

**AUSTRALIAN FORCES Its EGYPT - 1939-44.**

**By Harry S. Porter.**

Prior to September 1940 the only Australians quartered in Egypt were individuals attached to other units or schools. and the few covers soon sent by Australians during this period passed through the British Military Post Offices. Data-stamps seen hereon are of the type "E" and bear the indications B.P.O./E.602. 2. and F.P.O./E.601. E.603. E.607 or E.608. I understand that about August 1940 a new Postal Unit arrived from the United Kingdom furnished with the standard type of date-stamps (see Type "D") and that those of Type "E" were withdrawn and returned to Ordnance.

The position as regards Postal Rates was identical for the Australians as for other British troops in Egypt. For letters by surface mail postage was 10 m. for 20 grams with a surcharge for airmail of 50 m. per 10 grams. It follows that the airmail postage was 40 m. for 10 grams. 70 m. for 20 grams. 10 m. for 30 grams. etc.

The service postage was paid with special stamps (known as "Army Seals" in military parlance) those current in 1940 being the 3 m. green and 10 m. carmine with head of King Farouk listed in Gibbons Catalogue as Nos. A3 and A4.

The 3 m. denomination was designed to pay a special rate for Christmas cards. This concession was still in force in 1940 and I have seen examples of the 3 m. cancelled with an Australian Army date-stamp but only with dates in late October. In my experience, these are scarce.

The date-stamps used by the Australian Postal Units can be classed under two categories, those used by Field Post Offices attached to Formations, which were mobile, and those Post Offices which came under the Lines of Communication (L of C) and were located at a given place until moved to another.

To meet the threat to Egypt occasioned by the entry of Italy into the war on 10/6/40, the transfer of the Australian 6th Division from Palestine was begun in September 1940. The date-stamps given to this Division and the first known date of their use on Egyptian soil is as follows;

<u>FORMATION.</u>	<u>LETTERING OF DATE-STAMP</u>	<u>FIRST DATE SEEN..</u>
16th Brigade.	1st Bge H.Q.P.O. - M.1-	11.9.40
17th Brigade.	2nd Bde H. Q.P.O. -M.2-	21.9.40
19th Brigade	3rd Bde H. Q.P.O. - W.3-	29.11.40
6th Division H. Q.	Div. H. Q.P.O. - D.M.1-	3.10.40
6th Division Supply H.Q.	Div. Supply H.Q.P.O. -S.P.1.-	3.12.40

Typical date-stamps are shown under Types "A" and "B" and they were originally brought with the troops from Australia.

It is possible that slightly earlier dates may be found than those given To my knowledge only M. 1. and S.P. 1. had been in previous use in Palestine. M.1. was not used there after April 1940 but S.P.1. is found occasionally obliterating Palestine stamps as late as October 1940.

As a result of the success of the offensive launched against the Italians on December 7th 1940, the 6th Australian Division advanced into Libya and took a prominent part in the capture of Bardia (Jan. 6th.), Tobruk (Jan. 22nd.), Derna (Jan. 30th) and Benghazi (Feb.7th. 1941). On what date the Postal Units crossed the Egypt-Libya frontier I have been unable to determine, but it must have been early in January. It follows therefore that the Egyptian Army Seals cancelled with the above date-stamps with dates after early January can be classed under "Egypt used abroad".

Although not immediately apparent. the Libyan campaign had an effect on the service postal rate. Egypt was the only active service theatre where the troops did not enjoy free postage on surface mail. Once outside

Egyptian territory surface mail became free and as the airmail made up of 10 m. postage plus 30 m. surcharge this reduced the airmail to 30 m. on a single weight letter. From the end of January airmail letters from the 6th Australian Division have three 10 m. stamps instead of the previous four.

From February 8th 1941 the Australian troops in Libya were ordered to use Australian stamps to pay air postage (the rate was 9d per ½oz), so the period of use of the Army Seals in Libya was short. Australian troops in Egypt continued to use the Army Seals until April 24th 1941 when the use of their own stamps by troops forming part of the Allied Forces was sanctioned, so the Army Seals disappear.

In February 1941 it was decided that the 9th Australian Division would relieve the 6th and the latter be withdrawn to Egypt. to await transport to Greece. The relief took place during March and the units of the 6th Aus. Div. left for Greece after spending a short period in Transit Camps in Egypt. It follows that it is possible that covers with the date-stamps of the 6th Aus. Div. may be proved to emanate from Egypt during this second short period. The only examples I have found show M.2. (24.3.41 on Australian stamps ) and W.3. (19.3.41 with English stamps ). Please do not ask why Australian and English stamps were used (contrary to the statements I have made above), but the position re stamps was chaotic at that time! I have reason to know that the vast majority of letters posted by the 6th Div. at that time received L of C date-stamps.

The original L of C office in Egypt was a Sub-base P.O. opened at Cairo in September 1940, although the earliest date-stamp seen is 3.10.40. As happened in the case of a number of Australian Army Post Offices in the Middle East, this office used blue ink at first. The date-stamp read "Army P.O." at top and "A.M.1." at foot. As the importance of this Australian Base Post Office (A.B.P.O.) increased. one date-stamp was found inadequate and in the early part of 1941 resource was to borrowing some of the date-stamps of Type E previously mentioned. The two numbered E.607 and E.608 were used at A.B.P.O. chiefly for registered letters and parcels and I only know E.607 used on ordinary correspondence for a few days in March and E.608 similarly in April.

E.606 is said to have been in use by the Australian Port Postal Detachment at Suez in March and in July 1941 but I am still looking for an example.

E.608 had been removed from A.B.P.O. Cairo by May 1941 as it was then listed to be at Aust. F.P.0.42 at the 2nd Aust. General Hospital at Kantara on the Canal. I have yet to find a cover with it used at that time in Egypt but the date-stamp was evidently prized by the Postal Orderly of the Hospital as he brought it back with the unit to Australia and they used it when stationed in Northern Queensland in 1942.

E.609 and E.611 of the same series were loaned to the Australians at the same time but all the evidence goes to prove that they were never used in Egypt but in Palestine.

To continue the history of the A.B.P.O. in Egypt on July 8th 1941 it was issued with our new date-stamps recently arrived from Australia. These were Type "K" and the lettering was Aust. Base P.O. at top and Nos 1. 2. 3 or 4 at foot. No 1 was customarily in use in the latter months of 1941 and No 4 is met with from December 1941 onwards. No 2 went back to Australia early in 1942. It is possible that Nos 2 and 3 were used in Egypt at A.B.P.O. but examples have yet to be found. On October 30th 1941 A.B.P.O. was moved from Cairo to Tel-el-Kebir (generally known as "TEK"). An ordinary F.P.O. continued to operate at Cairo and I think that date-stamp No 16 (Type "L") was the one used there.

Other L of C Post Offices were opened in Egypt as the situation required. One at the Atlantic Hotel Alexandria was functioning as early as the first week in 1941. This office used a standard English Field Post Office date-stamp No 443 of Type "D". Date-stamps nos 443 to 445 were originally issued to Australian Troops in England in August 1940 and were brought with them to the Middle East.

Another date-stamp which appears with Egyptian Army Seals at the beginning of January 1941 is "P.2." (Type A -- inscription at top "2nd Bde .H.Q.P.O."). This can almost certainly be ascribed to an office opened at Sollum to which mails were sent by sea during the advance into Libya. This office was moved to Tobruk about the end of January and continued to function there during the siege although still classed as a L of C Post Office. Only examples of this date-stamp with dates in January 1941 can be considered as coming from Egypt.

Another L of C Post Office was located for a time at a staging camp named Ikingi Maryut, a few miles west of Alexandria. During the time of its occupancy by Australian troops, in the first half of 1941, several changes of date-stamp took place. The 18th Australian Brigade landed in Egypt from the United Kingdom early in 1941 and was issued with date-stamp E.605 as early as 6.2.41. On March 16th it was replaced by a new type of date-stamp this being one of a "skeleton" type lent to the Australian Forces by the Palestine Post Office. Two varieties of this type are shown under Fig. F and G. but, as the loose type fits into slots, spacing and distribution of the lettering varied from time to time. On some of these date-stamps the date is in one line and on others in two, this of course remaining constant for the same date-stamp. The lettering was AUS F.P.O. and they were numbered from 31 to 38 and 31 was the one issued to the 18th Brigade and is the only one I know cancelling Egyptian stamps.

When the 18th Brigade was hurriedly moved by sea to reinforce the garrison at Tobruk it took date-stamp No 31 with it thus leaving Ikingi Camp without one. To meet this situation date-stamp No 444 ( Type D ) was given to Ikingi, it having been recently returned from Libya. It will be seen that the fortunes of the F.P.O. of 18th Bde (No 31) and of Ikingi Camp (No 19) were interwoven and difficult to distinguish.

It had been the intention that 7th Aust. Div. from Palestine should follow the 6th Aust. Div. to Greece via Alexandria and accordingly the 25th Bde. thereof arrived in Egypt in the middle of April and so their date-stamp P.3 ( Type A with top lettering " 3rd Me H. Q.P.O. ) appears cancelling Egyptian stamps. In view of the Greek situation and Romel's advance in Libya, part of the 7th Aust. Div. was diverted to Mersa Matruh area. To serve the troops in that area No. 39 F.P.O. was opened and used date-stamp 443, but with letter B inserted instead of an asterisk used with the same number previously at Alexandria. On August 1st date-stamp A.11.1. ( withdrawn from A.B.P.O., Cairo ) replaced the 443B and remained in use there until F.P.O. 39 was closed, about October 1941, owing to withdrawal of the last Australian troops from the area.

Almost contemporaneously with the authority to use Australian stamps (together with those of the other Allied Forces such as United Kingdom, New Zealand South Africa etc.) a new type of date-stamp appears of Type H. From the point of view of the Egyptian specialist or of the "used abroad" fan this is much more satisfactory as the word "Egypt" appears on the date-stamp as also the words "Postage Prepaid". It is therefore not a question of taking another's word for it, but is self-evident. The intention seems to have been that this type should supersede all others, but, if so, the rule was often honoured in the breach. Particulars of the date-stamps of this type issued to the Australians will be found in the appendix where place and date of usage is also given.

The entry of Japan into the war resulted in the majority of the Australian forces in the Middle East being withdrawn early in 1942 and only the 9th Aust. Division remained in Syria. In Egypt only certain Depot troops remained until the 9th Division was hurriedly transferred to the El Alemain area in Egypt in July 1942. The Division remained there until withdrawn to Palestine after the battle of Alemain. The date-stamps used were Nos 33 to 37 of the "skeleton" types F and G. No. 38 should also be found, but I have no proof of its use, with dates from July to November those date-stamps must have been affixed in Egypt, afterwards they were in use in Palestine until the Division left for Australia early in 1943. This meant the disappearance of the Australian Forces from the Middle East and A.B.P.O. in Egypt closed in January 1943.

Only one other Aust. F.P.O. in Egypt remains to be mentioned. No 2 Aust. Convalescent Depot was at Sidi Bish, near Alexandria, in 1941. F.P.O. 46 was located there and used date-stamp A.P.1 (type B with top Inscription "Army P.O."). The range of dates seen is September to December 1941.

A factor which must be remembered is that from January 1942 onwards the airmail route between Egypt and Australia was interrupted. Postage by surface mail was free and no airmail existed so the reason for the use of stamps was confined to Registration and Parcels. Stamps found with the appropriate cancellation and dates in 1942 to prove use in Egypt are extremely scarce.

During the period dealt with above and also subsequently there were a considerable number of Australians serving with R.A.F. units in Egypt but no special organisation existed to deal with their mails.

The foregoing information has been extracted from a series of articles which I wrote in the Australian Stamp Monthly between October 1946 and September 1947 which covered the Postal History of the A.I.F. in the Middle East. In some cases information subsequently acquired has been incorporated in these notes.

### APPENDIX

Date-Stamp	Type	Location of Unit	From	To
M.1.	A.	6th Aus Div. 16th Bde.	11.9.40	early Jan /41
M.2.	A.	do 17th Bde.	21.9.40.	do
W.3.	A.	do 19th Bde.	29.9.40	do
D.M.1.	B.	do H.Q.	3.10.40.	do
S.P.1.	B.	do Supply H.Q.	3.0.40.	do
P.2.	A.	F.P.O . 20 Sollum.	9 .1.41.	late Jan /41.
P.3.	A.	7th Aus Div. 25th Bde.	15.4.41.	May /41.
A.P.1.	B.	F.P.O.46. Sisi Bish.	Sept 41.	Deo. 1941.
A.M. 1.	B.	A.B.P.O. Cairo.	16.9 .40.	8.7 .41.
		F.P.O.39. Mersa Matrud	1.8. 41.	Oct. 1941.
E.605.	E.	7th Aus Div. 18th Bde.	Feb 41	April 1941
E.606.	E	F.P.O.47 Suez	Feb. 41.	?
E.607	E	A.B.P.O Cairo	Feb 41	8.7.41
E.608	E	do F.P.O.42 Kantara	Feb. 41	April 41 Jan.42
443	D	F.P.O.18 Alexandria F.P.O.39 Mersa Matrud	Jan 41 May 41	April 41 Oct.41
444	D	F.P.O.19 Ikingi Maryut	Apr. 41	June 41
Aus. FPO 31	FG	7 <sup>th</sup> . Aus Div 18 <sup>th</sup> Bde,	Apr.41	April 41
Aus. FPO 33	FG	9 <sup>th</sup> . Aus Div 20 <sup>th</sup> Bde,	July 42	Nov.42
34	FG	do Supply HQ	do	do
35	FG	do 24 <sup>th</sup> . Bde.	do	do
36	FG	do 26 <sup>th</sup> . Bde.	do	do
37	FG	do H.Q.	do	do
Base P.O.No.1	K	A.B.P.O. Cairo	8.7.41	Jan.43
2	K	do	do	Jan.42
3	K	do Cairo or TeK	do	?
4	K	do	do	Jan.43
A.I.F.F.P.O.16	L	F.P.O. Cairo	1.11.41	Jan.42
Egypt Prepaid 5	H	?	March 41	End 41
7	H	Base Depot. TeK	do	do
8	H	A.B.P.O. Cairo then TeK	do	do
41	H	F.P.O.19 Ikingi Maryut	do	do
58	H	?	do	do
61	H	F.P.O. Alexandria	do	do

A number of the above date-stampswere used outside Egypt at periods other then as given above.

**H.S.Porter**

THE POSTAL MARKINGS OF THE AUSTRALIAN FORCES IN EGYPT



A.



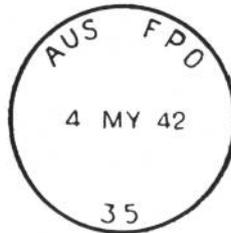
B.



C.



E.



F.



G.



H.



K.



L.