

East Africa Stamps, Postmarks and Censorship of Air Mail from Madagascar 1942-45

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The occupation of Madagascar by British Empire forces took place between May (the first landings at Diego Suarez) and November 1942 (the armistice with the island's Vichy administration). It was probably only just in time to prevent the island becoming an advanced base for Japanese submarines. These had remained active in the Indian Ocean after the surface vessels that had attacked Ceylon in April withdrew to face the US Navy in the Coral Sea. With their long range, these submarines would have cut seaborne communications between the forces in North Africa and those in South Africa, India and Australasia, not to mention the U.K. itself. This was at a time when the fighting in the Western Desert was all going Rommel's way and, in the East, Malaya, Burma and the Dutch East Indies had all been overrun.

In December 1942, the government of the island was handed over to General De Gaulle's "Fighting France" or "France Combattante" as "France Libre" became in mid-1942. However, the agreement with De Gaulle established the naval base at Diego Suarez and the aerodrome at Tulear as British military zones. Moreover, mail and telecommunications, particularly censorship, remained under British control for the whole island, although the French authorities also had the right to censor, after British controls had been carried out.

It was not until July 1943 that the British Military Administration officially ended and the island's administration came under a Joint Control Commission. However, Diego Suarez remained a British naval base and the British could still censor outgoing mail posted anywhere on the island. Not until July 1944 did the French authorities assume sole authority for censorship (except in Diego Suarez). The British censors only left Madagascar in July 1945.



Figure 1. APO cancel. The occupation forces were from South Africa, the Rhodesias and East Africa, but they used EA APO marks. No. 53 shown here was used by the British Military base at Diego Suarez.

Hence, there were Empire forces post offices on the island from the start of the occupation in 1942 right up to 1945, and air mail was carried by the British or Empire services. Initially, mail was taken by military plane to Mombasa and then to Durban by BOAC flying boat (Little, ref. 1). When necessary, the army post offices used Kenya, Uganda and Tanganyika stamps with both civil and army post office cancels (Fig. 1), although Rossiter and Parmenter (refs. 2 & 3) both show examples where GB stamps were used. The servicemen recognized the philatelic opportunities of KUT stamps on covers from Madagascar and contrived covers are well known. This paper is written to illustrate that genuine postal use occurred with stamps being applied at the correct rates (Colley, ref. 4). The censorship markings and labels are also of interest for following the sequence of administrative changes described above. Since servicemen were on active service, their surface mail through the Army postal service was free within the Empire. Thus, genuine use of postage stamps by them should mainly have been for air mail. For standard covers this was East African 1s 30c but for Airmail Letter Cards (available from July 1942), it was 25c. (Colley, ref. 4).



Figure 2. 1942. British Military Administration of the whole Island and British censorship of all mail. The front shows posting in Tananarive, with stamp cancels on "26 11 42". The detail of the reverse and the EA APO cds on the front show that it was taken to an Army Post Office (APO 59), which was in Tananarive, and passed to the censor there. It was opened and closed with the "OPENED BY BRITISH CENSORSHIP" label and stamped by "CENSOR I", who was in Tananarive (Parmenter). From Durban it was forwarded to Bethlehem in the Orange Free State, which is the arrival mark on the front. The stamps are 1938-40 Laborde series SG 199 and 201, which cover the surface rate to South Africa.



Figure 3. January 1943, Air Mail Letter Cards for the British forces were introduced in 1941/42 and distribution to active service units was rationed on a weekly basis. In East Africa, the postage was a special 25c rate to GB and the Empire (Colley, ref. 4). This card was printed locally in East Africa (Daynes and Colley type EA 04; ref 5).

The cds on these stamps is from EA APO 59 (Tananarive). The so-called “Arch Mark” of the military censor was applied after posting. At this date the island was under Fighting French administration, but the British military still controlled censorship.

The reverse of this AMLC bears a transit cds from EA APO 88, which was at Nairobi (Rossiter). Arrival in Scotland was 3½ months later in April 1943. This is genuine postal use of KUT stamps on service mail.

Barra Castle was a Dower House and presumably staff shortages had made the resident move out during the war, because the letter had to be forwarded.

Gertrude Forbes-Sempill was the maiden aunt of William, Lord Sempill, who was discovered to be passing aviation secrets to the Japanese Navy while working in the Admiralty in December 1941. He was forced to retire from public life but it was decided that it was not in the government’s interest to prosecute him.

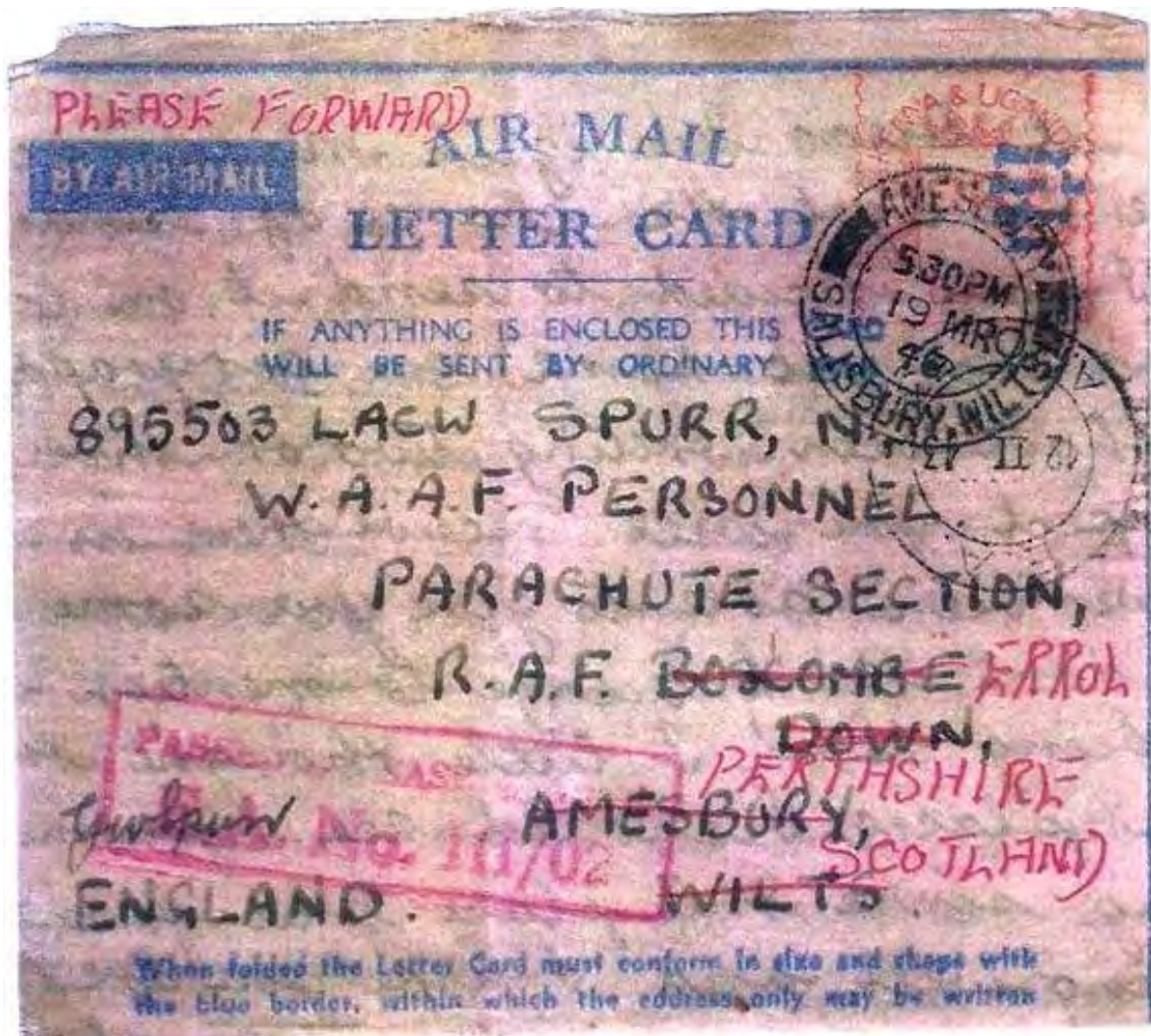


Figure 4. February 1943. As noted for Figure 3, the island was now under French administration, but Diego Suarez was a British military base. Note that the printing font and layout differ from those of the card type in Figure 3 (Daynes and Colley type EA 08; ref. 5). These cards were printed locally by South African Union Defence Force, Directorate of Printing in Nairobi on air mail paper and early ones had the 25 cent stamp printed on them in blue. The use of this red version, printed by a meter, was authorized for use by the military authorities for issue/sale in places where adhesives were difficult to obtain (e.g., up-country Madagascar?). The meter was originally made for The Nanyuki Farming Association in Kenya, which may account for the "N" in the right lower corner. Alternatively, it refers to the meter makers, Neopost.



The meter stamp is heavily obscured by the arrival mark from Amesbury in the U.K., which is unfortunate because clear impressions are rare and command a substantial premium.

The EA APO cancel is No. 53 in Diego Suarez. The boxed "PASSED BY BASE C (ENSOR) E.A. No. 111/02" is only listed by Rossiter as used in Mombasa in 1944 but it could have been in Diego Suarez the previous year.

(The image of the meter mark is taken from Daynes and Colley; ref. 5)



Figure 5. January 1943. French civilian mail censored by the British and KUT stamps added for air mail.

As noted above the British military authorities kept control of censorship at this date. This French civilian (we presume) posted their letter in Tananarive on 23 January, franking it with 4 francs in pre-war issue stamps. That was the rate to Mombasa only, where it was passed to the British for censorship and air carriage. The left section of the image shows the Tananarive censor's closure label on the reverse tied by his stamp, 252-1 (Parmenter, ref. 3).

The air mail rate to the U.S.A. had been reduced (Colley, ref. 4) from EA 5s 75c to 4s 70c from 1 January 1943 but that might not have been known in Madagascar.

Although this was paid in Tananarive, we suppose that the higher value KUT stamps were not available at the APO there or in Diego Suarez at this early point in the occupation. So, the letter must have been marked in some way to indicate that payment was received. When it arrived at Mombasa (there is an "EA APO 84 3 II 43" strike on the reverse) the stamps were applied and cancelled with the faint rubric "POSTAGE PAID AT APO" (inset). The "P" of "APO" surrounds the King's left eye. However, this sequence of events is open to question (see text).