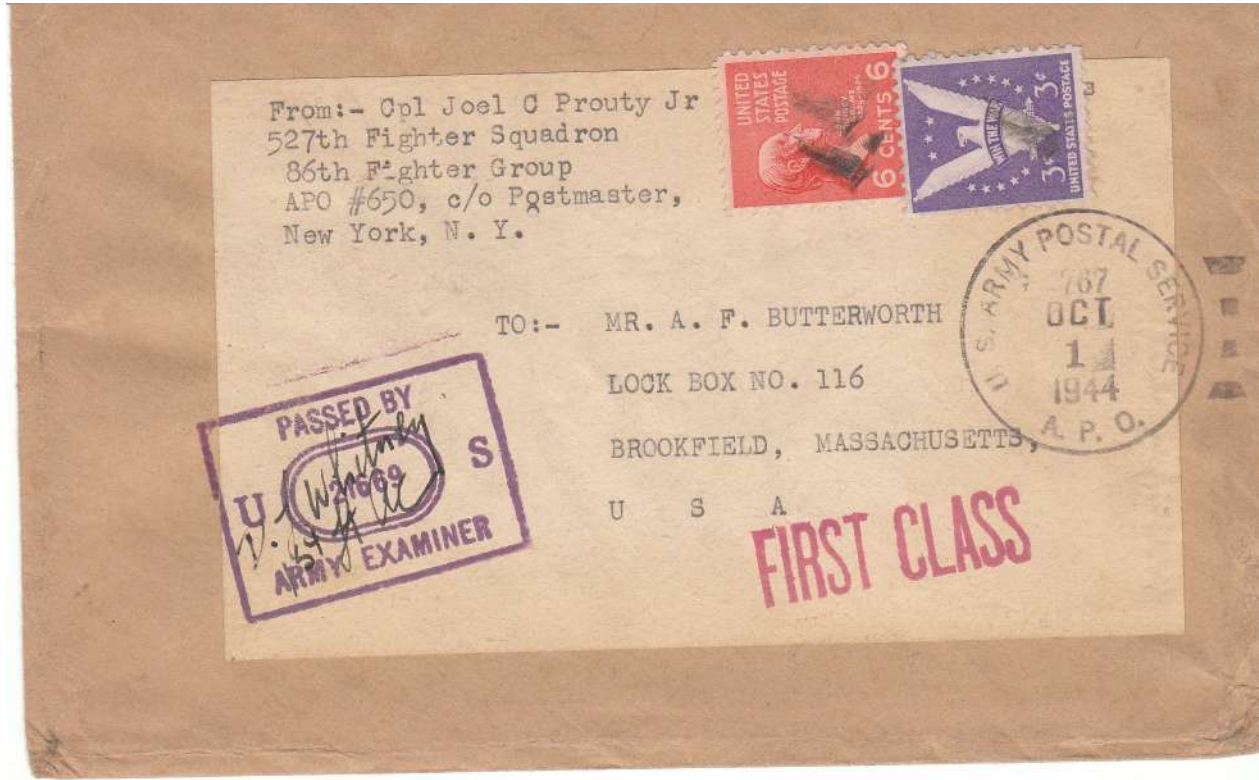
Left: Letter from Feldpost 81800 which was Command Headquarters of the Italian Alpine Div. at Monte Rosa on the Swiss border

Allied Military Posts in Italy

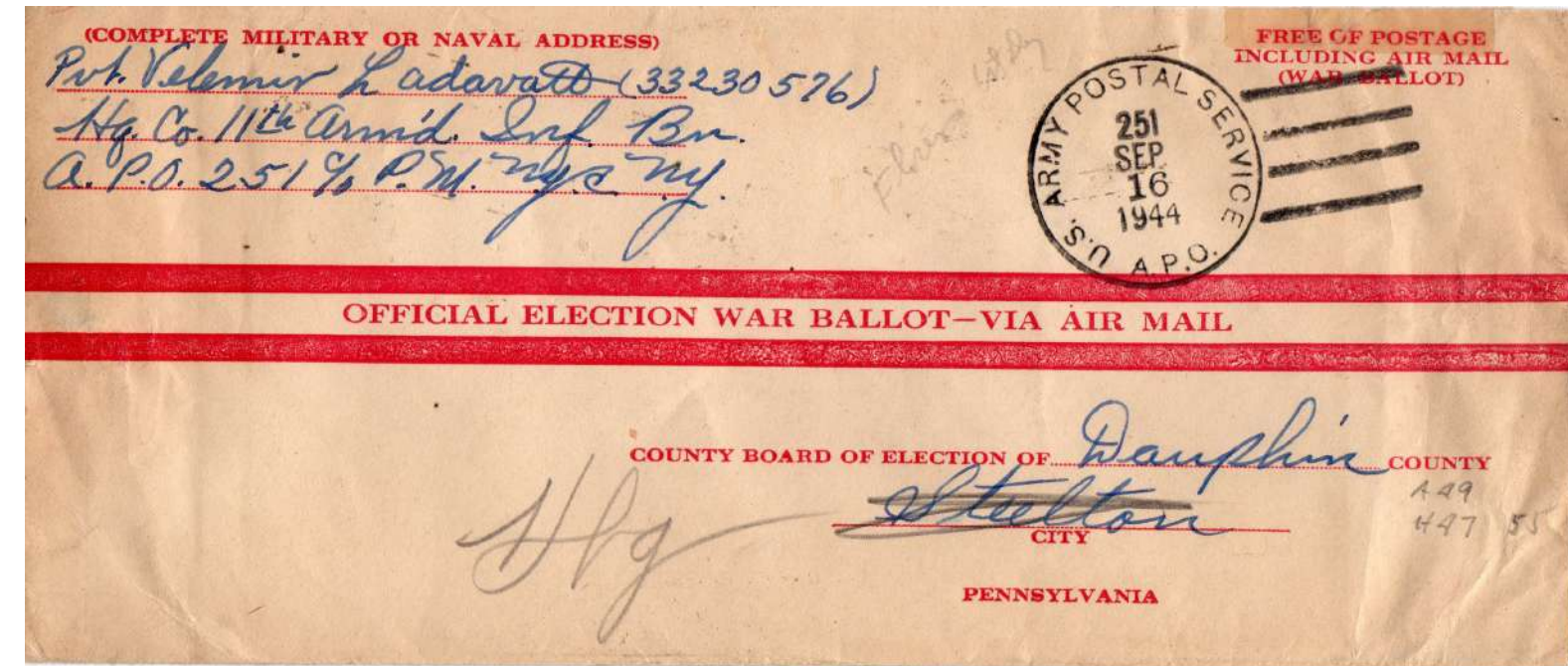
After the armistice, the Italian Military Post service was mostly disbanded. In the south it was replaced by the Allied military postal services and in the RSI and Yugoslavia the German Feldpost system took over military communications. Italian units used the Feldpost rather than the RSI civil mail service.

U.S. Army Post Offices (APOs)

The APOs were run in parallel to the civilian mail service and were attached to and moved with the various divisions of the U.S. military. A letter might pass through more than one. This letter began with an air squadron at APO 650 but has been postmarked by APO 767 which was at Grosseto at the time



Above: US soldier's letter from APO 767 at Grosseto. Not all US service mail was free. This airman has paid to send his letter first class. It has the square US censor stamp plus a red First Class stamp.



1944 US Ballot envelope for troops posted at APO 251, Florence. Mail was sorted at the main APO depot in New York.

On November 7th 1944, America went to the polls. Democrat Franklin D. Roosevelt defeated Republican Thomas E. Dewey to gain a record fourth term though he died six months later. In this soldier's home state of Pennsylvania Roosevelt won by a close 2.78% margin. U.S. soldiers voted in the field and their votes were sent home in these envelopes.

Missing - Captured - Killed Visions and Victims of Mussolini's Wars

Sgt. Ralph Horn's Story

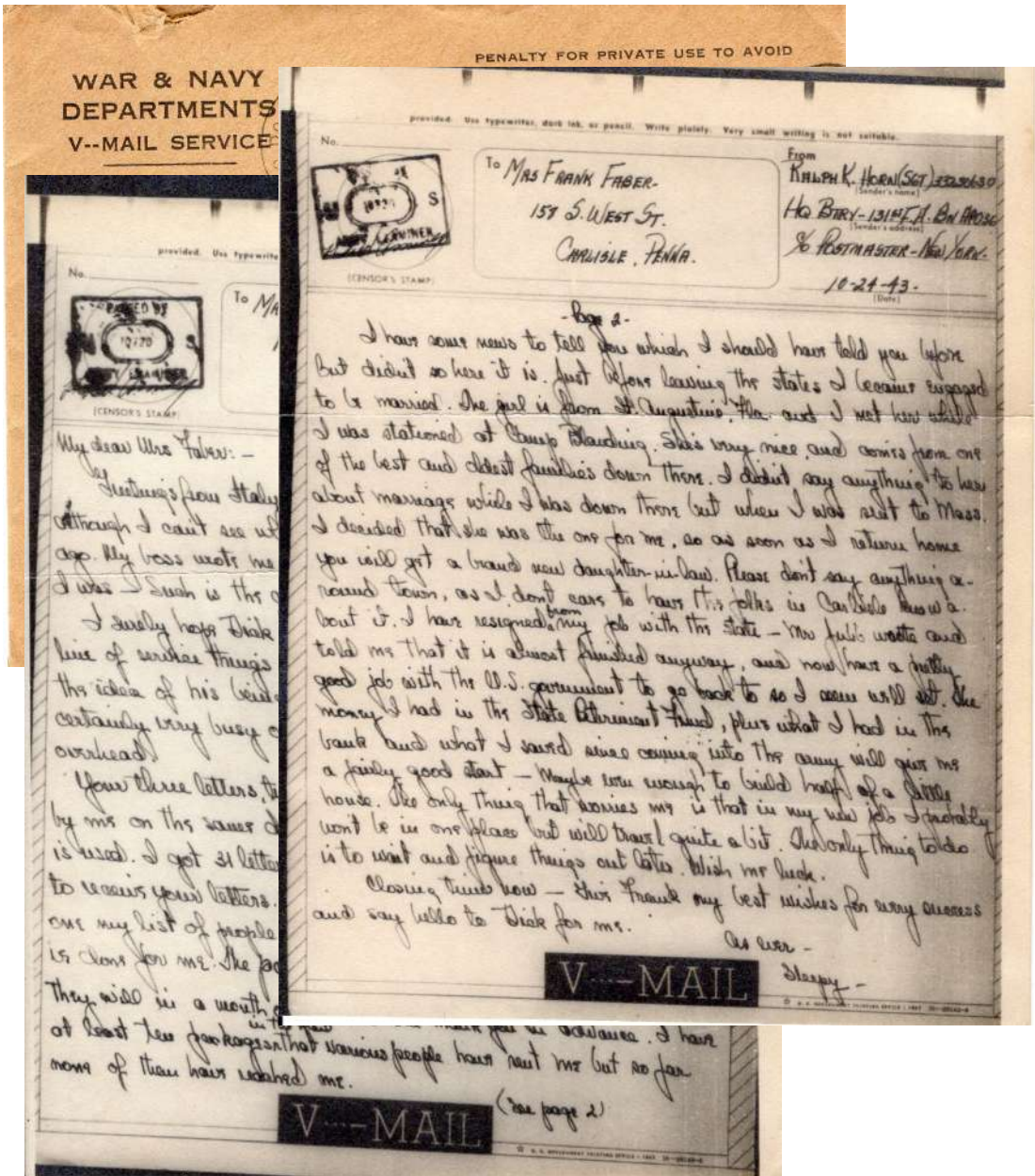
These two airgraphs were written by Sgt. Ralph Horn from Cumberland County, Pennsylvania. They were written on subsequent days to Mrs Frank Faber who, from the content, seems to be his mother, perhaps remarried. They must have been posted together as they were delivered in one envelope which is quite unusual.

In the first he talks about how everyone knows he is in Italy but now he is finally allowed to say so.

In the second he gives the big news.

"I have some news to tell you... Just before leaving the States I became engaged to be married. The girl is from St. Augustine, Fla., and I met her while I was at Camp Blanding. She's very nice and comes from one of the best and oldest families down there. I didn't say anything to her about marriage while I was down there, but when I was sent to Mass. I decided that she was the one for me. So as soon as I return home you will get a brand new daughter-in-law."

Ten weeks later, Sgt. Horn was fatally wounded. He died on the 28th December 1943.



A "Missing" U.S. soldier



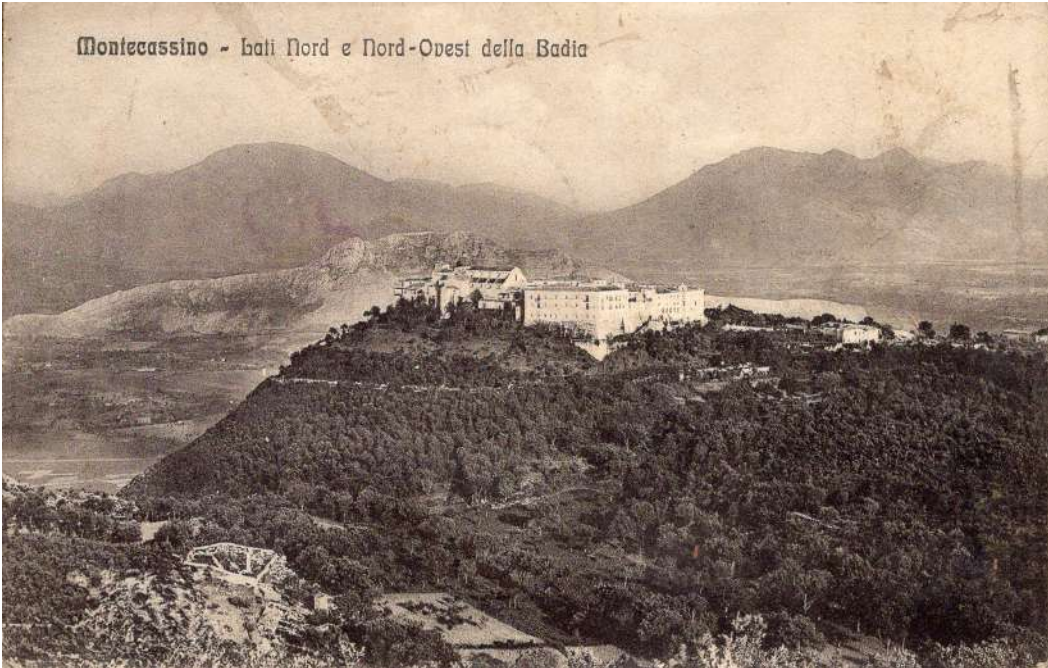
Once the armistice was signed, Italian-Americans were allowed to join the US forces. Previously, many had been interned as potential enemy aliens.

Carl Piparo was an Italian born American with family in Sicily and the Allied invasion must have been very traumatic for him. He signed up immediately after the armistice and was soon shipped to Italy, probably because Italian language skills were needed in the US army.

This letter was written to him there from Agrigento, Sicily, but he was listed as missing, fortunately, not missing in action but AWOL - Absent Without Leave. He may have been back late from visiting a relative but the infraction seems to have drawn time in the Garrison Stockade as the letter is addressed there.

He survived the war and his record says he was a good soldier. In the last record I could find, he was in his 90s, dividing his time between New Jersey and Agrigento, where this letter was posted.

Montecassino and the Gustav Line



Montecassino Abbey in 1923 (card above) giving an idea of the terrain faced by the allies.

International efforts after the war rebuilt the destroyed abbey using the original plans (Right).



Missing - Captured - Killed
Visions and Victims of Mussolini's Wars

As the allies drove northwards towards Rome, they had to break through the Gustav Line, a formidable array of bunkers, minefields and machine-gun emplacements guarding the route to Rome which included the defences around the 14th century Montecassino Abbey.

Between January and May 1944, in four bloody battles for Montecassino, American bombs destroyed the abbey after which the Germans moved into the ruins, a strategic advantage that prolonged the battles and was one cause of the high casualties - 50,000 allied attackers and 20,000 entrenched

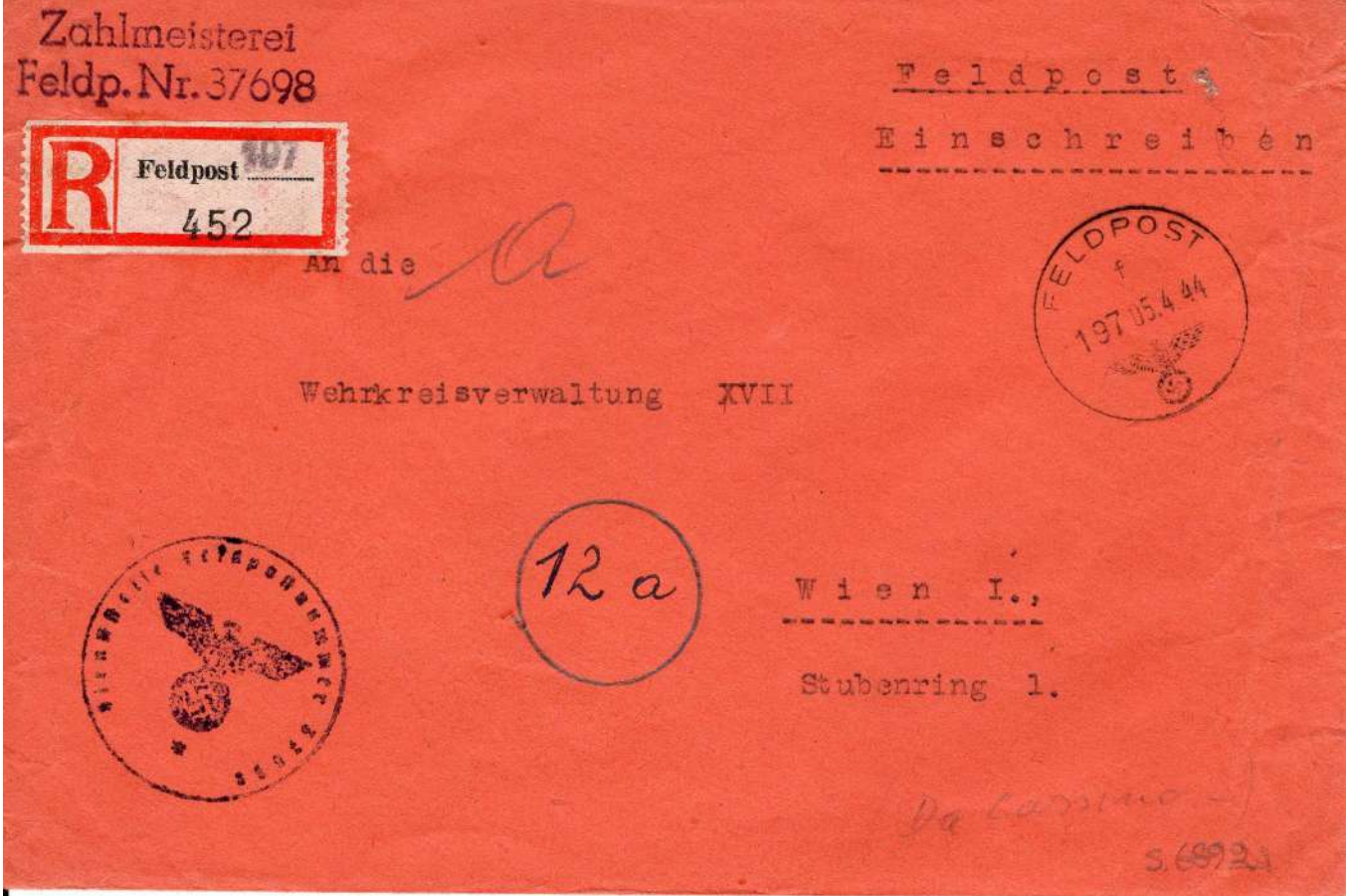


German defenders. Until then, they had agreed not to use the abbey. In the final battle, the defences were so good that at one spot, 800 Germans kept 16,000 attackers at bay for three days.

50,000 Polish troops fought at Montecassino and finally broke through but took a terrible toll. After the battle, a handful of exhausted Poles climbed the last hundred metres up the hill to raise the Polish flag. After the war, special stamps were issued for Polish troops who remained in Italy (below).



This stamp honours the Polish soldiers at Montecassino. The leader of the Polish troops, General Wladyslaw Anders, was among the group who raised their flag over the ruins of the abbey. He noted, "Corpses of German and Polish soldiers, sometimes entangled in a deathly embrace, lay everywhere, and the air was full of the stench of rotting bodies." The campaign left 923 Poles dead, 2,931 injured and 345 missing.



The envelope above may have contained an official report and was sent from Montecassino to Vienna six weeks before the German defeat there.



When the Germans rescued Mussolini and set up the Italian Social Republic, stamps showing the destruction of the Abbey made good propaganda material.

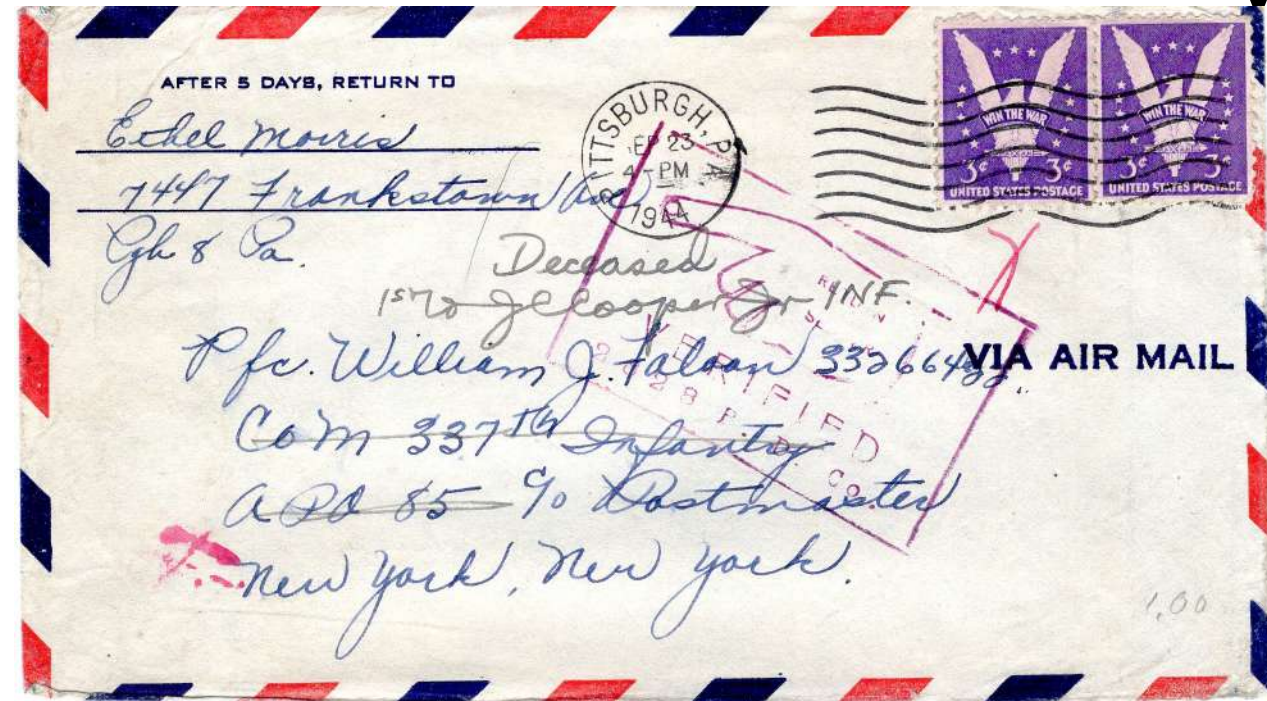


The Armistice was not the end of the war in Italy. Germany invaded from the North and rescued Mussolini. North of the Gustav Line, a terrifying string of fortifications, they set up the Italian Social Republic at Salo. At Brescia and Verona they used current Italian stamps overprinted with the initials of the Republican National Guard.



For Florence, Genoa and Rome, the stamps were overprinted defacing the king's head with a fasces, the words Repubblica Sociale Italiana or both.

How I search for a soldier



This cover has been returned to sender as the soldier has been killed. I wanted to know more (of course). I began badly as I read his name as Falcon. It is in fact Faloon. Having his service number I was able to find his record but the one held online adds little except that he enlisted in 1942 in Pittsburgh Pennsylvania. He was single without dependents but it did not give his date of birth.

The Military Hall of Honour showed his date of death as 11th October 1944 and that he was killed in action. Looking at the dates on the cover shows that he was still alive when the letter was posted on the 23rd September but had died by the time it reached Italy on 26th November and was processed for return to sender.

I wondered about the sender. Was she a girlfriend, mother, sister or simply someone he knew. A search brought me to the 1940 census for Pittsburgh, Allegheny, Pennsylvania.

Ethel Morris in the 1940 Census
Age 25, born abt 1915 Birthplace Pennsylvania
Gender Female Race White
Home in 1940 7447 Frankstown Avenue, Pittsburgh, Allegheny, Pennsylvania

Household Members Age
Head Harold Morris 32, Wife Ethel Morris 25
Daughter Carol Morris 7, Daughter Lucia Morris 5
Lodger Kenneth Menohar 45

This showed that Ethel was married with children so was less likely to be a girlfriend and too young to be his mother. I noticed they had a lodger and wondered whether this was the case for William. I decided to look for death notices in the Pittsburgh papers. Ethel was his sister and in this article from 1945, she received the Bronze Star on his behalf.

I thought I would like to know more about where and how he died. Researching his unit found many photographs. The one above right shows soldiers from the 337th heading for the front lines, a few km away, on the 6th October. He was a member of Company M, (mortars?) 337th Infantry. There was a photographer accompanying this outfit. They were fighting in the mountains near La Villa, North of Rome where the German forces were well dug in with a formidable series of defences known as the Gothic Line. The top photo shows a German trench after capture and gives a good idea of the terrain.

Just a young man doing his duty on a hillside from Hell.

Military Honor Roll

One district man was reported killed in action and three others are listed as wounded by the Navy department in today's casualty list. The next of kin have been notified. Their names and addresses follow:

MARINES—Dead
FREE, Edward G., pfc.; Brentwood.

MARINES—Wounded
EHRMAN, Robert F., s/sgt.; McKeesport.
O'BRIEN, Paul D., pfc.; 1043 New Arlington avenue.
TAYLOR, George W. C., cpl.; New Castle.

Posthumous Awards Made
The army's fourth highest decoration, the Legion of Merit, was presented to the widow of an army medical officer at a special ceremony at Logan Armory in which 15 other posthumous awards were made to relatives of district soldiers.

wood avenue, Millvale, for her brother, Private Volta Karlicek; Roy Young, of 403 Bausman street, for his son, Private First Class Robert E. Young; Karl H. Held, of 1132 Lancaster avenue, for his son, Private First Class Richard C. Held; Mrs. Francis Piferski, of 70 Holt street, for her son, Staff Sergeant Louis Piferski; John Yurik, of 98 Reppert boulevard, Uniontown, for his son, Sergeant Paul J. Yurik; Charles Gutknecht, of 347 North Balph avenue, Bellevue, for his son, Staff Sergeant William C. Gutknecht; Mrs. Frances Hanas, of 2306 Spiral street, for her son, Private First Class Paul Hanas, and to Silas Myers, of 805 Summit street, McKeesport, for his son, Lieutenant Robert Myers.

Bronze Star Medals were presented to: Mrs. Ethel Morris, of 7447 Frankstown avenue, for her brother, Private First Class William J. Faloon; Harry H. Stark, of 500 Beltzhoover avenue, for his

Missing - Captured - Killed
Visions and Victims of Mussolini's Wars
Victims of the fight for Rome

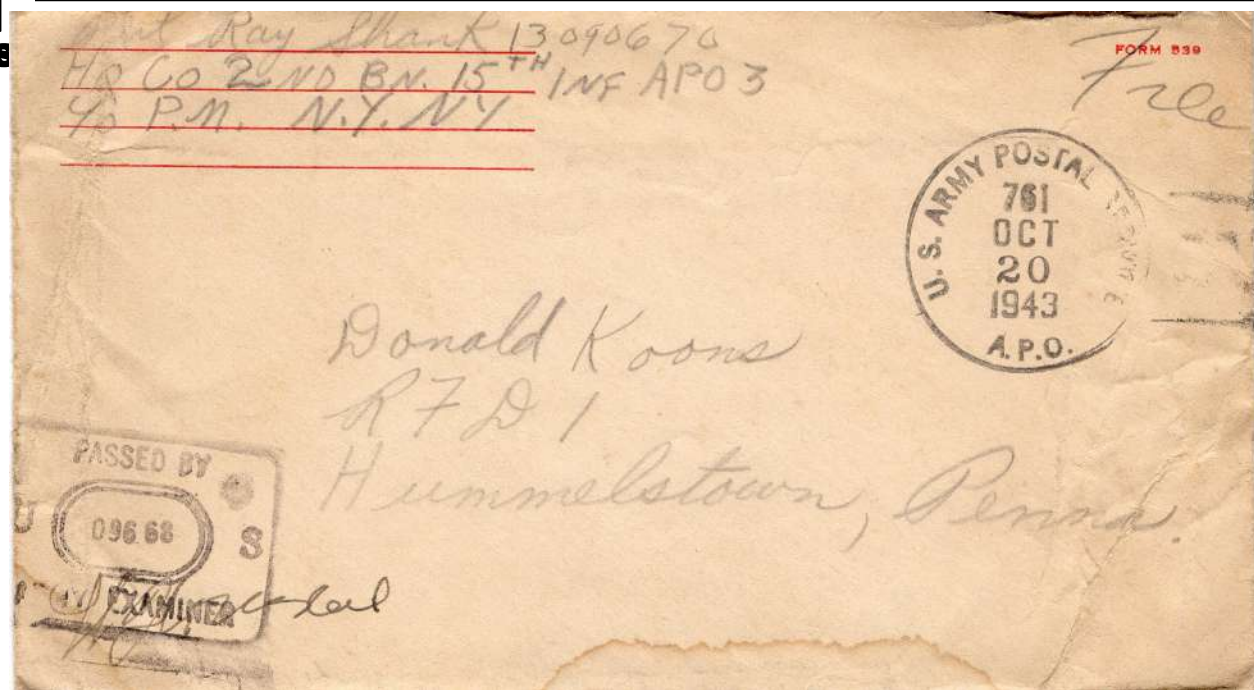


A captured trench on the Gothic line



337th Infantry heading for the front. Italy 1944 Five days later William was killed.

Both photos from the 337th Infantry website,



Pfc. Ray M Shank was single, stood six foot one inch tall and weighed 141 pounds. He sent this chatty letter to a friend but died on 24th January 1944 as the Allies moved towards Rome, not yet 20 years old and before a reply would have arrived .



This letter was sent by a woman in Thomasville North Carolina to Private A.J. (Alexander) Guancione, 32925610, Company D 6th Armored Infantry, APO 251. Pvt Guancione was from Essex, New Jersey, and was killed in action on May 29 1944, in fact, he died before the letter was posted on July 12 1944. It has a pointing hand stamp "Return to Writer" and the word “Deceased” with the name of a Captain. He was 27 years old. The official report that day read:

“Early that afternoon, as the armor approached the outpost positions of the Caesar Line, opposition increased sharply. Heavy fire from enemy armor and artillery smashed against CCA's front and right flank, while at close range small detachments of enemy infantry armed with Panzerfausts harassed the American tanks. The tanks, nevertheless, continued to advance, too far in fact, for they bypassed many strongpoints that held up the infantry... Thus the enemy broke up the close partnership between infantry and armor that was vital in operations of this kind.”

This communication failure cost the division 133 casualties: 21 killed, 107 wounded, and 5 missing. In addition, enemy antitank fire destroyed 21 M-4 and 16 M-5 tanks.

Missing - Captured - Killed Visions and Victims of Mussolini's Wars

Italians Held in German Camps

After the Italian capitulation, the Germans moved quickly south capturing many Italian regiments. Italian soldiers were given the choice of joining the Germans or being interned. Of 700,000 captured, more than 600,000 in the northern occupied zone were shipped to prison work camps in Germany or Poland. The Germans considered them traitors and denied them prisoner of war status. One prisoner, the writer Giovanni Guareschi kept a diary in which he wrote, "I will not die, even if they kill me!"



Giovanni Guareschi

Air rate letter sent from Italy to Stalag XB in Sandbostel in Lower Saxony, Northwest Germany. It was sent from San Polo D'Enza, a town in the province of Reggio Emilia within the Italian Social Republic. The letter and back of the envelope bear the purple Stalag XB censor mark. (Geprüft = tested)



Letter sheet from Stalag XIA at Altengrabow near Dornitz in Saxony-Anhalt. The camp had existed since 1893 as a military training camp. It became a prisoner of war camp in WW1 and again in 1939. It was a major camp where prisoners were sorted to be sent to work camps and held many nationalities, all kept in separate areas. By 1945 60,000 prisoners had passed through or were imprisoned at the camp.



Wikipedia:
Altengrabow



The lower card is from Stalag IVB in Mühlberg, about 30 miles from Dresden, another large camp which held 30,000 prisoners by war's end. This card only allows the sender to choose from a range of limited options for the message and was originally intended for French prisoners.



Left and Below: Two types of card supplied to Italian prisoners in German camps. The top card is from Stalag VIIA in Moosburg in Southern Bavaria. This was the largest of the German prisoner of war camps which originally held 10,000 Polish prisoners but swelled to almost 80,000 from all allied nations by Jan. 1945. The reverse allowed a seven line message to be written.



The letter sheet at left was posted from Ovada, near Genoa in the Italian Social Republic to a prisoner in Stalag XIIF. It is written on a letter sheet supplied by the camp for the purpose. This seems unusual as one would have expected forms to be produced for mail from the camp rather than to it. It is labelled Rückantwortbrief which translates as "smooth response letter" similar to a modern reply paid letter.



Wikipedia:
Stalag IVB

Missing - Captured - Killed Visions and Victims of Mussolini's Wars

German Casualty and Death Cards

The German government used casualty cards to inform relatives of the death of a loved one (English and American governments used telegrams). German families had “death cards” printed to send to other family members and friends.

This card has retained its envelope and was sent to Frau Erna Schricker in Oberkotzau from the office at Nuremberg. She may have been the wife or mother of the soldier who had been killed. The printed signature is that of General von Cochenhausen who administered the office at Nuremberg. He also wrote several books, most of which are now banned.

The German database of soldiers killed in WW2 has 4.6 million names listed. There were only three soldiers listed as killed in 1941 with the Schricker surname. All died on the Eastern Front.

Cpl. Ludwig Schricker was born in Nuremberg on 16.9.1917 and died just before his 24th birthday on 11.9.1941. He is buried in the Ukraine at Kiev.

Sgt Max Schricker was born in Michelau on 5.01 1908 and died on 3rd October 1941.

He is buried at Dukhovshchina in Russia

Wilhelm Schricker was born in Oberroeslo on 8.12.1913 and died at Kusolewo in Russia on 4.11.1941

I have not been able to determine which of these the card was for so perhaps now it can be for all of them.



The envelope travelled free and bears a black border, a purple Feldpost stamp and a Nuremberg slogan postmark which translates, “Your own caution is the best accident protection”. It also carries the standard round German censor stamp.



Reverse of card (left)

Front of card reads: Faith is our comfort. Reunion our hope Jesus, have mercy! Merciful God, give him eternal rest

The back reads: In memoriam and in prayer of Lieutenant in an anti-aircraft battalion, Franz Pleikner Decorated with Iron Cross 2nd Class, Ground Assault Badge of the Airforce, Crimea Shield, Eastern Front Medal Primary School Teacher at Ried im Innkreis who died a hero on September 8, 1944 in Italy, aged 39

We thank God that you were ours, even more that you still are ours for everything which is with God lives and who returns home to the Lord is with his family



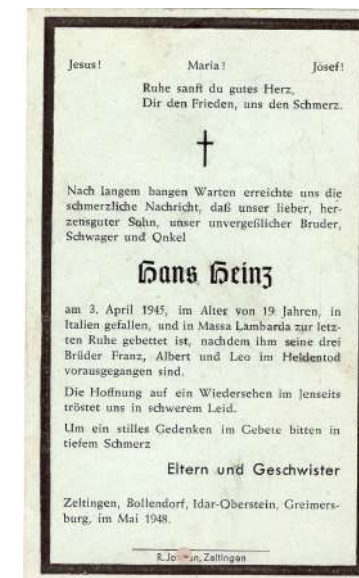
Johann Flingelli was killed in Italy on the 27th February 1945.

Eight weeks later, the war in Italy was over with the German surrender there on 29th April, one day after Mussolini was killed.

Johann was 23 years old.



Private First Class in a Grenadier regiment, Ludwig Wimmer who died a hero for his country on December 5th 1944 at the Southern Front. He was buried with military honours at a Heroes Cemetery at the Southern Front. Private Wimmer was born on 28.9.24. He was 20 years old



Reverse of card (right)

As the war entered its final stages, the desperate German army threw younger and younger men into the battlefields.

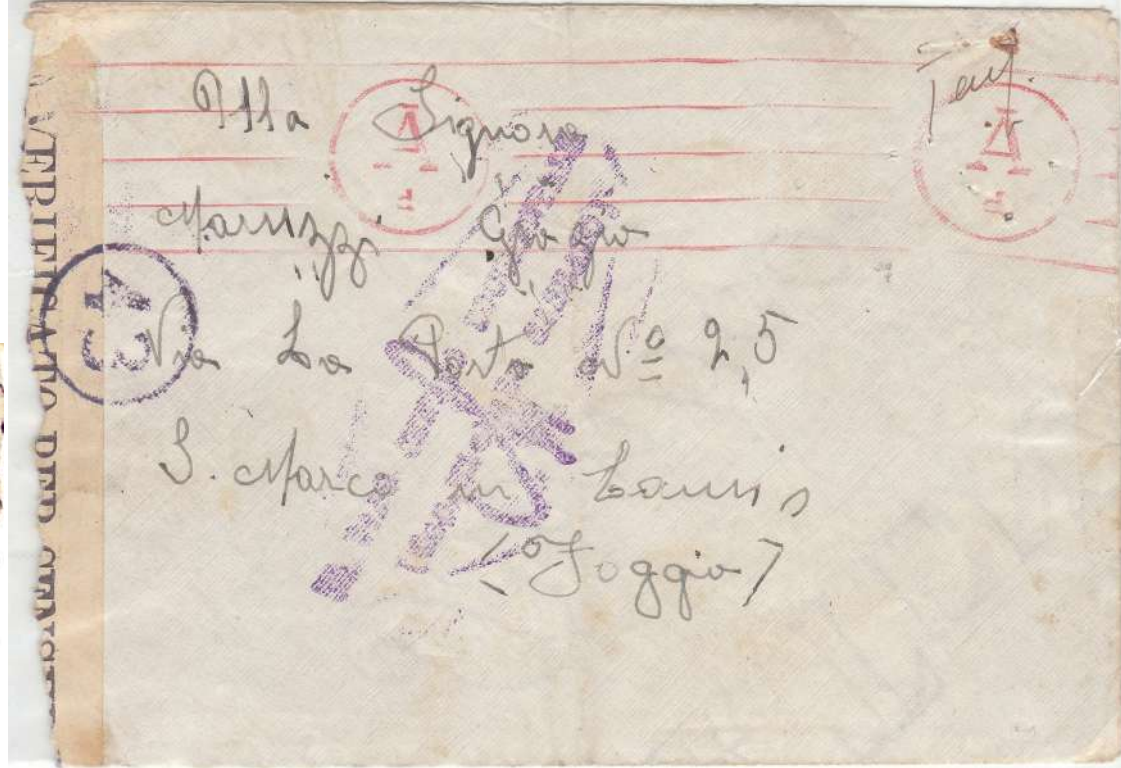
Hans Heinz was killed in Italy less than a month before the German surrender. He was only 19 years old.

He was the last of four brothers killed in the war following Franz, Albert and Leo to their deaths.

One can hardly imagine the effect his death would have had on his family. Perhaps due to this, but more likely due to the chaos that followed the war in Germany, his memorial mass was not held until more than three years later. It is also possible that it took that long for the news to arrive.

The Mail Gets Through

This undated envelope is from an Italian Military Internee held in Collection Camp No. 2 (Internato campo di raccolta No 2) near Asguro village, Rhodes/Dodecanese. It was under German control after Italy’s armistice and the letter was sent to south Italy before the end of February 1944, and demonstrates what it took to get the mail from one side to the other.



Scan of reverse.



Map of route taken to deliver

more opened and examined, receiving the VERIFICATO PER CENSURA sealing tape tied with the no. ‘43’ reader’s marking in a circle. Inspection was carried out at this office at random, until 19 March 1944. It was then transmitted to its final destination, San Marco in Lamis in the province of Foggia. A two-line “IL CAPO CENTRO DOCUMENTALE” (Chief Document Centre) and signature stamp was applied there.

Thanks to Mr Socrates Bosovitch of Papagos, Greece for supplying the tracking information for this item.

Missing - Captured - Killed
Visions and Victims of Mussolini's Wars

Own Goals (1): The Men of Camp P.G.54

Camp P.G.54 at Fara in Sabina mostly held prisoners from North Africa. When the Allies took Rome, the guards at the camp left but Churchill sent a message over the radio ordering the men to stay in their camps until allied troops reached them. Douglas Whittle was a South African farmer aged 33 when he enlisted and was possibly used to making his own decisions. He chose to ignore Churchill and like many others escaped to the hills where he lived with a partisan group for six months until he reached his own army.

In the meantime, the Germans took over the camps before the allies could reach them and began shipping the prisoners to camps in Germany and Poland, not wanting them to be liberated and rejoin their own armies. The 12-1500 men at Camp P.G.54 were loaded into cattle trucks on a train bound for Germany. On the 28th January 1944, the American 320th Bombing Group filed this report.

“At 1050 hours, 28 B-26's of the 320th Bombardment Group (M) took off (from Decimomannu, Sardinia) to bomb Orvieto RR Bridge, North, Italy. .. An excellent concentration of bombs bracketed the bridge with direct hits at the south and completely destroying 2 spans. 100ft of the bridge has been wiped out. 1 train of 40/50 cars standing across the bridge received direct hits destroying 10 cars, derailing 3 and the remainder buckled up in an arch.”

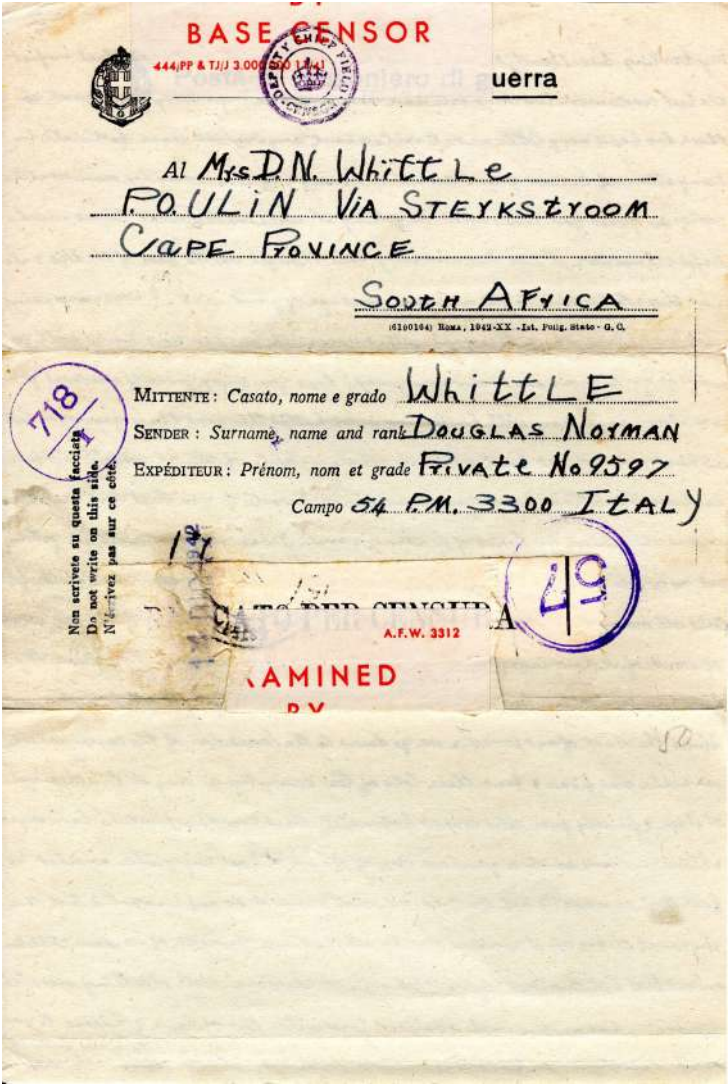
Many of the estimated 400 allied soldiers and 40 Germans who died were never identified, their remains beyond recognition. All the prisoners from P.G.54 were on the train but Private Whittle was fortunately not among them. After his discharge, he went back home to his wife and farm in Cape Province, South Africa.



Testaments from survivors



Photos and details at montegabbione.net



Italian letter sheet for prisoners sent by Private Whittle to his wife in South Africa.



If Donald Whittle had listened to Churchill, this would have been his fate. Photo taken by a German soldier at the site. © montegabbione.net. Used by permission. 35

Own Goals (2): The Arandora Star

Missing - Captured - Killed
Visions and Victims of Mussolini's Wars

On 1st July 1940 the cruise ship, Arandora Star left Liverpool with about 1600 people on board, bound for Canada These included the crew and a military guard but were mostly Germans and Italians, some prisoners of war but many of them interned British nationals of German or Italian origin. Some had been living in Britain for generations. The ship was torpedoed by a U-boat in the Atlantic. It is estimated that 175 Germans lost their lives and 486 Italians. Of the Italians, only thirteen of the bodies that were recovered were able to be identified. Many were washed up on the coast of Ireland one month later. Below is a newspaper account from the following day and two of the ship's souvenir postcards sent in happier times.

You Will Enjoy The
Daily Short Story
in
THE INQUIRER
Every day a story of
love-romance-mystery

The Philadelphia Inquirer

PUBLIC LEDGER

An Independent Newspaper for All the People

FIRST CITY
EDITION

CIRCULATION: June Average 424,589, Sunday 1,044,703

THURSDAY MORNING, JULY 4, 1940

Second Largest 3c Morning Circulation in America

THREE CENTS

NAZI, ITALIAN PRISONERS DROWNED WHEN U-BOAT SINKS BRITISH LINER

Ilkie Says HOLLAND TUBE

1000 Are Missing;
Panic Starts Fight
For Place in Boats

Ship Carrying Interned Aliens
To Canada Sunk Without Warning
Off Irish Coast; 1000 Survivors Land

LONDON, July 3 (A. P.)—Torpedoed off the coast of Ireland by a German submarine, the British liner Arandora Star, bound for Canada with 2000 persons, most of them interned Italians and Germans, sank with apparently heavy loss of life.

Many of the German and Italian prisoners were killed in a wild rush for lifeboats, said survivors who reached a Scottish port today.

The water was filled with bodies and debris, the witnesses related. Hundreds were salvaged when the torpedo struck, and most of the survivors were taken to the Scottish coast.

BRITISH PRISON SHIP SUNK BY U-BOAT

Arandora Star July 2/36.

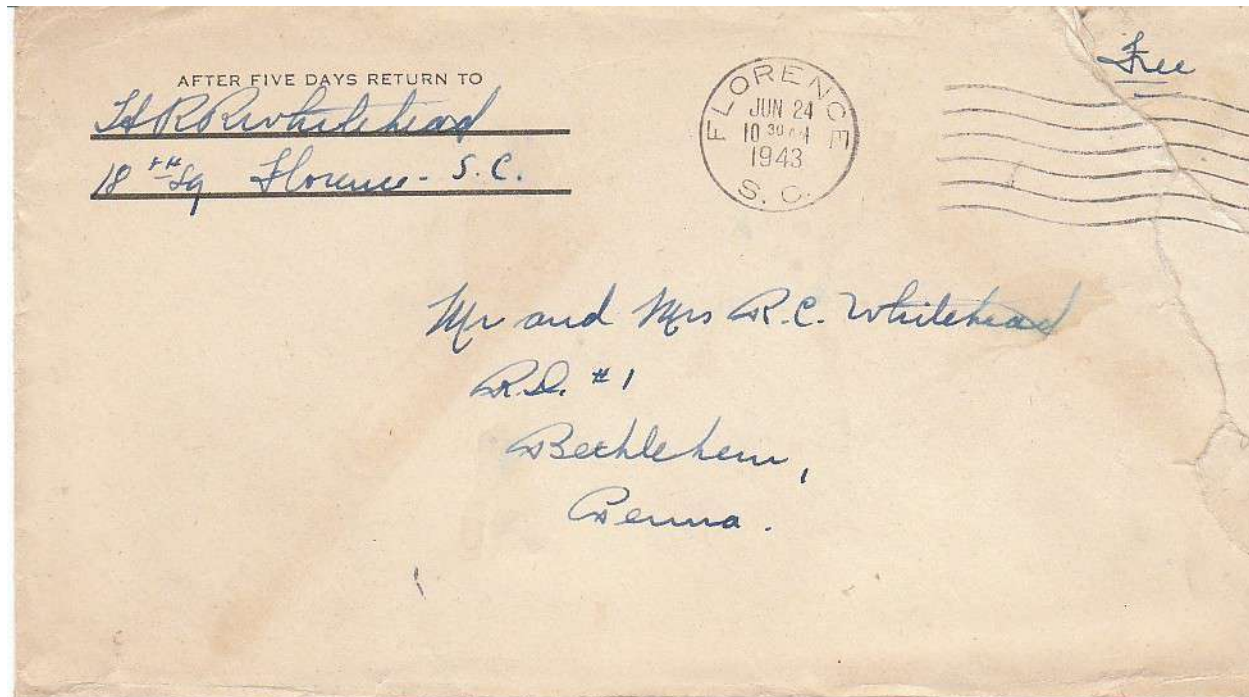
We are having a lovely
Cruise with perfect weather,
infact it is too hot. We have
not yet reached Stockholm but
there is not a large selection
cards on this ship. I like
Hamburg a beautiful
city. So also is Danzig.
Spent the afternoon last
the old buildings on
to the ship by S. S. S. S.
the Vestal. Love you
England.

113 Belvedere St
London S.W.17.

Blue Star Line Cruise.

Missing - Captured - Killed

Visions and Victims of Mussolini's Wars



Italy - The Land of Love: Ron Whitehead's Story

Italy is known as the land of love. Indeed, even our words “romance” and “romantic” are derived from “Roman”. St Valentine was an Italian priest in Rome. St Valentine’s Day is February 14th when we are expected to think of love.

Look at this innocuous little envelope and the letter it contains. The story behind it has more to do with real love than all the Valentine’s Day cards put together. It was written by a young U.S. Air Force pilot, just before he left for Italy.

This is one of several letters I have seen from this young pilot but is the only one that I own. It was written by Ronald R. Whitehead in June 1943 from Florence in Southern Carolina to his parents and sister at home in Bethlehem Pennsylvania.

We get a glimpse of a young man with a cheeky sense of humour when he writes, “Dearest Mom, Pop and Sis” and then asks, “How does it sound, the girls like it”.

Generally, the letter only contains trivialities like the weather, his family’s vacation and his concern that the dog has been off her food while they have been away but his love for his family would be obvious, even if the letter was not signed that way. A month later, on July 18th, he wrote a more detailed set of letters detailing the rigorous training schedule, showing his pride and satisfaction to have qualified as a pilot for B19 and B25 aircraft.

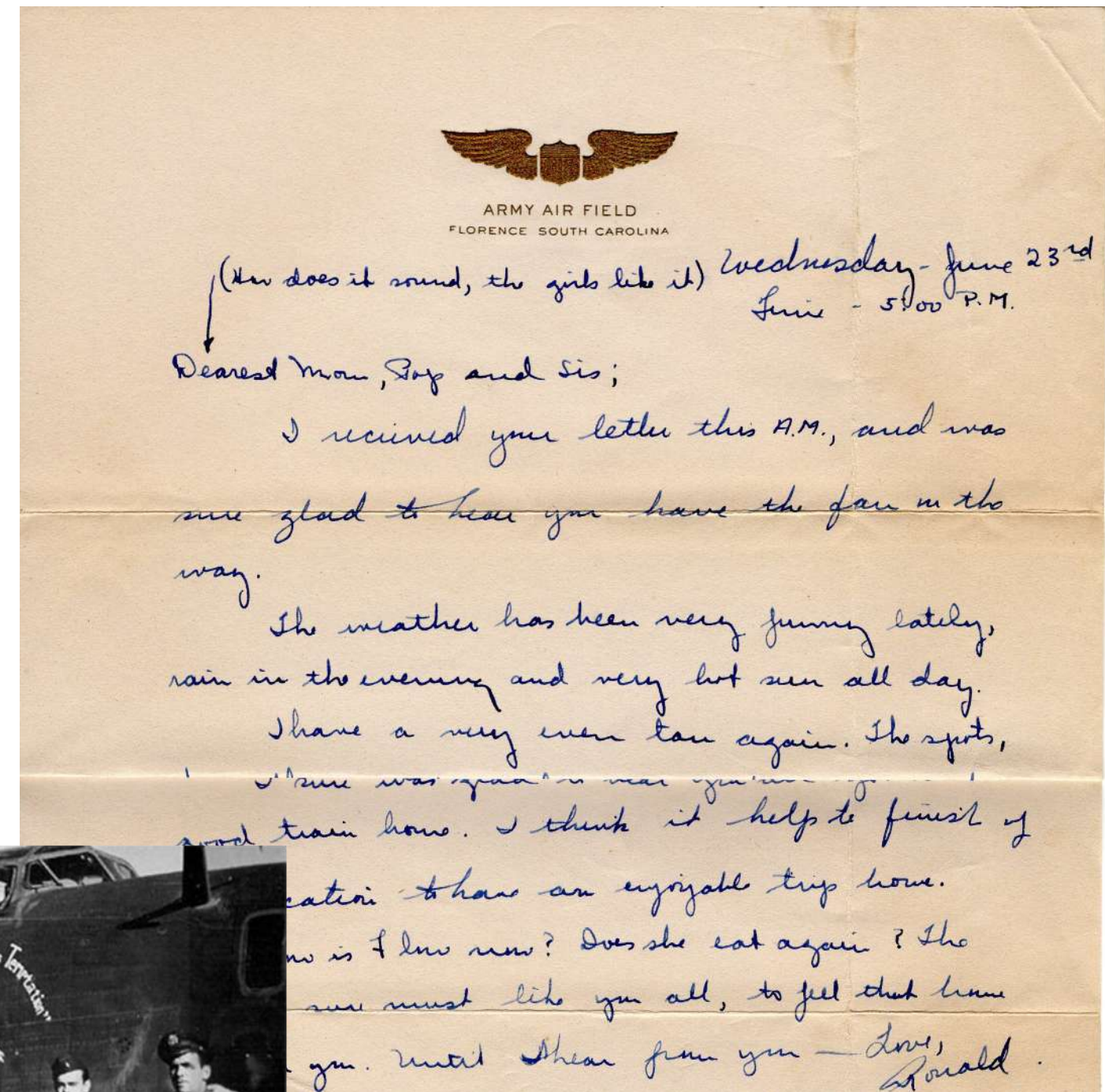
"This letter will be very short, as I'm very tired. We fly around 6 to 7 hrs. a day and then have ground school after that. I have 12.5 hrs. pilot time in this slow B-17. I've been checked out and now am qualified as a B-17 pilot. Now I have two tactical planes to my credit (B-25 and B-17). The only reason I like the B-17 better than the B-25 is, it has 4 engines and more firepower. It's slower than the 25 and is a heavier ship to fly than the B-25." His determination to do well was a reflection of the love he felt for his country in its hour of need.

Four days later he wrote again, this time telling of the girl from Dallas, Texas he had been dating and looking forward to introducing her to his family. St Valentine was smiling when he wrote that one.

Towards the end of 1943, Lieutenant Ronald R. Whitehead was sent to Italy. There he would fly a B-24 Liberator heavy bomber named “Miss Temptation” as part of the 720th Bomb Squadron, 450th Bomb Group (Heavy), 15th Air Force. He never saw his family or girlfriend again.

He had been with his squadron for a few weeks when, on 24th January 1944 on a mission to bomb targets in Yugoslavia, the convoy was attacked by between ten and fifteen German Messerschmitt 109 and Focke Wulf 190 fighters over Bulgaria.

According to accounts provided by surviving members of his crew, Lieutenant Whitehead's aircraft suffered damage to one engine and could not maintain sufficient speed to remain in formation. As soon as Whitehead's aircraft left formation it was attacked by numerous ME-109s, sustaining severe damage, and at least one crew member was hit. Lieutenant Whitehead remained at the controls and managed to keep the aircraft level while the crew bailed out. His entire crew survived and was captured by the Germans, some of them very badly injured. Lieutenant Whitehead alone was killed.



Crew member Sgt. Donald R. Amundson wrote in his biography, parts of which are shown on the 450th Bomb Group website,

"In my story I have tried to show myself as a young airman who tried to do his best. In no way were we heroes. The heroes did not come home.

Many were like my pilot, Lieutenant Whitehead, who lies entombed in our plane on a mountaintop somewhere between Albania and Yugoslavia. He stayed at the controls until all crew members had left the plane, for this he lost his life. May our nation ever be grateful for men like him."

Missing - Captured - Killed Visions and Victims of Mussolini's Wars

Rachele Mussolini

Rachele Guidi came from Predappio, Mussolini's birthplace. She met Mussolini when her widowed mother married his father. In 1910, she moved in with him and became his mistress.

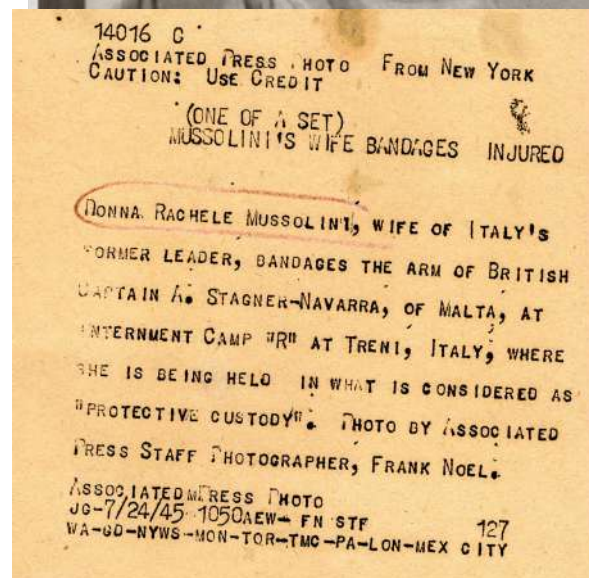
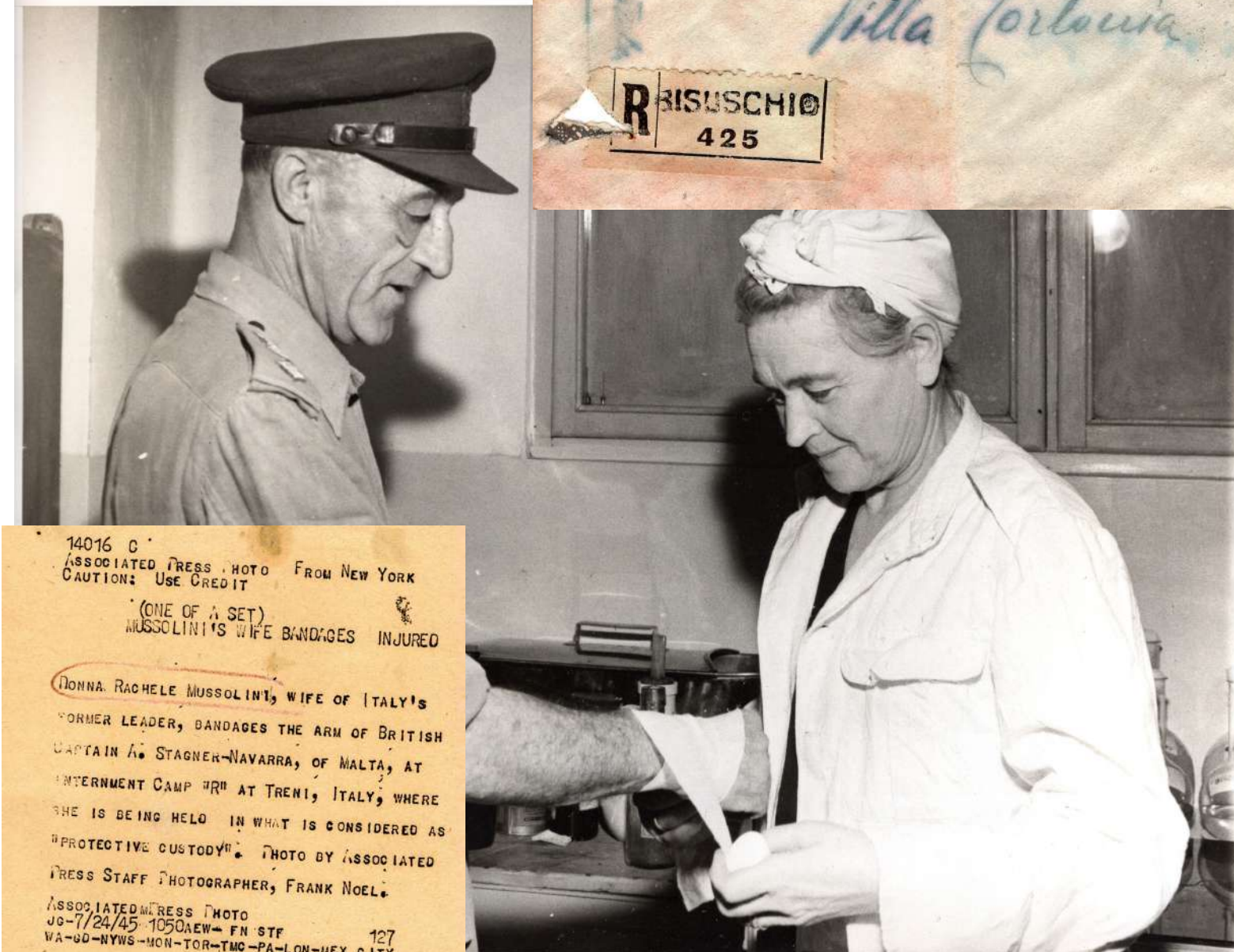
In 1915, they were married, despite him having married Ida Dalser, who was pregnant to him, in 1914. When he gained power, the records of this previous marriage were mostly destroyed. Rachele bore him five children, accepting his many mistresses, even Clara Petacci who died with him. She was promoted as being the perfect Fascist wife.

At the war's end, she was taken into protective custody by the Allies after partisans caught her trying to flee near the Swiss border.

In later life, she returned to Predappio, opening a restaurant, cooking pasta and serving it herself.



Above: Letter to Mussolini's daughter, Edda, addressed to the Foreign Ministry her husband headed.
Above Left: Letter to Rachele Mussolini at Villa Torlonia, rented to Mussolini for one lira per year.



Edda Mussolini and Count Gian Galeazzo Ciano

The Fascists were ruthless in their treatment of political opponents, even if they were family. Count Gian Galeazzo Ciano was the son of a WW1 war hero who had been made a Count by King Emmanuel III for his exploits during the war. Gian lived an extravagant, flamboyant lifestyle and in 1930 rose more to prominence when he married Edda Mussolini, the daughter of Il Duce. He flew bombers in the Ethiopian War in 1936 and returned to acclaim after which Mussolini made him Foreign Minister.

He argued against the second world war writing in his diary when war was announced by Mussolini, "I am sad, very sad. The adventure begins. May God help Italy!"

Nevertheless, he worked tirelessly throughout the war but by 1943, when the battle weary Italians voted to oust Mussolini, he voted against his father in law. After the partition of Italy, he tried to travel with his wife and children to Germany but the Germans sent him back to the Italian Social Republic where they insisted that Mussolini should put him on trial for treason. He was executed by firing squad along with two others who had voted against the Fascists and since been captured. His last words are said to have been, "God Bless Italy".

The above letter was sent by registered mail to Edda Ciano Mussolini in 1941. It is in an official red envelope and is addressed to her at the Foreign Ministry in Rome. It contains a handwritten letter applying for an extraordinary grant. The letter has Ministero Esteri (Foreign Ministry) crossed out and it has been redirected to another department.

Edda did not forgive her father after her husband's death and later published a memoir "My Truth" telling her story.



Top: Letter to Rachele Mussolini Below: Associated Press original photo taken while in custody with scan of reverse label.

Missing - Captured - Killed Visions and Victims of Mussolini's Wars

Benito Mussolini -The Ultimate Victim

On the 27th April 1945, Mussolini and his mistress, Clara Petacci were captured by communist partisans near Dongo, on Lake Como. They were on their way to Switzerland to board a plane to sanctuary in Spain. They were taken to Mezzegra and held overnight.

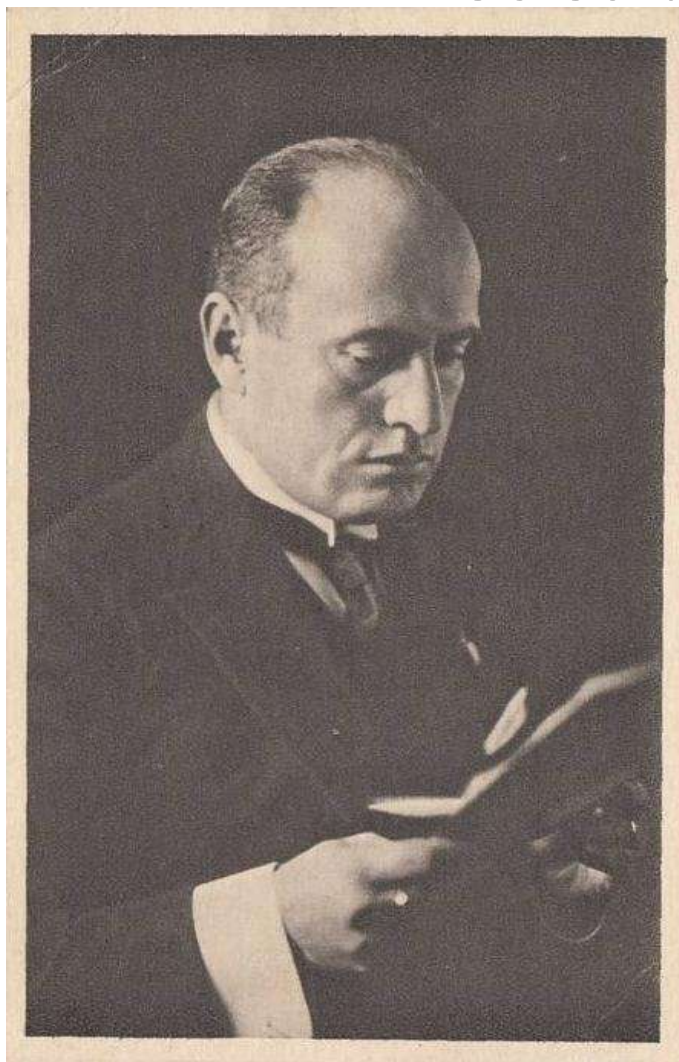
The next day, they were executed by firing squad, as were most of their party and their bodies were trucked south to Milan. There, the bodies were kicked, shot and spat on then hung by the feet from the roof of a service station where they were stoned by the huge crowd that had gathered.

The service station had been the scene of the execution of Italian partisans by the Germans some months before.



Special postmark produced to celebrate Hitler's 1938 visit to Rome. Hitler was apparently so shocked by the treatment of Mussolini's body that he gave instructions that his body should be burned to stop it falling into enemy hands.

The war had ended but the killing had not. Throughout Europe, more people died, many from revenge killings, in the first three years after the war than during the seven years of fighting.



Above: 1929 Card with Mussolini in pensive mood .

Reflecting on the spectacle of Mussolini's death in 1945, The BBC reported: "The executions are the first conspicuous demonstration of mob violence carried out by the partisans who until now have been kept under control by their leaders. The partisan commander-in-chief General Raffaele Cadorna said such incidents were regrettable but desirable in this case as a way for the public to vent their anger against the former dictator and his cohorts."

Waves of vengeance swept Europe at the end of the war. In Italy partisans in the north executed between eight and twelve thousand people. In the south, the resurgent Mafia murdered hundreds of communists, union members and peasant farmers. In areas where the Italians had held power, reprisals often were bloody. The entire Italian population of Istria was driven out with vastly differing accounts of the number of killings, but even if the lowest numbers are accepted as correct, there were many thousands.

The R.N. Giulio Cesare was one of three Conte de Cavour class battleships built for the Italian Navy and launched in 1911.

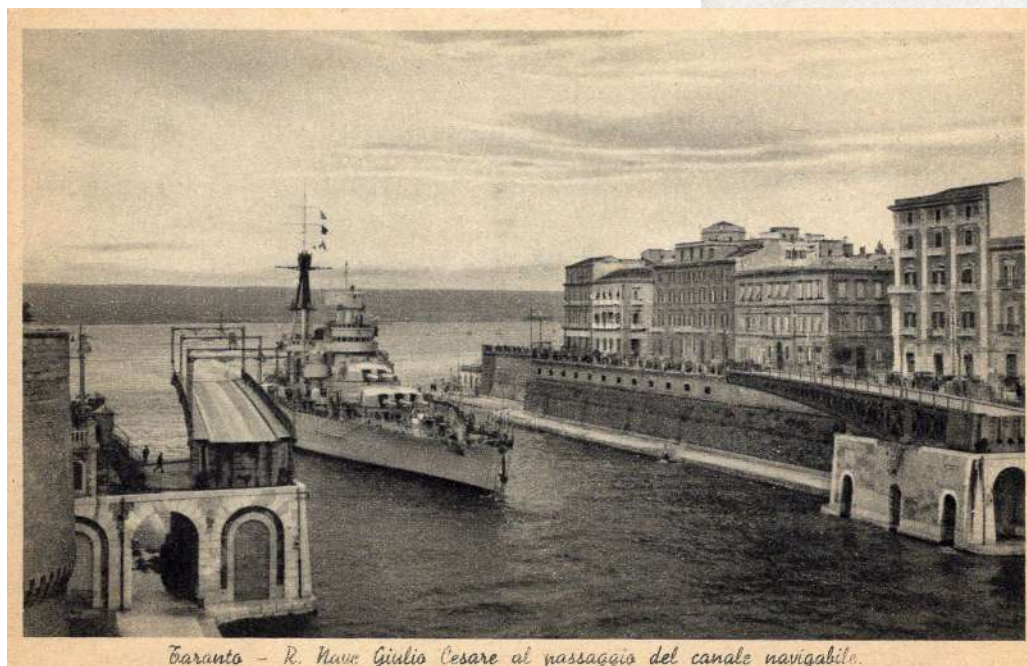
She saw little action in WW1 but was one of the allied fleet that escorted the captured German fleet to Scotland after the war.

Based at Taranto, she was a symbol of Italian pride and a whole range of postcards were produced featuring the ship.

In 1949, she was taken by the Russians as war reparations, an action that incensed many in the Italian military.

Renamed Novorossiysk, she was used as a training ship for young Russian sailors until, in 1955, an explosion holed her hull and she began sinking.

The captain believed the ship would be safe as the water was not deep, but beneath the water were several fathoms of thin mud. She sank into the mud then capsized and 608 men died



Taranto - R. Nave Giulio Cesare al passaggio del canale navigabile.

They claimed that these men were acting under orders to avenge the disgrace of the Russian seizure of the ship. Other sources say they were part of a NATO operation as this was the height of the "cold war" though this seems unlikely.

The damage was said to have been deliberately small to allow time for the crew to abandon ship but the Captain overruled this option.

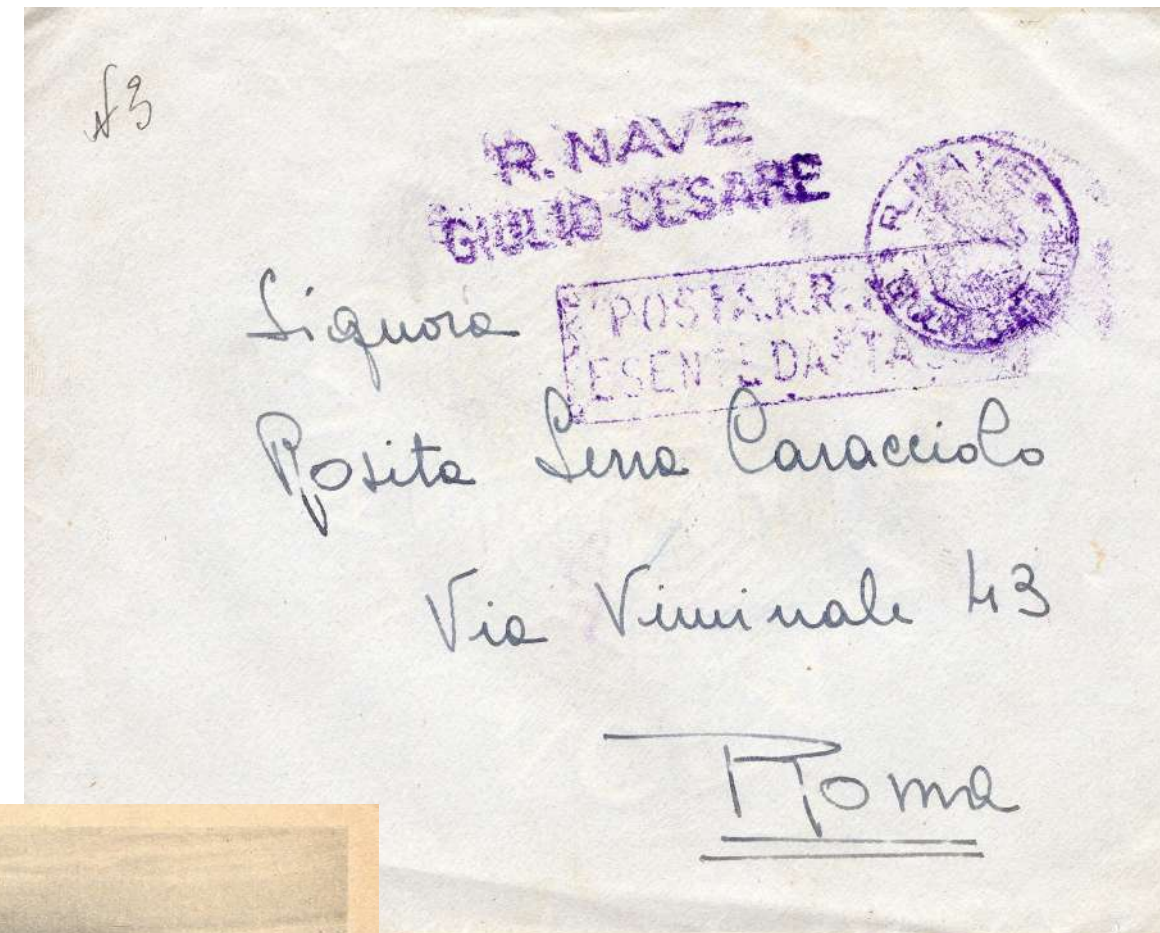
If the story is true, the young men who died may have been the last casualties from the Italian involvement in WW2.

Top: Letter posted from R.N. Giulio Cesare showing the ship's purple postmarks

Centre: Giulio Cesare in 1932 entering her berth at Taranto.

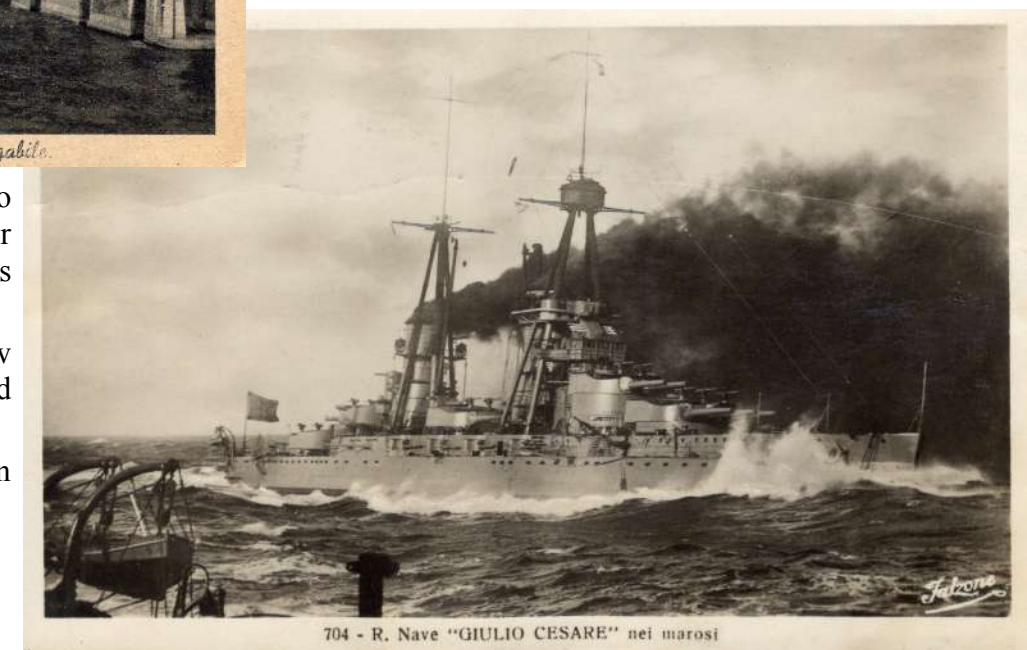
Bottom: Under full steam

Post Script: The Final Casualties?



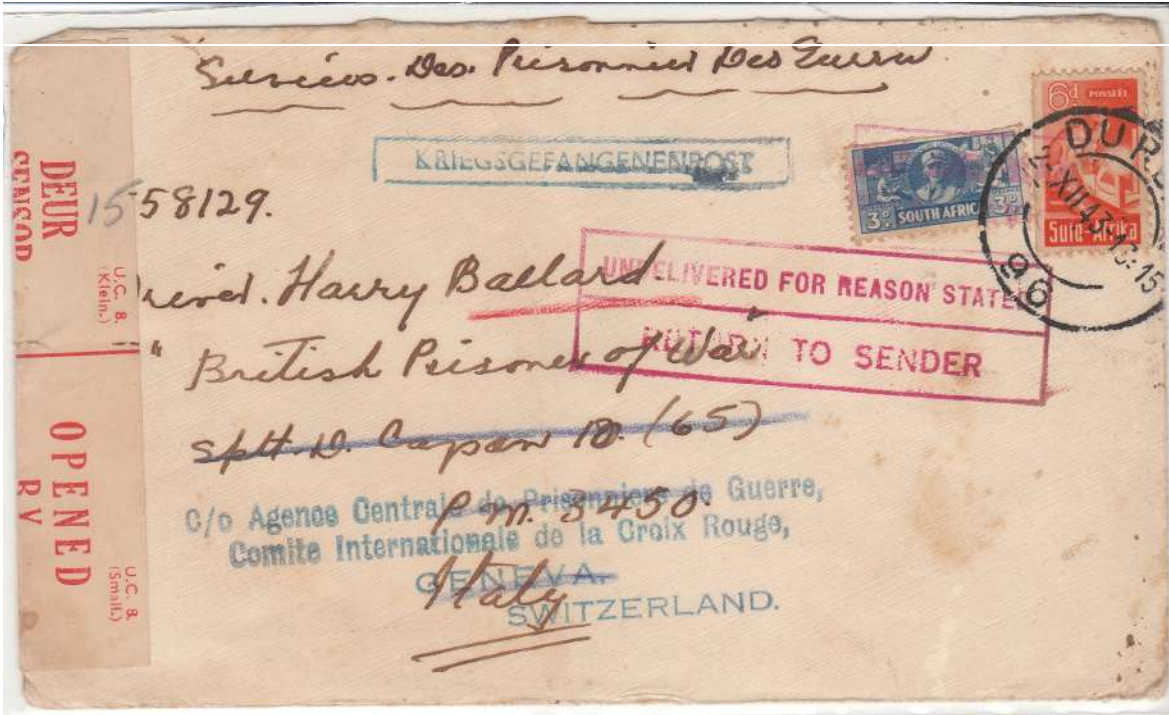
Officially she was said to have hit an old mine but there is another explanation for the tragedy.

Several Italian memoirs claim that the ship was sabotaged by frogmen from the disbanded Decima Flottiglia MAS, a WW2 Italian naval group who fought with the Germans after the armistice.



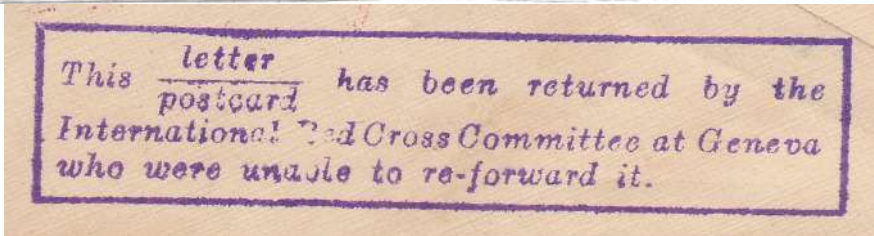
704 - R. Nave "GIULIO CESARE" nei marosi

And sometimes the postman failed...



This letter was posted from Durban in South Africa to a prisoner of war at Camp No 10 which was at Acquapendente on the border of Tuscany and Umbria. This was within the Italian Social Republic and it is possible that as the Allies pushed northwards, prisoners were moved to other camps. The cover carries a variety of labels and stickers including a dual language censor tape in English and Afrikaans. It carries a German stamp in blue, Kriegsgefangenenpost (Prisoner of war post) and a stamp in the same colour redirecting the letter from the original camp address to the ICRC in Geneva. The Red Cross have then possibly added the red stamp on

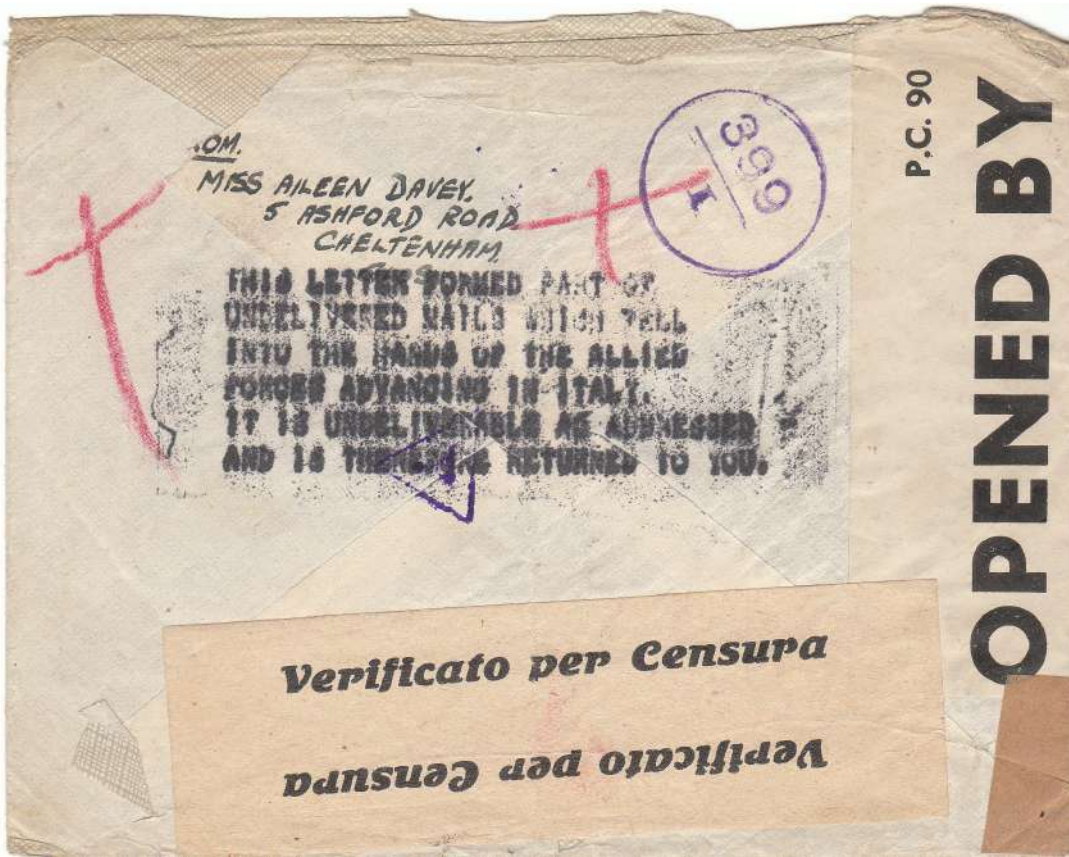
the front and returned it to sender. There is also a faint red stamp over the postage stamps which says By Air Mail Par Avion



There are two stamps on the back, probably both South African. The first explains that the letter has been returned by the Red Cross as they could not forward it. The second, which looks like a blot, is a South African censor stamp in the shape of the coat of arms that was used in South Africa at the time. The stamp appears to be either very worn or carelessly applied and is almost unrecognisable.

Thanks to Mr. Ian Billings of Norvic Philatelics, England for assistance with this censor stamp.

Missing - Captured - Killed Visions and Victims of Mussolini's Wars



Reverse of letter showing reason for non-delivery

A Happy Ending

Flight Lieutenant Eric Ralph Edmunds was a New Zealander attached to the R.A.F. He fought in the Battle of Britain flying a Hurricane. He was then transferred to 213 Squadron.

They were a fighter squadron and at the time were protecting the Suez Canal. At the time he was shot down he was listed as flying out of Libya.

His plane was shot down over El Adem on the 12th June 1942 but he survived and was captured by German forces two days later. He was handed over to the Italians and spent a year in various Italian POW camps. As the Allies advanced in 1943, Edmunds was transferred to Stalag Luft III. He was POW Nr. 3093.

His available war record seemed to end there but I wanted to know whether he survived the war.

I checked the British Marriage Register and found that in 1945 in Cheltenham, Gloucestershire, Eric Ralph Edmunds married Aileen Davey, the writer of the letter.

This letter from Miss Aileen Davey, 5 Ashford Road Cheltenham was addressed to Flight Lieut. E. R. Edmunds R.A.F in prison camp N47 in Modena, Italy in 1943.

The camp was for officers and held mostly New Zealanders. The letter carries both British and Italian censor marks but was returned undelivered and has this stamped on the reverse:

“This letter formed part of undelivered mails which fell into the hands of the allied forces advancing in Italy. It is undeliverable as addressed and is therefore returned to you.”



Scan of front of envelope.