

British air letters Part 4: armed forces and stamped to order issues, by Colin Baker



To end my series, I look at items created purely for philatelists, but begin with a much more important part of this story: air letters introduced for writing to those serving in our armed forces, and those air letters intended only for use by military personnel.

Three Forces air letters The first pre-stamped air letter to be issued in Great Britain was only available for sending to prisoners of war and internees being held in countries occupied by, or allied to Germany. This was issued in 1941 and printed

with the King George VI 2½d letterpress stamp, the current inland letter rate, which was also the rate for forces surface mail. These air letters were not sealed, but were secured with a tongue which slipped into a slot on the reverse side. This was to allow them to be opened and then resealed easily, so that censorship could be undertaken by both sides without the need for sealing labels and pots of glue. Even the sides of these air letters were open so that it was impossible to include an enclosure. Despite their name of 'air mail letter sheet', a good portion of their journey was undertaken on land. They were normally carried by air as far as Lisbon, and then proceeded through Spain, into France and onward to the German-run prison and internment camps.

Although members of the armed forces had a specially reduced rate for air letters, families and friends writing to them did not, and they had to pay the civilian rate of 6d. There were also airgraphs of course, but these had a very small writing area compared with that of the normal air letter. It was not until 1945 that a special air letter was issued for those writing to members of the armed forces serving overseas. The increasing availability of aircraft in the last few months of the Second World War allowed the authorities to reduce the cost of air letters sent to those 'on active service' to 1½d, even less than it cost to send a normal letter within the UK. These air letters followed exactly the same format as the 6d civilian issue (see part one of this series, in the September *Bulletin*) and were folded into four and sealed with two small gummed flaps. They were printed on a buff-coloured paper with the King George VI 1½d stamp.

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To: _____

1 British Forces
Postage Paid



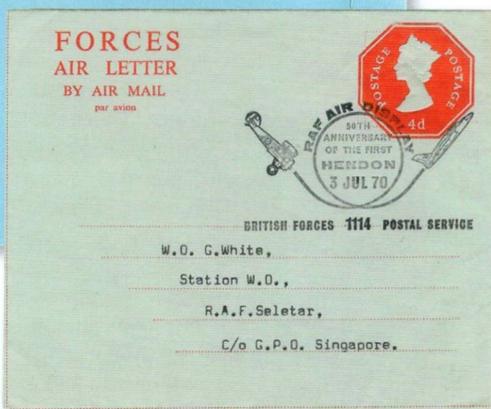
As with their civilian cousins, these forces air letters can also be found with both solid and dotted address lines. Solid lines in both cases are much less common, and worth looking out for.

Only three different pre-paid forces air letters have ever been issued, the last of these appearing in 2003. This used the A4 format that we are now all used to, and stated it could be sent postage free to those personnel on active service. It was up to the person buying the air letter to show that this was the case, otherwise payment equal to the standard postage was required.

Air letters Stamped to Order (STO) From 1957 until the stamping to order service was withdrawn in 1973, many pre-printed air letters had stamps privately impressed onto them, either to pay the full air letter postage rate or to uprate them to the then current postage rate for air letters. In nearly every case, these stamped to order items were created for philatelic rather than commercial purposes.

Unstamped air letters could be bought from major stationery shops and suppliers, and were approved by the Post Office for sending at the current air letter rate, postage being paid by means of adhesive stamps or franked impressions. Air letter sheets were also supplied to the forces, as they were eligible for free postage whilst they were on active service. If this was not the case, they had to pay the appropriate postage in adhesive stamps.

The creators of the stamped to order material took these unstamped air letter sheets and then had a variety of stamp values and types added. This created a wide variety of different air letters, almost none of which were used for their correct purpose. However, they can make an attractive and colourful addition to a collection of air letters, and so we must not dismiss them out of hand. ▶



Opposite page Left: the first stamped air letter, 1941, was for sending to prisoners of war in German-occupied territory. Right: the air letter introduced in 1945, for use to members of the armed forces overseas.

Above Left: a 2003 forces air letter, postage free to servicemen on active service. Above: an unstamped forces air mail letter sheet with stamp added under the STO facility, with an RAF special handstamp.

Only one King George VI air letter was treated in such a way, and it was stamped with the s70 6d embossed stamp (shown opposite). The air letter was actually created in 1957, five years into the reign of our present Queen. The Post Office had been slow to produce the higher value embossed dies for stamped to order work, which is the reason why the King George VI die was still being used.

Later that same year the new Queen Elizabeth II dies had at last been produced and these were used to create prepaid forces air letters, using the unstamped forces air letters to do this. There was no commercial need for these and most have either not been used, or have commemorative cancellations, often with an RAF or armed forces connection.

There are several instances of private commemorative air letters being produced which could have been used by the public. The Royal Wedding of 1973 gave rise to one of these. Rather than using one of the approved unstamped air mail letters, a completely new printing was undertaken with silhouettes of the couple framed in a pink design, alongside the address area. A 6p stamp was never prepared for use on either Post Office or s70 stationery, and to make up the correct rate for air letters at that time it was necessary to impress two 3p stamps side by side.

Two years later, in 1975, a similar situation arose when a private air letter was produced to celebrate the 30th anniversary of the United Nations. This time a 2p and 4p stamp were struck onto each item, making up the 6p small-size air letter rate. I have not seen either of these air letters genuinely used, which is not to say they do not exist, so it's worth looking out for them. Don't forget to keep your eyes open for any other examples as well.

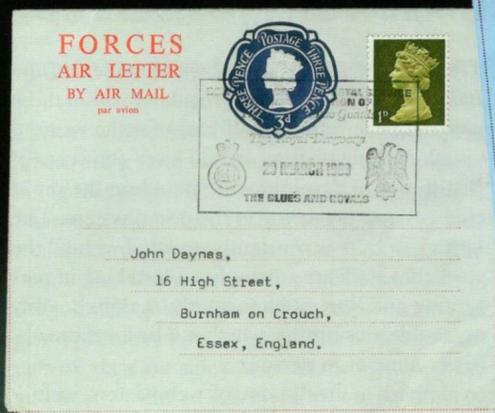
Post Office air letters with added stamps Some air letters have used standard Post Office issues, overprinted with a commemorative design. Others have simply had an additional stamp stuck alongside the existing Machin stamp to bring the air letter up to the correct rate.

There are numerous combinations of stamps that have been impressed on s70 air letters, and well over a hundred have been recorded to date. There may be others out there waiting to be discovered. Whether you find one of these or not, collecting air letters in either mint or used condition can be a colourful, satisfying part of your hobby. There are specialist large albums available if you would like to display your collection to the full, and plenty of information is available on each issue. Many air letters have been fully described in this *Bulletin* over the years, and back numbers are sometimes offered for only the cost of the postage. A full list of all air letters issued in Great Britain, together with colour illustrations of the vignettes and etiquettes is given in the new postal stationery catalogue by Alan Huggins and Colin Baker published in 2007.

Many of the Post Office issue air letters are sold by dealers and auction houses at very reasonable prices and these can usually be found without a great deal of effort. The hunt for the s70 varieties can be more difficult, but that's the fun of collecting. So there should be no excuses for those who want to have a full and attractive collection of British air letters ●

Postal stationery articles by Colin Baker were published in October and November 2004, January, September and October 2005, and February 2008. *Collect British Postal Stationery* by Alan Huggins and Colin Baker was reviewed here in March 2008.

Postal Stationery Society For details write to Mr Baker at 4 Greenhill Gardens, Sutton Veny, Warminster BA12 7AY.



From top left: another unstamped forces air mail letter sheet with stamps added under the STO facility; the King George VI 6d STO air letter of 1957; a 9d STO used by a dealer to his client; the Royal Wedding air letter of 1973; and an example of an added stamp – there were many private air letters produced under the stamped to order facility, nearly all of them philatelic.