

NOTES ON KOREAN FREE FORCES AIRMAIL LETTER CARDS (AEROGRAMS) TO SOUTH AFRICA

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1952. FREE FORCES MAIL

Posted in Korea to SA during the period of the Free Postage Concession.

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KOREAN FREE FORCES AIR MAIL LETTER CARDS (AEROGRAMMES)

By Dave Young, Fishhoek Philatelic Society.

Historical Background

Prior to reviewing the subject from the philatelic aspect it is perhaps important to understand the background to the historical development of the Korean War. The Korean Peninsula lies in the middle of a triangle between Russia, China and Japan, which explains why this rugged mountainous country, 925km long and averaging 240km in width, has been a focal point of rivalry between these powers, more especially China and Japan. Following the war between China and Japan from 1894 to 1895 the independence of Korea was recognised. However in 1905 Japan defeated Russia in a conflict and proclaimed Korea a protectorate formally annexing the country in 1910, thereby terminating Korea's brief independence. Korea was renamed Chosen by Japan, a name that appears on Atlases from 1910 and for the following 35 years. Until 1945 Koreans were totally subjugated by Japan who forced them to contribute towards Japan's agricultural and industrial requirements. All key posts were held by the Japanese denying opportunity and benefits to Koreans. Schools were forbidden to teach the Korean language.

At the 1943 Cairo Conference Allied leaders agreed that after a period of Trusteeship, Korea would become an independent nation. In 1945 Russia concurred with this decision. Prior to World War 2 hostilities ceasing, Russia occupied much of what is now North Korea. The American Forces although much less in number occupied what is now South Korea. To facilitate the end of the war America proposed that a temporary measure be instituted essentially dividing North and South Korea along the 38th parallel, Russia agreed to this. The 38th parallel became the Korean Iron Curtain. By the end of 1947 the United Nations appointed a committee to create full independence for a combined Korean nation. Elections were held in South Korea and 100 seats were reserved for the North Korean representatives. North Korea did not accept this and formed an independent Korean People's Democratic Republic. The United Nations then declared that South Korea was the only democratic country and did not accept the North Korean ultimatum. Russia withdrew its troops from North Korea but left behind a well trained Korean army with the sole purpose of attacking South Korea.

On 25 June 1950, 90,000 North Korean troops crossed the 38th parallel confident in their military superiority. The United Nations called upon North Korea to cease hostilities, a request which was ignored, hence the seeds of conflict were sown and war was declared by the United Nations by early July 1950.

The SAAF Involvement

The South African Government complied with a UN request for assistance on 4th August 1950 by sending No. 2 Squadron SAAF, commonly known as the Flying Cheetahs, from World War 2 fame, to Korea. 49 officers and 157 other ranks were chosen from a larger number of volunteers, the majority of which had served in World War 2. This contingent embarked at Durban on the Royal Inter-oceanic Lines vessel *Tjisadane* on 26 September 1950, arriving at Kobe harbour in Japan on 1st November 1950. Final disembarkation took place at the port of Yokohama on 4th November 1950 and proceeded to the nearby Johnson Air Base. The entire Squadron was attached to the USA Air Force 18 Wing. Following basic integration drills with the USA Air Force, the No. 2 Squadron SAAF was

requested to become operational. On 15th November 1950 13 officers and 21 other ranks were flown to Pusan East airfield (K-9) in Korea, being attached to the USA Air Force 18th Fighter Bomber Group.

The Korean Air Bases used by the SAAF.

Air Fields in Korea were designated by the UN Force by the letter K, followed by a number. It is relevant to note that the Air Fields were spread from the far south of South Korea up to the 38th parallel with one Air Field initially being located in North Korea for a short period at K-24 namely P'yongyang East from 19th November 1950. K-9 Air Field at Pusan East and the nearby base headquarters, K-10 at Chinae were located in the far south of South Korea. The Flying Cheetahs initially arrived at Pusan East on 16th November 1950 to find that all operational units were being transferred to the recently captured K-24 Air Field. Some 43 sorties were flown by the Flying Cheetahs in the space of five days from the K-24 Air Field under extreme weather conditions. The K-24 Air Field was evacuated on 2nd December 1950 as some 300,000 Chinese troops who had now joined the North Korean Forces, advanced towards the 38th parallel.

It is not intended to detail all subsequent Flying Cheetah air field movements around South Korea but the information has been given to illustrate how quickly movements and strategy changed to counteract North Korean and Chinese troop movements. Suffice to say the aircraft flown were F-51 Mustangs and from early 1953 Canadian F 86-F Sabre aircraft. A total of 74 Mustangs and 4 Sabres were lost during the war. On 29th October 1953, the last South Africans left Korea.

Air Fields used by the No.2 Squadron SAAF were:

K-24 P'yongyang East 19 Nov. 1950

K-13 Suwon 2 Dec. 1950

K-10 Chinae 23-31 Dec. 1950

K-9 Pusan East 23 Mar. 1951

K-10 Chinae 24 Apr. 1951

K-13 Suwon 1 May 1951

K-16 Seoul May 1951

K-46 Hoengsong 1 Oct. 1951

K-55 Osan 30 Dec. 1952 and 22 Feb – 27 Jul. 1953

Current Status of Philatelic Information

There have been at least four articles published in the South African Philatelist regarding the subject. 1953 saw the first attempt at formalising the number of Air Mail Letter Cards issued. Much later, in October 1995, an article was co-authored by Jim Findlay and Alexander Ganse (of the Korean Philatelic Society), a third in April 1996 by the now deceased Tony Chilton and finally, a fourth in October 1999 by Jim. The articles detail aspects of varieties of the Air Mail Letter Cards, whilst Jim

Findlay's co-authored article, also gives the historical background to the South African Forces deployment in Korea. The 1999 article detailed standard air mail envelopes from Korea i.e. non Air Mail Letter Cards. The latter are probably scarcer than the Korean Air Mail Letter Cards. Jim has kindly forwarded these to me by email and these are included in this article.

Further historical information is available on the South African Military History Society web site entitled "The History of No. 2 Squadron, SAAF, in the Korean War". Further essential reading is the book "Flying Cheetahs in Korea" by Dermot Moore and Peter Bagshawe. Neither of these literatures address philatelic aspects but they both provide valuable additional background information to persons wishing to study this subject.

One of the more recent and probably the most authoritative sources of philatelic information is the book published by the South African Collectors Society in 2004, entitled

"The Aerogrammes of the Union of South Africa, 1942 – 1961".

This was compiled by Eddie Bridges with input from others, a number of whom are noted South African philatelists. A section of this book is devoted to the South African Airmail Letter Cards of the Korean campaign.

For those who are not familiar with the development and usage of the Korean Airmail Letter Cards, The following information is provided, with acknowledgement to Eddie Bridges and the South African Collectors Society:

*"Inland Air Letter Cards bearing a 1½d impressed stamp, with no airmail label, were specially overprinted for use by South African Air Force personnel serving with the United Nations Forces in the Korean Campaign of 1950-1953. These cards originally printed in alternating languages, were overprinted by the Government Printer in Pretoria. This consisted of defacing the value of the imprinted stamp with horizontal lines and adding an impressed Air Mail Label and the words **"FREE FORCES MAIL-POSVRY VANAF MAGTE"** with deep blue ink.*

According to the Union Handbook, 86,400 cards were overprinted in four batches of 21,600 each. No confirmation of these quantities has been found. Only two reports were found in the SA Philatelist where batches of 21,600 were delivered to the Postmaster General. The higher number quoted appears excessive for the number of Air Force Personnel serving in Korea. According to a report in the SAP of March 1953, Mr. Godfrey has been informed by the GPO that the total number of forms issued was 21,600. This is supported by a report in the SAP (Jan.1953) that an order for 21,600 was completed by the Government Printer. The first delivery is given as 11 July 1952 and the final delivery of the balance on 5 August 1952. First postmarks seen are dated 17 July 1952.

I have discussed the likely quantity of Airmail Letter Cards issued with Jim Findlay and he is strongly of the opinion that the final number printed was in fact 21,600. This is based on the number of service people based in Korea from South Africa which was probably never much more than 220 in total at any one time and that the war lasted for a three year period. In fact the total number of SAAF Servicemen during the Korean War was 264 officers and 555 other ranks (total 819). Assuming each person wrote home say fortnightly and there is a total of say 150 weeks over the three year period this would give a requirement of around 17,000 airmail letter cards.

I have reprinted the above directly and believe that the batch Korean Airmail Letter Card delivery dates of 11 July 1952 and the first postmarks seen on 17 July 1952, are possibly a print error. The dates do not correspond to the 1950 dates of the No. 2 Squadron SAAF deployment nor the posting dates in the reference material.

Korean Airmail Letter Card Correspondence

The first reference material of Korean Airmail Letter Card correspondence, the Bisset letters, dates from 19th October 1951, the date of the serviceman Bisset's arrival in Korea, one year after the initial personnel deployment. The last correspondence is dated 12th September 1952, just prior to Bisset's departure from Korea by sea for South Africa. This would seem to confirm that a one year tour of duty, at least for ground staff, was the norm. Between these dates there are 18 Letter Cards posted as Free Postage and 13 with paid (2½d) postage.

In the Bisset reference material of Korean Air Mail Letter Cards nearly all are postmarked, on the rear of the Letter Card, with the Ysterplaat Airbase circular date stamp upon arrival. The correspondence is also dated (when written) by Bisset. Although, not conclusive, it seems that the Korean Air Mail Letter Cards were not franked at the Korean end until after the Free Postage Concession was withdrawn in January 1953*. Thereafter British Forces Letter Cards and/or Korean Airmail Letter Cards (until stocks were depleted), both required 2½d postage in British stamps, were used. From January 1953* correspondence received a Field Post Office circular date stamp in Korea and in most cases the Ysterplaat Air Base, Cape Town arrival circular date stamp, on the rear of the Letter Card.

*The date of January 1953 for the withdrawal of Free Postage Concession is taken from the South African Collectors Society publication, although this date is qualified by Eddie Bridges as still being questionable. In the reference material the 13 Korean Airmail Letter Cards with the 2½ British postage stamp affixed date from as early as 24th May 1952, all with the Field Post Office 798 circular date stamp (Pusan Air Base). They are written by Bisset and continue to be used in conjunction with the 2½d British postage stamp until his departure from Korea on 12th September 1952 (a 15 week period).

The last Bisset Korean Air Mail Letter Card posted with Free Forces Mail Concession is dated 11th April 1952, so it would appear that the Free Postage Concession was withdrawn somewhere between 11th April 1952 and 24th May 1952. Strangely one Bisset Korean Air Mail Letter Card, written on 18th June 1952 managed to be posted without payment of the 2½d British postage. There are no items of British Forces Letter Cards in the Bisset reference material since he returned to South Africa before supplies of the overprinted Korean Air Mail Letter Cards were depleted. As Eddie states *"these Korean Air Letters (as they became known) were still used for some time until stocks were depleted. This is the reason that these overprinted Air Letters are found with 2½d British stamps on them. The forces i.e. No.2 Squadron SAAF, were subsequently issued with British Forces Letters which still required 2½d of postage in British stamps"*.

Korean Airmail Letter Cards sent from another serving officer, the Van Vuuren reference material, to South Africa, are not as prolific and only commence in January 1953. In this smaller reference material there are four Korean Airmail Letter Cards all with a 2½d British postage stamp and all with

the Field Post Office 798 cancellation, three with King George VI stamps and one with a QE II stamp. Their respective posting dates are:

7th Jan 1953; two dated 9th Jan 1953 and 26th Jan 1953 (QE II).

Also in the Van Vuuren reference material there are five British **Forces Letter** Cards, all with the Field Post Office 798 cancellation, with the following posting dates:

9th Feb 1953; 1st May 1953; 10th Jun 1953; 30th Jun 1953 and 23rd Sep 1953.

Jim Findlay advises that his earliest British **Forces Letter** Card from FPO 798 is 25th Jan 1953 and his latest is 21st June 1953.

From both sets of the above posting dates one can deduct, with reasonable certainty, that from mid to end January 1953 the supply of the overprinted Korean Airmail Letter Cards had been depleted and that from late January 1953 British Forces Letter Cards were being fully utilised by the No. 2 Squadron SAAF.

All nine items in the Van Vuuren material have been posted direct to a street address in Pretoria and have no incoming circular date stamps whatsoever.

Standard Airmail Envelope Usage

Interestingly a few examples of Korean Forces Mail using standard airmail envelopes have surfaced, having been discovered by Jim Findlay. In total there are six of these covers, as illustrated, with dates varying from 25th October 1950 to 18th August 1953. These discoveries, although not directly related to the Korean Forces Airmail Letter Cards, form an important and informative adjunct to the No. 2 Squadron SAAF Forces movements and provide background for continuing research. Interestingly two covers have been posted from San Francisco indicating the deployment of No.2 Squadron SAAF personnel into the 18th Fighter Bomber Wing based in California.

UN Command Postal Procedures

In keeping with the UN Command Postal procedures all items in the Bisset reference material has the senders address as:

No. 2 Squadron SAAF

Union of South Africa Forces

Korea* * omitted on some letter cards

Far East

The Van Vuuren reference material has the senders address as:

No. 2 Squadron SAAF

Union of South Africa Forces

S.A.P.O. 5301

Far East

Airmail Letter Card/Aerogramme Overprints

Six overprint varieties are known:

Type 1 – Three obliterating bars, 31mm × 3,5mm, maximum dimensions of inscriptions 46mm × 7mm (A).

Type 2 – Four obliterating bars 31mm × 7mm, the four bars slanting slightly to the left, inscription as type 1 (A,E).

Type 3 – Four obliterating bars 29mm × 8mm, the four bars in alignment, inscription in bolder letters 52,5mm × 7mm (A,E).

Type 4 – Four obliterating bars 29mm × 8mm, the centre bars protruding 0,5mm to the left, inscription 52,5mm × 7mm (A,E).

Type 5 – Four obliterating bars 30,5mm × 8mm, 29mm × 8mm, 29,5mm × 8mm, the four bars being irregular, inscription 52,5mm × 7mm (A,E).

Type 6 – Four obliterating bars 29mm × 7mm, the four bars in alignment, inscription 46,5mm × 7mm (A,E).

Type A – Afrikaanse inscription Briefkaart on the left, English inscription Letter Card in the centre (=A)

Type B – English inscription Letter Card on the left, Afrikaanse inscription Briefkaart in the centre (=B)

Note: Information taken from The South African Collectors Society Publication by Eddie Bridges.

Summary

The used Korean Airmail Letter Cards (KAMLC) and British Forces Letter Cards relevant dates, although detailed in the text, are summarised as follows. Kindly note that these early/late dates are applicable to the reference material of the author and Jim Findlay:

Earliest Free Post KAMLC written from Korea to Ysterplaat Air Base, Cape Town, South Africa: 19th October 1951 (Fig.1).

Latest Free Post KAMLC written from Korea to Ysterplaat Air Base, Cape Town, South Africa: 11th April 1952 (Fig.2). *

*There is one Free Post KAMLC written on 18th June 1952 which should have utilised a 2½d stamp but I believe this to be “one that slipped through”.

Earliest KAMLC with 2½d stamp written from Korea to Ysterplaat Air Base, Cape Town, South Africa: 24th May 1952 (FPO 798) (Fig.3).

Latest KAMLC with 2½d stamp written from Korea to Pretoria, South Africa: 26th January 1953 (FPO 798) (Fig.4).

Concluded date when KAMLC stocks were depleted: mid to end January 1953.

Earliest date of British **Forces Letter** Card (with 2½d stamp) to South Africa: 25th January 1953 (FPO 798) – Jim Findlay collection.

Latest date of British **Forces Letter** Card (with 2½d stamp) to South Africa: 23rd September 1953 (Fig.5).

Last South African Forces depart from Korea 29th October 1953.

It is known that there are additional items from the same reference material in the market place which would seem to indicate that at some earlier stage the two collections were split up. In fact one illustration in book "The Aerogrammes of South Africa" is from the Van Vuuren correspondence being dated 14th July 1953.

The reference material has no three bar cancellers. There are in total 36 overprinted Korean Airmail Letter Cards from both sets of correspondence and 5 British Forces Letter Cards. The next phase of the study will be an attempt to correlate the postal dates with the five different types of bar cancellations, to ascertain if there is any particular synergy.

Additional Service Information on R.G.Bisset (Information supplied by Jim Findlay).

Reginald George Bisset

Service Number: 01214485

Date of Birth: 21st August 1914

December 1933: Joined Special Services Battalion

July 1934: Joined SAAF

September 1939: Became Leading Air Mechanic

February 1944: Promoted to Lt.

March 1944: Served with No. 7 Wing in Italy

March 1945: Returned to South Africa

Became Armaments Officer for No. 2 Squadron SAAF

19th October 1951: Arrives in Korea

27th September 1952: Departs Korea via Yokohama on board MS Straat Makassar

8th November 1952: Arrives Durban

17th December 1952: Posted to AFS Ysterplaat

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To Dave Morton who requested me to write this article. To Jim Findlay and Barry Smith who have been most supportive in reading through the text. Specifically to Jim for advising on various factual issues, dates and additional postal history information.

I trust that readers who have any additional information, such as earlier or later post mark dates as well as related material, will advise accordingly.

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South African Philatelist issues of 1953, October 1995, April 1996 and October 1999.

The web site of the South African Military History Society publication entitled "The History of No. 2 Squadron SAAF in the Korean War".

The book entitled "Flying Cheetahs in Korea" by Dermot Moore and Peter Bagshawe.

The South African Collectors Society book published in 2004 entitled "The Aerogrammes of the Union of South Africa" by Eddie Bridges

The New World Atlas by C.S. Hammond & Co. New York, published 1920.

Dave Young

Fishhoek Philatelic Society, 23rd July 2010



Fig.1 Earliest Free PostKAMLC 19th October 1951
Type A: BRIEF KAART on left; Overprint Obliterating Bars Type 5.



Fig.3 Earliest KAMCL with 2½d postage stamp 24th May 1952
Type B: LETTER CARD on left; Overprint Obliterating Bars Type 6.



Fig.2 Latest Free Post KAMCL 11th April 1952
Type A: BRIEF KAART on left; Overprint Obliterating Bars Type 4.



Fig.4 Latest KAMCL with 2½d postage stamp 26th January 1953
Type A: BRIEF KAART on left; Overprint Obliterating Bars Type 6.



Fig.5 Latest date of Forces Letter Card with 2½d postage stamp 2nd September 1953





Latest cover finds from the No.2 Squadron SAAF deployment during the Korean War.

By Dave Young

This information is a follow up from the Korean Free Forces Air Mail Letter Cards article which appeared in the *Aeroleter* Number 101. The No.2 Squadron SAAF served in the Korean War from 15th November 1950 to 29th October 1953.



Field Post Office 798 (Pusan) to Cape Town 24th May 1952. This is the current earliest seen use of the 2½d value on a South African Letter Card.

South African forces used demonetised pre-paid South African Letter Cards for correspondence from Korea to South Africa. Until May 1952 Letter Cards remained post free. After this the concession was withdrawn and G.B. stamps to the value of 2½d were affixed, in line with the Allied Forces postal charges. After stocks of South African Letter Cards were depleted British Forces Letter Cards were used by the South African Forces.

Field Post Office 798 (Pusan) to Pretoria 23rd September 1953. This is the current latest seen use of the 2½d value on a British Forces Letter.



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specialising in Rhodesian, Nyasaland and Mozambique Air Mails.

New find: The majority of the No.2 Squadron SAAF utilised the free post South African letter card facility. It is believed that there were occasions when these may have been in short supply. In these cases forces could make use of ordinary airmail envelopes, but clearly these were required to pay 2½d postage. Current research has revealed the existence of some eight such envelopes. Five examples span a period from 5th December 1950 (the earliest known use in Korea) to 24th August 1953. The three others, in the latest find, have January 1952 dates, have been posted from Field Post Office 798 at Pusan and are all from the same correspondent, namely Flight Sergeant C.E.R. (Eric) Burger.



Korean War, Field Post Office 798 (Pusan) to Cape Town 7th January 1952, 2½d paying the standard rate applicable to post from military personnel based in Korea.

Eric Burger was attached to one of the ground crews, affectionately known as "Erks", who maintained and kept the Cheetahs and Mustangs airworthy. F/Sgt Burger is mentioned twice in the book "South Africa's Flying Cheetahs in Korea" for outstanding service in the most appalling conditions. In fact the ground crew to which Eric was attached was awarded a citation from the United States Presidential Distinguished Unit. At the time of posting this correspondence it is recorded, in the above mentioned book, that the ground crew under the leadership of Engineer Officer, Harold Knight, were flown in late 1951 from the K10 Chinae Base to the forward base at K46, Wonju.

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The End

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for sharing his collection with us.

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