

Indian Army Postal Service in World War I

by Robert Gray

One hundred years ago in Europe, Africa, and the Middle East, the armed forces of the “old” world collided, irrevocably pulling the major nations into the morass that became known as the Great War. The main combatants divided into the “Allies”: Great Britain, France, Russia, and the United States (which entered in 1917), and the “Central Powers”: Germany, Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman Empire. The war raged from 1914 to 1918 when an armistice was reached. Post-armistice conflicts and occupation duties, however, kept Indian troops engaged through 1924.

Mobilization in India

Great Britain entered the war against Germany and Austria-Hungary on August 4, 1914 and within days it mobilized its “Imperial Reserves” in India. These troops were called the Indian Expeditionary Force or I.E.F. Ultimately, more than 1.3 million Indian troops served in the I.E.F., with about 500,000 men in the force at any one time. They were deployed in a total of twenty-three countries (under today’s political borders). The Indian Army World War 1 casualty

rate was about 9.3 percent, including 57,000 dead or missing. These, plus the casualties of the Third Afghan war, are memorialized in New Delhi’s India Gate.¹

The I.E.F. was divided into seven force groups, each designated by a letter indicating its general area of operations. Base post offices, named with the corresponding force group letter, were the key conduit for all mail coming from or to the I.E.F. troops and Britain and India. There also were other base offices serving smaller field operations. The Base Offices are summarized in Table 1.

I.E.F. Force A was sent to the Western Front to help block German advances in France and Belgium. **Forces B and C** were sent to East Africa to support South African and British army units and engage forces from German East Africa. **Force D** was the main thrust against the Ottoman Empire, driving it out of present day Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria; while **Force E** had the mission to defend the logistically essential Suez Canal from the Ottoman army.² **I.E.F. Force G** was placed in the Northwest Frontier of India to defend against raids from Waziristan.

Although the Indian Post Office had delivered mail to field-deployed troops before, nothing in its experience prepared it for the challenges faced in the Great War. The numbers of troops, their considerable distance from India, the geographic dispersion, the high number of casualties, and the generally poor field conditions all added to the complexity of mail delivery. In addition, the Indian postal service had to function in a three language-three alphabet work environment: English, Hindi, and Urdu.

The I.E.F. postal history reflects much of what transpired during this pivotal period. It also provides insight into how postal logistics were managed without the benefit of modern communication and data management technology.

A military postal system has as its foremost objective the delivery of mail from civilians to the troops and military mail to the civilian postal systems of the world. The key



Indian Expeditionary Force postcard with a British Army FPO 154 (France).

challenge to that process is that the individual soldier's actual location is subject to frequent change. A military postal system also may be called upon to deliver mail between soldiers in different units and to provide mail processing services for other armed forces in their area. This article describes generally how this was achieved, using postal stationery to illustrate specific postal situations.

The Indian army units engaged in World War 1 were well integrated within the British military system. Larger Indian Army units generally had British officers as well as British army units attached to them. In other instances Indian army units would be attached to British Divisions. The postal system reflected this close working relationship. Illustrating this point are two postal cards. The first is an I.E.F. postal card with a British Army FPO 154 (Field Post Office) handstamp dated 6 June 1915. The FPO is associated with the 51st Brigade, a mixed Scot and Indian unit located in France. The second card illustrates the converse usage, i.e., a British Field Service postcard with an Indian Army FPO 16 handstamp dated 4 November 1914. This FPO is associated with the 21st, or Bareilly, Brigade of the 7th (Meerut) Division, an I.E.F. unit located near Orleans, France.

In East Africa the Indian army postal service supported I.E.F. troops and provided services for both British and South African army units. In instances where there were no civilian post offices, it also provided mail services to civilians. In the Mesopotamia campaign the Indian army postal service supported most of the British units. It also supported the transition of postal services provided by the military to a civilian organization in present-day Iraq, representing an early stage "nation" building exercise.

Letters from India to an I.E.F. Soldier

In September 1914 a Postal Notice was published describing the rules by which a letter or parcel could be sent to an I.E.F. soldier. The name, rank, and unit had to be on the address as well as a designation that this was an I.E.F. assigned individual. Unregistered letters, postcards, newspapers, book-packets, and registered and unregistered parcels could be sent. Insured, value payable articles, money orders and registered letters initially were not accepted for delivery to the field. Unlike mail posted to civilian addresses, all I.E.F. bound mail had to be fully prepaid.³

By December 1914 the restrictions on registered mail were relaxed, making it possible to send registered mail to the Western Front (France) and later to the Middle East. Towards the end of the war I.E.F. registered letter volumes reached around 45,000 per month inbound and 21,000 outbound.



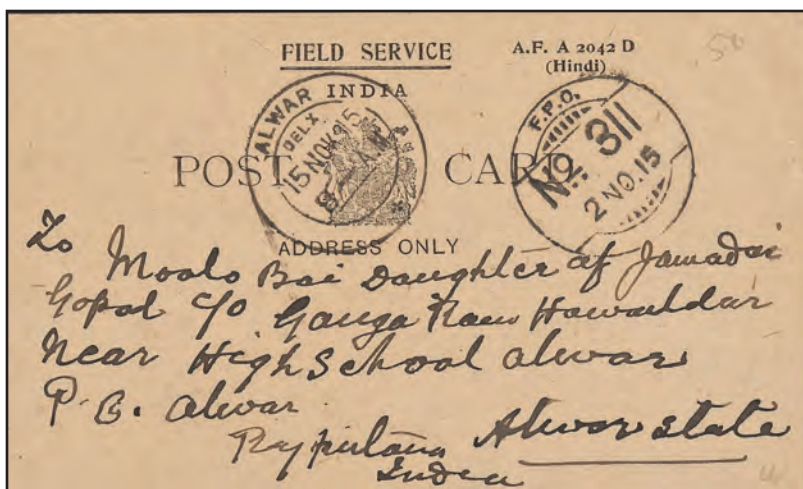
British Army Field Service postcard with Indian FPO 16 (France).

The majority of I.E.F. troops were located west of India itself. Letters sent through the civilian Indian Post Office addressed to I.E.F. personnel were, therefore, first sent to Bombay (Mumbai) for sorting, followed by shipment by P&O steamer along prewar routes to Port Said, Egypt; Marseilles, France; and Kilindini, Kenya (port city for Mombasa). Once at the port, the mail would be moved to the base office for further processing. As troops moved to other areas, postal depots were added at Lahore (Pakistan) and Karachi (Pakistan). The chief post office was located at Bombay.

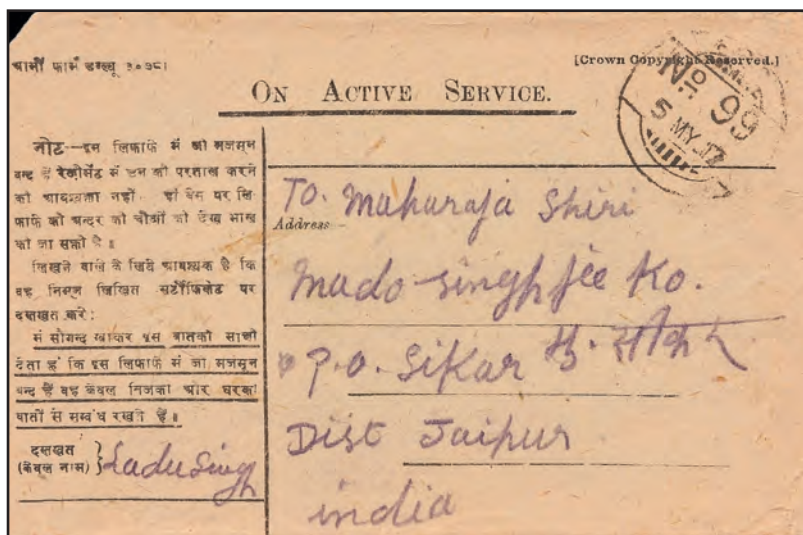
The base offices were responsible for receiving and sending bagged mail from the field to Britain and India. The postmaster at the base office maintained a unit location book that was updated daily, recording the location of the units and the names of its officers. Each base office had a specially marked CDS (circular date stamp). From the base office the mail would be sent to one of several sorting offices that arranged all mail sent from Britain or India and bagged it for the field post offices (FPOs) in the area. Some sorting offices sorted local mails, exchanging bags daily with the FPOs, and some also served as inquiry bureaus for returned non-deliverable articles. From the sorting office, the mail would be sent either directly to an FPO served by that office or to another post office for additional processing.

Where available, trains brought supplies, including the mail, as close to the front as possible. The remaining distance was covered by a variety of means but typically by horse-drawn wagon. Once at an FPO, the mail would be delivered to the troops, including those that were tactically deployed. Each FPO was assigned a number, and each unit at the Brigade level and above was assigned an FPO. However, this relationship was not permanent, as units moved and FPO numbers could be transferred to other units. Some post offices were designated "stationary offices" and, as the name implies, remained at a fixed location providing postal services for a broader operational area.

Sorting and stationary post offices, as well as field post



Indian Army Field Service postcard, Hindi version with FPO 311 (Suez Hospitals, Egypt).



Urdu version Indian Army On Active Service envelope with I.E.F. FPO 99 (Egypt).



Soldier to soldier cover with I.E.F. FPO 27 (Iraq).

offices, all were assigned an FPO number and a CDS handstamp in the same format. Therefore it is not possible to associate an FPO number with a particular unit or function without a date. Fortunately, the FPO numbers, their use dates and corresponding locations have been published.⁴

In areas where there was no front, such as in the East African Campaign, the mail was forwarded from the Base Office by train or ship as close as possible to the appropriate sorting office and then transported overland. From the sorting office it would move through the line of communication until it found the particular unit in the column, often having to pass through several sorting offices. Mail could take weeks to deliver, even under the best weather conditions.

Outbound Military Mail

The field post office or FPO was the logistical nexus of the postal delivery system, both receiving and forwarding the mail. I.E.F. originating mail moved more or less in the reverse fashion as inbound civilian mail.

Indian Army personnel on field service had free postage to India and Britain for standard weight letters. Most I.E.F. covers therefore do not have I.E.F. stamps. The overwhelming majority of extant covers are from soldiers to civilian addresses. Letters received at a civilian address were far more likely to be preserved than those directed to the soldier in the field. A typical I.E.F. cover would appear as an "On Active Service" cover or Indian Army postal stationery marked with a handstamp showing the I.E.F. FPO number and date. I.E.F. military postal

stationery field postcards and "honor envelopes" similar in design to those used by the British army was utilized extensively. Honor envelopes and field postcards in English, Hindi and Urdu were produced.

Illustrated is an Urdu language honor envelope cancelled FPO 99 5 MY 17 (Tanta, Egypt) and sent to Jaipur, India. An honor envelope typically would not bear any censor markings. Also shown is a field postcard whose front is in English (note that the card is designated A.F.A. 2042 D [Hindi]) in the upper right corner. The card was sent from the Suez Hospitals to Alwar State, India. The reverse side contains the

Field Service Card formula text but written in Hindi.

The available postal history provides good insight movement of mail sent from the field to civilian addresses. However, the paucity of extant covers sent between soldiers and from a civilian address to a field-deployed soldier is more problematic. A soldier receiving a letter would have had considerable difficulty retaining it considering the frequent relocations, tactical requirements, and general conditions when living in the field. Covers sent between soldiers are very scarce and usually not very attractive, for the reasons already cited.

The cover with the “OPENED UNDER MARTIAL LAW” seal may be an example of a soldier to soldier letter. It was not sent from a civilian post office as there are no stamps and no civilian postal markings, nor is there a civilian address. On the rear of the envelope is an I.E.F. CDS for FPO 27 from Qurnah, Iraq dated 28 March 1915. The front of the cover appears to show the addressee as Pte W. Wampell, 1627....Bucks (i.e. Buckinghamshire) Battalion. In red manuscript is “1st Battn.” and in purple “Midland Brigade / British Expeditionary Force.” However, that force was associated only with the Western Front British army through December 1914. The cover bears the distinctive Passed Censor D used by I.E.F. D force in Mesopotamia. The Buckinghamshire 1st Battalion left India for Mesopotamia on 27 November 1914.

When troops were engaged in combat the number of casualties and the dislocation of individuals quickly overcame the more normal flow of a unit’s mail. As the war progressed, the India Postal Service adopted a Returned Letter Office (RLO), which functioned like a civilian Dead Letter Office (DLO) with specially trained individuals working to get the letter to the correct hospital or an acknowledgment to the sender that the individual was dead or missing in action.

Military Mail Requiring Postage

Mail sent by military personnel required postage under three circumstances: (1) mail addressed to countries other than Britain or India; (2) mail going to Britain or India weighing more than 1 tola or 11 grams; and (3) registered mail required payment of the registration fee (2 annas) with stamps in addition to any postage payment that might otherwise be required.

There are two other situations where I.E.F. postage may be seen on covers. The first would be situations where civilians have used



Stampless cover from Iringa, Tanganyika (Tanzania) to the United States with I.E.F. FPO 321 on back of cover and U.S. postage due stamps and handstamps.

an I.E.F. postal facility and the second is souvenir covers, generally found with excess postage.

Base, stationary and sorting post offices and many field post offices sold Indian stamps of King George V overprinted with “I.E.F.” and I.E.F. postal stationery. The stamps included values from 3 pies to 1 rupee. Postal stationery included a ½-anna embossed envelope; ¼-anna domestic postcard and its reply card version, and a 1-anna postcard for international use. Registration services were available only at sorting, stationary and base post offices.

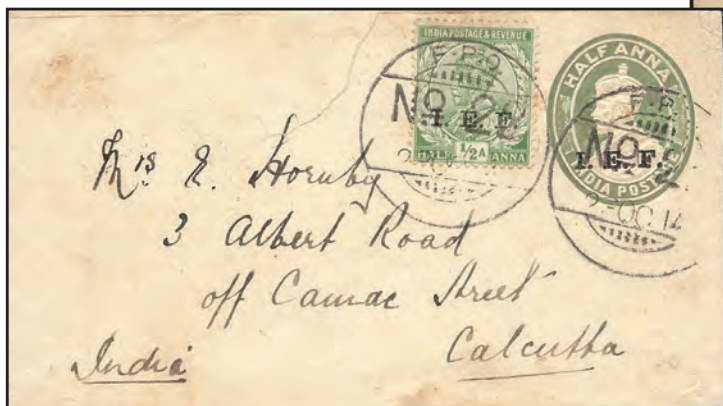
Examples illustrating the different situations for an I.E.F. cover to have postage are included. The first example is a stampless cover marked in manuscript “Soldiers letter. No stamps obtainable” and a handstamp “I.E.F. B Postage Free.” On the reverse side there is a CDS FPO 321 dated 4 NO 16. This indicates an origin at Iringa, Tanzania (Tanganyika). It was addressed to the United States and bears a British Army triangular censor mark and censor tape. It was accepted for delivery in New York where an “opera glass”



I.E.F. stamped cover from Lestrem, France to England.

I.E.F. stamped registered cover from France to England and handstamped with I.E.F. FPO 20 on back of cover.

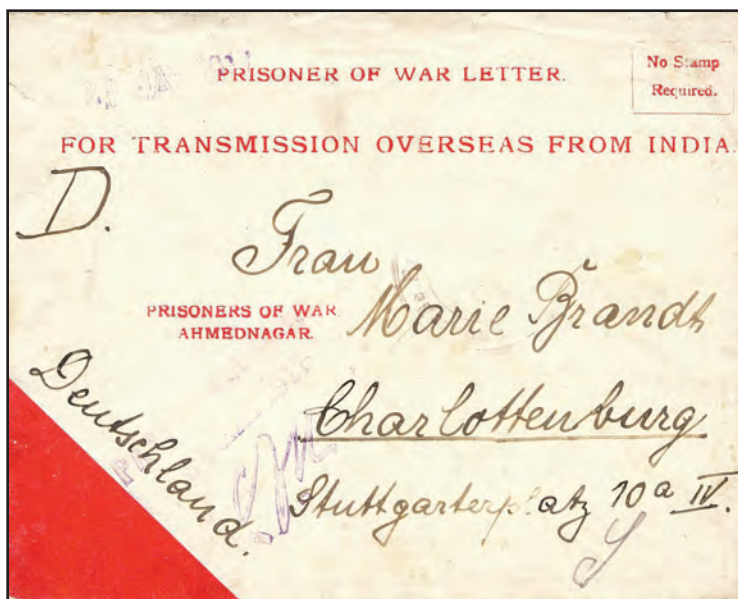
I.E.F. postal stationery envelope up-rated by 1/2-Anna stamp and handstamped FPO 22 (Kenya) sent to Calcutta, India.



CDS-due mark was applied. An additional four cents postage due was received in Atlanta, Georgia as evidenced by the U.S. postage due stamps on the cover.

The cover marked by FPO No. 8 dated 19 AP 15 possibly represents an overweight envelope. It is franked with I.E.F. stamps totaling 2¾ Annas and, because it was addressed to Britain, it would normally have not required any postage. It was sent from the Indian Army HQ located near Lestrem, France and bears a signed British Army censor.

An example of registered mail is shown with a cover franked with a 2-anna I.E.F. stamp cancelled with a CDS FPO 21 JA 17; a letter R in crayon; and a registration label. It also bears a British Army oval censor mark. FPO 20 was a stationary office located at Marseilles, France.



Prisoner of war letter envelope from India to Germany.

The last example in this series is an embossed I.E.F. postal stationery envelope up-rated by a ½-anna stamp to meet the UPU international rate at the time. Based on the FPO number, this envelope was sent from Voi, Kenya. Since military personnel would not have needed postage at all, this is either an overweight letter or possibly one sent by a civilian who would have been required to pay postage at the international rate. There are no markings on the cover to indicate that the sender was military. The cover is dated 23 OC 14, which was only one week after this FPO opened.

POW Mail

Enemy nationals living in India at the outbreak of the war were placed in civilian prisoner of war camps in India. Captured soldiers also were sent to camps located in India, including what is now Burma.⁵ POW mail was managed through a joint military-civilian mail and censor system. Postage was free, but the amount and frequency of correspondence that could be sent by a POW was regulated within established rules. POW correspondence from India represents a separate but related aspect of the Indian post office activities during the war. Special POW postal stationery was provided, an example of which is shown here for use in international correspondence.

Censorship

During the war all military, government and civilian in- and outbound Indian mail was subject to censor inspection.⁶ Civilian and government correspondence was censored through a civilian organization and military mail was censored either locally by the commanding officer or through censors assigned to larger military units. Censorship was done by the British army for I.E.F. troops in Europe. In Egypt and the Middle East, the I.E.F. was the predominate force

Table I: Key India Expeditionary Force Base Offices

Base Office	Location	Comments
A	Boulogne, France; moved from Marseilles	Established 7-12-1914
B/C	Kilindini, Kenya (harbor near Mombas)	B&C forces were amalgamated
D	Basra, Iraq; Advanced Base Office at Baghdad	Established 24-11-1915
E	Port Said, Egypt	Established 6-12-1914
F	Bushire, Persia; then transferred to Waziristan	Established 8-10-1918
G	Peshawar, Northwest Frontier, Pakistan	Waziristan Campaign
H	Alexandria, Egypt	Transferred in 1918 to Salonika, Greece and then to Chanak, Turkey

NOTE: Base office **J** operated in Bandar Abbas, Persia from 1917–1919; Base Office **K** from Tank, Northwest Frontier, India briefly in 1917; **L** was located in Harnai, Baluchistan (Pakistan) and then Duzdad, Persia as a railhead. There was also a base office in Aden (Yemen) which was not designated by a letter. There is no base office with the letter I.

and it provided censorship using its own handstamps.⁷ In Egypt circular handstamps with “Passed by Censor Indian Expeditionary Force” and a number from 1 to 145, depending on the location of the censor and its unit, were used. The example here is number censor 38 sent from FPO 311, Suez Hospital, to Gwalior, India. Elsewhere in the Middle East the common I.E.F. censor handstamp was a circular “Passed by Censor” with the letter D in the middle.

Post War Conflicts

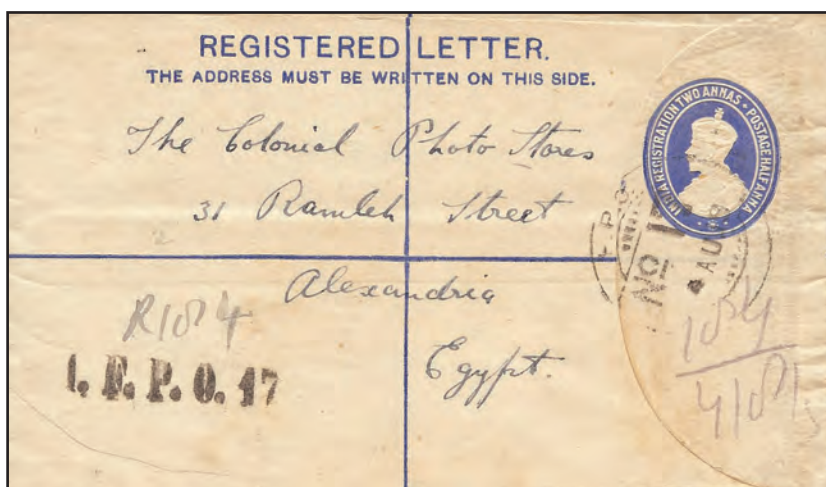
Oil security was a key strategic mission towards the end of the Great War. Great Britain formed a special force called the Army of the Black Sea⁸ using British and Indian troops to secure the oil fields in the Transcaucasia area. British and Indian army units also were sent to Persia to block Soviet troops as well as Persian “nationalists” who wanted access to the oil fields.

Some depleted British Army units were heavily augmented with Indian troops, requiring Indian army post office personnel for support. In addition, Indian army units were engaged in the Third Afghan War and defended India from raids in the Northwest frontier area as part of the Waziristan Field Force. Indian troops occupied former Ottoman Empire countries including Syria and Lebanon, which were turned over to French troops in 1920; and what is today Iraq, Israel, Palestine and Egypt, which remained under British control.

Post-armistice military mail took advantage of civilian Indian postal stationery. An



Stampless cover with “Passed by Censor Indian Expeditionary Force 38” handstamp, addressed in Urdu to Gwalior, India and sent from FPO 311 (Suez Hospitals, Egypt).



India postal stationery registration envelope with FPO 17 (Aleppo, Syria) marking.

Table II: Countries of Deployment

The India army post office served field deployed troops in twenty-three countries, using today's political borders, during World War I and its post-armistice conflicts. In theory I.E.F. stamps could have been used in all of these countries, but most are known on covers from present-day France, Egypt, Iraq, Israel, Palestine, and Tanzania where larger I.E.F. units were stationed. World War I-era names are in parenthesis.

Europe	Africa	Former Ottoman Empire	Asia	Former Soviet Union
Belgium	Egypt	Iraq	Afghanistan	Azerbaijan
France	Kenya (British East Africa)	Israel	Iran (Persia)	Georgia
Greece	Mozambique (Portuguese East Africa)	Jordan	India (Northwest Frontier)	Russia
	Tanzania (German East Africa & Zanzibar)	Lebanon	Pakistan (India)	Turkmenistan
		Palestine		
		Syria		
		Turkey		
		Yemen (including British Aden; Aden States)		

example here is an embossed Indian Registration Envelope cancelled at Aleppo, Syria with FPO 17 4 AU 19. The cover also bears an I.E.F. handstamp associated with registered mail, I.F.P.O. (Indian Force Post Office).

The Collector's Viewpoint

Philately was a widely popular hobby during this period and especially so in Great Britain with King George V himself being an enthusiaistic collector. A British weekly stamp newsletter announced the availability of Indian stamps of King George V overprinted with I.E.F. and recorded the numbers by denomination initially produced. Also noted in the article was the production of 3,700 reams of stamped postcards and embossed envelopes.⁹ I.E.F. postal stationery included postcards, a reply card version, a rarely used international I.E.F. postcard, as well as the embossed I.E.F. envelope.¹⁰

The I.E.F. stamps were valid for postage between September 1914 and October 15, 1921. Late in the war, Indian forces occupied Mosul, an Ottoman *vilayet* or province. This would be today's Kurdish enclave in Iraq. Ottoman (Turkish) fiscal stamps overprinted with "POSTAGE I.E.F. "D" were authorized for postal purposes from January 1919 until December 1925 when the League of Nations placed Mosul under Iraq.

"Souvenir" envelopes often can be found with excess postage or even the entire set of stamps on the envelope. Less common are envelopes where perhaps a "friend" at the post office stamped the envelope with postal handstamps that were not necessary or otherwise inappropriate but that made for an attractive cover. An example of this is the prominent FPO No 31 and a CDS 29 Jan 20. The black seals on the envelope would have been used for mail bags, not covers. FPO 31 was located at the time in British Mandate Palestine.

Conclusion

Studying I.E.F. material takes the philatelist on a journey back in time 100 years to a pre-computer era replete with specially issued postage stamps, postal and military stationery, and a great variety of handstamps, projected against the drama of the Great War. The Indian Army Postal Service played a role in the postal history of twenty-three countries, and although much has been learned regarding the I.E.F. postal history, considerable opportunities for discoveries and learning remain.

End Notes

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2. Hubart A. Sams, *The Post Office of India in the Great War*



"Souvenir" stampless cover from FPO 31 (Palestine) to England. Cover bears additional handstamps for registration and postal bag seals.

(Bombay, India: The Times Press, 1922).

3. Robert Gray, "Indian Expeditionary Force — In-Bound Mail," *Collectors Club Philatelist*, 92 (May 2013): 141–146.

4. Edward B. Proud, *History of the Indian Army Postal Service, Volume II, 1914–1931* (East Sussex, UK: Proud-Bailey Co. Ltd., 1984).

5. F. Blanchard, F. Thormeyer, and Emmanuel Schoch, *Reports on British Prison Camps in India and Burma* (New York: George H. Doran Co., 1918).

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7. John Firebrace, *British Empire Campaigns and Occupations in the Near East, 1914–1924; A Postal History* (London: Christie's Robson Lowe, 1991).

8. John Slingsby, *The Postal History of the Army of the Black Sea: 1918–1923* (Leicestershire, UK: The Stuart Rossiter Trust, 2004).

9. Frank J. Melville, *Meekel's Weekly Stamp News* (January 16, 1915): 21.

10. Derek Lang, *British India Postal Stationery* (Leicestershire, UK: The Stuart Rossiter Trust, 1997).

The Author

T Bob Gray collected U.S. postage stamps as a child and then neglected this hobby for several decades. He returned to it when he needed a distraction while working in Europe. Quite by happenstance he purchased a small lot of British India covers and postal stationery that were not written up or otherwise described. To understand what he had bought, he joined the India Study Circle and proceeded to build his collection of Indian postal history. Upon returning to the U.S. he joined the American Philatelic Society and the Collector's Club, focusing his collecting interests on India during the ten year period most impacted by World War 1 (1914–1924).