

Military Matters: German PoW Working Companies

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At the end of the Second World War Egypt contained many British and Commonwealth troops and some 100,000 German prisoners of war. These former adversaries had a common concern, repatriation back home to their families and distrust of the authorities who kept lengthening the date of repatriation on account, it was said, of a shortage of shipping.

For the British troops the magic words “Demob by Christmas” were being uttered and many were without useful work, being left to idle away the time. They were free to leave the camps and take the tram into Cairo, even to spend weeks in private houses and to wear civilian clothes. Provided one kept in touch “to see if a posting came up on the board”, no regulation was infringed - or if it was, no one paid any attention; whereas hanging about the camp dutifully and aimlessly meant that one could always be called upon for routine tasks.

The people in charge were the camp police and mail had to be picked up from their guard-room as a check that troops had not disappeared without trace. Those responsible were merely unpaid lance-corporals, themselves stuck in transit, sometimes because the unit to which they were attached had moved on while they were in hospital.

The overwhelming majority would not even leave the barracks, believing themselves under siege. To walk out into the street and mingle with the crowds seemed to them the height of foolhardiness with the likely outcome a slit throat down some dark ally. Others had “gone private”, being able to pick up pay for people in return for the odd favour.

People were left lounging round in such circumstances, living a pointless existence just because somebody in Whitehall thought that someone might run off with the Suez Canal; and with an indeterminate date of service, boredom easily set in. Many sought out jobs around the transit camp, for instance in the cookhouse, simply for the sake of something to do. During the war, people could be persuaded that staying in the Army was inevitable or even worthwhile. But even that consolation had been deprived the minority held back from the front by policy; now the enforced time-wasters were in the majority. Under the slogan “Roll on demob”, the background developed for Soldiers’ Councils.

When it was announced that fewer ships could be spared for demobilisation purposes, and that return to the UK had to be slowed anyway because of resettlement difficulties at home, an unofficial meeting was held in Ezbekieh Gardens in the centre of Cairo. The decision was taken to send a respectful enquiry to GHQ at Kasr-el-Nil, comprising a few soldiers making legitimate enquiries of welfare officers before any protest action was taken. A sympathetic non-career officer explained that frontline service was still needed in Greece, Palestine and Malaysia, as well as holding down liberated territories against the Russians, and that was why demob was held up. It wasn’t a question of punitive action.

This, conveyed back to the next Saturday meeting at Ezbekieh Gardens, caused an uproar. One after another squaddies got up to call for action. A call was made to set up the Soldiers’ Councils, and soon a strike was called for. Though it was agreed to suspend all drill, rosters and work, the majority would not agree not to do guard duties. They were under the impression that the Egyptians would break in to garrisons and kill them if they did so. In November 1946 there were stoppages in Tel el-Kebir followed by Port Said, Suez, Abbassia and Cairo. The strike continued for some time and was finally ended by Garrison HQ in Kasr-el-Nil assuring all the troops that release dates would be restored.

While the strike was on and amid growing concern at further agitation among their own troops the authorities fell back on greater use of the PoWs in labour companies, partly because Egyptian labour was suspect because of the impetus towards independence. In September/October 1946 there were 26 German Independent Working Companies, often controlled by the Pioneer Corps, of 48,000 men with an additional 4,000 men in ten German POW Artisan Working Companies. They worked mainly for the British Army (construction of quarters in the Canal Zone, motor vehicle workshops, drivers, orderlies etc.), including the defusing, blowing-up and shipment of ammunition. For expert work a prisoner was paid 10 piastres daily.

They longed for repatriation even more than the British soldiers, but hardly felt in a position to go on strike, and had no orders as to what to do if nobody turned up to guard them. So their own NCOs took command and they carried on their duties, even driving trucks through the town in a disciplined manner that won the admiration of the British officer class. In effect, while the British troops refused duties the Germans kept things running for the colonial power. Camps were run and guarded by the inmates, armed with nothing more than pickaxe handles, with the officers and senior NCOs taking charge. Initially some of the ardent Nazis tried to take command, but they were rapidly pushed aside by the majority of the PoWs who wanted nothing to do with them.

As a result, the British authorities determined more than ever not to part with them a moment too soon. About one-third of the Germans were from the Afrika Korps but among the prisoners were individuals claiming various other nationalities, including Brazilian, Bulgarian, Czech, Polish, Danish, Dutch, Argentine, Swiss, Spanish and Armenian. The last Italian prisoners had left, to the relief of the military authorities, for in spite of the valuable contribution of the Italian co-operators their mercurial temperament made them much more difficult to handle than the stolid Germans.

Until the defeat of Germany the prisoners had lived in guarded camps and did no work. Then a financial problem arose. The prisoners had been receiving pay from Germany through Sweden and had been able to buy trifling but much prized additions to their rations. When Germany collapsed pay ceased, and the effect on the men, especially in isolated desert camps, was severe. The inability to buy cigarettes was a special hardship, and the men were ready to do anything to obtain them. Simultaneously with the realisation that they had lost the war, the attitude of the prisoners changed. Disillusioned and completely at sea, they lost the arrogant confidence in victory that had sustained them during captivity.

They became tractable. The military authorities were able to kill two birds with one stone: they could relieve the manpower shortage and enable the Germans to fight the depressing effects of enforced idleness unmitigated by opportunity to obtain tobacco and sweets. Their work was so successful that, as described above, the authorities became largely dependent upon them. The intention was that prisoners in the Middle East should be repatriated at the same speed as those held elsewhere. But meanwhile a start was made with small working parties under guard. Basic working pay at a few shillings a week, with a little more for supervisors, was issued. The effect of being employed and able to buy simple luxuries was extraordinary.

During the war the prisoners had been graded in three categories on a political basis: white, or anti-Nazis; grey, Nazis of no deep conviction; black, staunch Nazis. There were also a few ultra-blacks, fanatical and dangerous men who had tried to maintain the Gestapo system within the prison camps. It was soon found that the whites could be trusted to work unguarded. The greys were next tried and proved as amenable as the whites. Finally the blacks, resigned to defeat and the hopelessness of their situation, gave little or no trouble and worked unguarded. Later they were given two grades: Grade I comprised all proven workers of good conduct. Grade II consisted of about a thousand ultra-blacks and bad and unreliable workers.

Grade I men were variously employed providing staff for military messes and for RAF Transport Command airfield buffets. Many drove Service vehicles, became watchmen in British depots, acted as wireless mechanics and meteorologists, worked on building and constructional work and about 100 technicians worked for the Royal Navy. Firetenders that saved several lives when a Dakota burst into flames on landing in Cyrenaica had mixed RAF and German crews. Germans staffed their own camps and pay and record offices. Some even guarded the Grade II prisoners. Pioneer and labour companies provided general labour and tradesmen for all Army and RAF needs; they were distributed in Cyrenaica, Iraq, Sudan, Greece and the Dodecanese, although the majority were in Egypt.

The prisoners lived in tented camps, in which amenities were developed partly by the prisoners themselves, partly with the valuable help of the YMCA. The prisoners were keen on games, especially football, and in one camp they built a fine mud-brick stadium with football pitch, running tracks and places for field events. They indulged in all kinds of hobbies and organised a "university" in which languages were the chief study. They formed several excellent orchestras, with instruments supplied by the YMCA, and performed in British leave camps, club messes and at Service functions. In another camp they specialised in village and farm planning and built models with true German attention to detail.

Prisoners were allowed to send two letters and four postcards a month, and there was no restriction on the amount of mail they could receive. Some English newspapers were provided and a German-language newspaper printed in England was supplemented by camp newspapers produced by the prisoners themselves. The only signs of discontent had been in two camps where crude posters demanded that the British should "release their slaves".

Considering the almost complete freedom in which these prisoners lived and worked, escapes were remarkably few and more often than not should be described as "absence without leave". Stories of romantic exploits by escaped Germans in Egypt were rumoured but possibly with little substance. Those who did go Awol soon returned or were returned to their camps within a few days. Some made for the ports, but language and lack of money quickly gave them away. A few hid with Egyptians, working as mechanics, field labourers, and sometimes armourers for the gangs that raided the great dumps. When later on great numbers of Egyptian peasants were engaged in British depots at high wages, men willing to work as Egyptian field-hands were invaluable.

The first repatriation came in late 1946, with 6,000 men. The first men sent home were the "A-men" (anti-Nazis) and repatriation continued slowly thereafter. Morale began to suffer and the rate of suicides increased and on October 11, 1947, the Declaration of a Captured Lutheran Pastor in Egypt was issued by Norbert Rückert, himself one of the incarcerated.

The declaration began:

The captured Lutheran pastors in Egypt, moved by the emotional situation of their fellow prisoners in the M[iddle] E[ast], which has become extraordinarily critical, and in obedience to their sworn duties of office, would like to make the following declaration before the British authorities, before the German public, before their fellow prisoners, and also before the Christians of the world....

It made mention that some 60,000 PoWs were still in Egypt, *having been put to work in a climate which for half the year is positively unbearable for a European*; that morale had declined and that five suicides had occurred in the Cairo district in the last month. In one work company, of 5,000 men, six had been admitted to the military hospital with mental illness.

It then listed the reasons for the despair, among them the failure of the British Government to implement the Repatriation Plan intended to be binding for 1947, causing complete distrust in any British promises, and stated that the closing date for repatriation, the end of 1948, would most probably not be achieved. Another point of contention was that the returned PoW would not be allowed to take out of Egypt more than ten pounds' worth of goods when many had saved their tiny wages for months and years to take foodstuffs back home to their families.

Alas the response was to fall back on the excuse:

The British War Department declares that the lack of shipping space in the Middle East at the moment does not make it possible to keep constant the considerably increased number of monthly dismissals like these summer months. The lack of shipping room has already led to the limited vacation of the British troops for some time. However, the final date of the repatriation scheme, which provides completion of the dismissals until December 31st, 1948, shall not suffer from this. As of the beginning of the next year, the rates of the repatriations in the Middle East will be increasing considerably in keeping with the deadline.

As to when the last PoW was sent home, I cannot find a precise date, but it certainly was not earlier than the end of 1948 and possibly into early 1949.

I'm not quite sure what, some four or five years ago, started me on the quest to find about these working companies since I have had some covers from them for some 20 years or more among my PoW collection, but something sparked my interest to find what philatelic evidence I could. Some have company cachets, but most of the company numbers I have recorded come from the return address or from the incoming mail address. I also imagined that this was/is(?) a neglected or even totally overlooked facet of Egyptian philately, but on going through some back issues of the *QC* - of course for some other reason altogether - I chanced

upon a meeting report in *QC 59/60* of 1962 on German Prisoner of War Mail mentioning eight sheets of the recently deceased Gordon Ward of the wartime correspondence of Kurt Hahn, a PoW in Egypt.

It seems that Gordon Ward corresponded with Kurt Hahn, who had been captured in Italy and sent to Egypt as a PoW, becoming the chief postal clerk at each of the PoW camps to which he was sent. Although the report mentions that he gave Dr Ward much information, I have not found anything published. Among the covers described two had reference to the working companies, one by its return address, the other by its incoming address. So perhaps I cannot claim a completely new line of research.

As might be expected, finding such material has not been particularly easy and on inquiry dealers would only look blank and suggest that I look through a box of covers that may contain something. I picked up one cover in Washington and a couple from a German dealer who frequents Stampex, who seemed quite pleased about my interest and took up the story. Gradually I made up a small collection and recently gave a display to the Forces Postal History Society of nine sheets of eighteen covers and cards.

Adding to this, a trawl through old auction catalogues and various internet sites has allowed me to start to form a picture of the companies and their postal markings. I have tabulated my provisional findings by company number and the location taken either from the return address, cachet or by the incoming address.

The place and country is supplied by various means; by the camp number if given, and then from a list of the camps and locations, the place mostly from camp location or from notes given by the seller, assumed correct or even given by the writer in the letter. The dates are normally taken from the writer or the occasional cachet or receiving postmark in Germany, ignoring any transit time.

**2768 INDEPENDANT
GERMAN P.W.
1 MAR. 1946
WORKING COY:**

**3106 Indep. German P.W.
Wkg. Coy.
Date.....**

**ORDERLY ROOM
10 JUN 1946
2773 IND. G.P.W. WKG. COY.**

**3106 Indep. German P.W. Wkg. Coy.
Post Office**

2752 Indep. German P.W. Working Coy

**3113 Ind. Ger. P.W. Wkg. Coy.
c/o Central P.O.W. Postal
Section
M. E. L. F.**

Figs. 1-6. Some cachets seen. Most are in mauve.

Location of the camps

The larger camps were mainly in the Bitter Lakes area; from Suez to Ismailia and a little further west into the desert as well. Other camps were closer to Alexandria and Cairo. The labour camps were located in the neighbourhood of the main camps near the Suez Canal, which was the emphasis of the labour service companies.

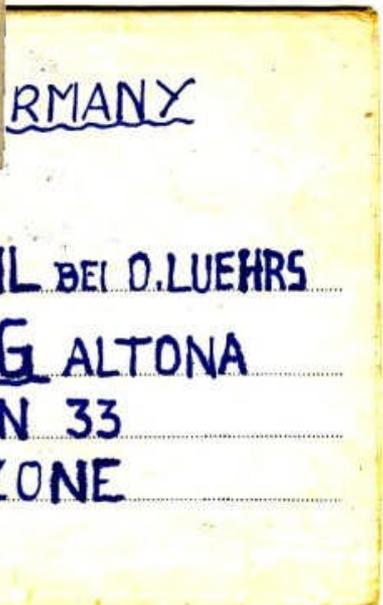
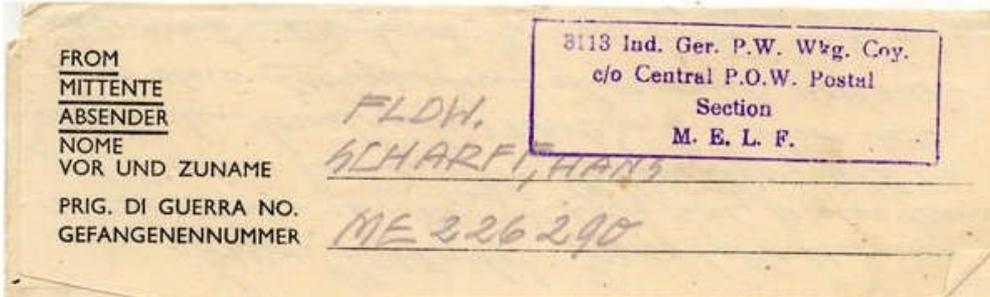
304 Helwan	305 Tell El Kebir	306 Fayid/Bitter Lake
307 Fanara/Bitter Lake	308 Fayid/Bitter Lake (former Helwan)	309 Fayid (?)/Bitter Lake
310 Gineifa/Bitter Lake	368 Fayid/Bitter Lake	379 Qassassin
380 Fanara/Bitter Lake	381 El Dabaa	382 El Dabaa
383 El Dabaa		

Table of Covers with Working Party Cachets or numbers

Number	Letters	Location	Place	Country	Cachet	Earliest	Latest
1274						3.3.47	
1279	A.W.		Fayid	Egypt		26.9.47	
1280	A.W.					14.4.46	
1283					Single line	10.2.47	22.12.47
1782							
2148		MELF.6					
2718						27.1.47	
2719				Egypt		17.7.45	7.6.47
2722		M.E.L.F.		Egypt		20.3.47	31.5.47
2723		M.E.Egypt	Benghazi	Libya		15.12.46	
2744		Egypt					
2748		M.E.F.	Benghazi	Libya		8.12.46	5.1.47
2750		390 M.E.F.		Egypt		7.4.46	28.2.48
2750	A	366/380	Fayid/Fanara	Egypt		07.4.46	
2750	B	380	Fayid	Egypt		22.2.47	
2750	C	366/380	Fayid/Fanara	Egypt		26.7.46	29.3.48
2751				Egypt		23.1.47	
2752		MELF	Suez	Egypt	Single line	15.8.46	17.10.48
2758		MELF					
2764							
2765		MEF		Egypt	Four lines	11.3.46	4.12.46
2769				Egypt		28.6.46	
2772				Egypt		12.1.47	
2773			El Firdan	Egypt	Oval	24.6.46	30.5.47
2775				Egypt		31.10.46	
2776				Egypt			
2778			Benghazi	Libya			
2779						1.3.47	14.3.47
2780					Four lines	23.9.46	
2781		807				12.6.48	
2782							
2785					Four lines	19.8.47	
3101					Single line	4.3.47	
3104				Egypt		26.12.46	14.4.47
3105				Egypt		4.6.48	
3106		380	Fayid	Egypt	2/3 lines	23.8.46	7.2.48
3107			Almaza	Egypt		27.10.46	25.12.46
3108				Egypt		26.1.46	
3110		MELF					
3113				Egypt	Box 4 lines	27.9.46	8.6.47

Anyone for Cairo?

Members who have visited our colleagues at the Philatelic Society of Egypt in Cairo in the past have returned full of admiration and tales of overwhelming hospitality. Soon there is another chance to enjoy the delights because Dr Sherif Samra, President of the PSE, announces that an exhibition – open to all to display, even as little as a single frame – will be held over the weekend of November 5-7 at the Opera House in the Exhibition Grounds on Gezira. Those with memories of Cairo 1991 will recall that this is just across the road from the Sheraton Towers Hotel where we have spent many happy visits. As an initial approach, please contact our President, John Sears.



Figs. 7-10. Four covers with cachets.



Fig.11. Incoming cover.

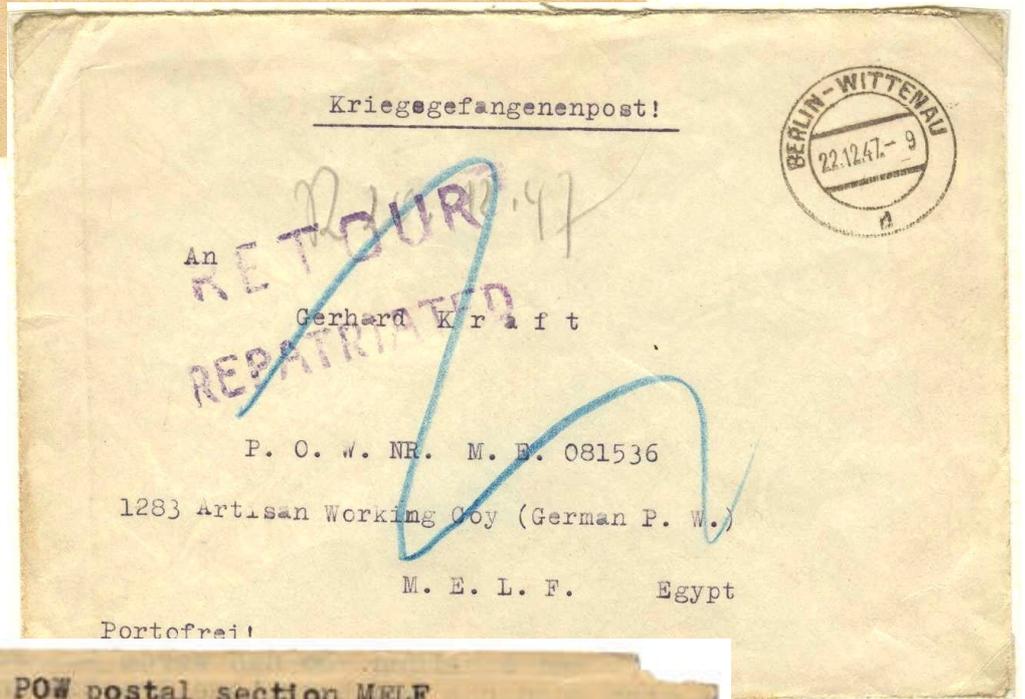


Fig.12. Incoming cover. One of the few references I have seen to the Artisan Working Companies.

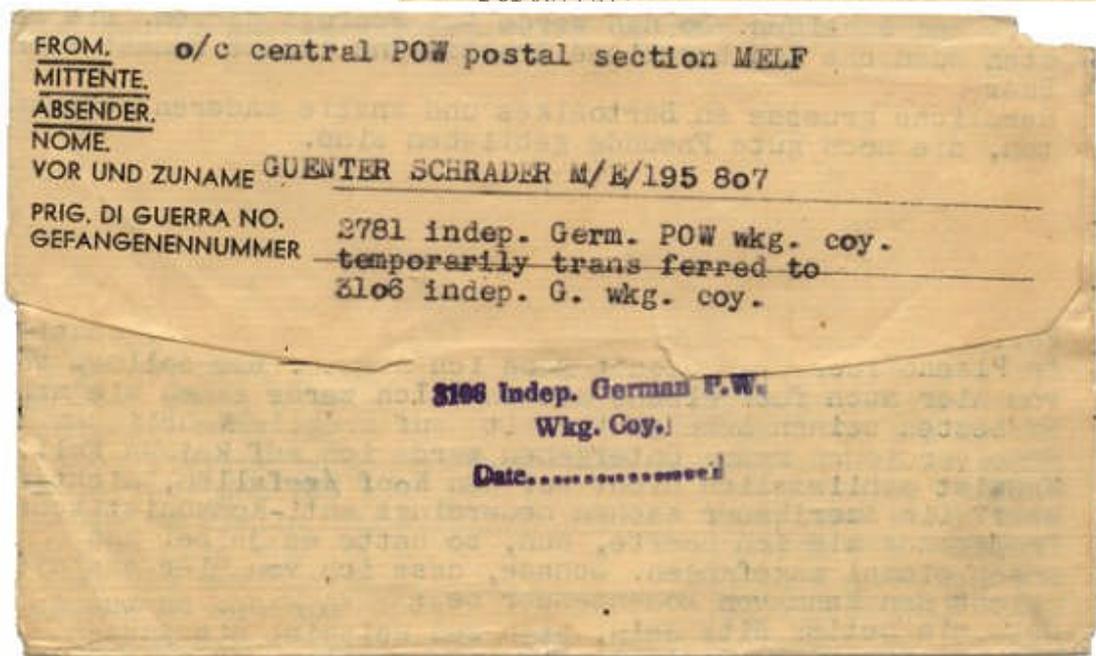


Fig.13. The majority of the covers do not have cachets. The number of the working company being given only in the return address. This cover having both the return address and a cachet of the temporary posting.