

NOTE

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Censorship of Mail, Canadian Army Overseas.
Field Censors' Notes as Material for History.

Canadian Military Headquarters,
2 Cockspur Street, S.W. 1,
London, ENGLAND.

The Director,
Historical Section,
General Staff,
National Defence Headquarters,
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1. A further report is presented. This deals with the question of mail censorship as it has affected the Canadian Army in the United Kingdom, and in particular with the possibilities of censorship reports as historical source material.

SKETCH OF HISTORY OF THE CENSORSHIP
QUESTION, CANADIAN ARMY OVERSEAS

2. The question of censorship of the letters written by officers and other ranks of the Canadian forces began to attract attention soon after the arrival of the first Canadian troops in the United Kingdom late in 1939. There were discussions with the British authorities on the subject during January, 1940, but these did not lead to the institution of any system of censorship; and except for a small proportion of letters opened by the British censors chiefly, if not exclusively, for the purposes of foreign exchange control, letters addressed to Canada by Canadian military personnel (and evidently by the population of Great Britain in general) were not subject to supervision for some time thereafter.¹

3. In the critical days of the spring of 1940, however, a system of censorship was instituted. An order issued from H.Q. 1 Cdn Div

1 Documents in C.M.H.Q. file 4/CENSOR/1 ("Postal and Cable Censorship Questions").

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under date 28 May 40 provided that field censorship on a unit basis should be undertaken upon the arrival of the Division in the NORTHAMPTON area to which it was about to move (Order, 1 CD/3-1, on C.M.H.Q. file 4/SENSOR/5 ("Field Censorship Cdn Army"); on the NORTHAMPTON move, see Historical Officer's Report No. 15). Unit censorship carried out by Unit Censor Officers continued until 12 Jul 40, when it was stopped by an order issued from H.Q. Cdn Force under the previous day's date. It appears that unit censorship was never instituted for units under the command of C.M.H.Q., and that British units stationed in the United Kingdom were not subjected to it. War Office circular letter 79/H.Q./934 (M.I. 11), 4 Jul 40, runs in part as follows:

I am to say that although it is not at present practicable to introduce unit censorship for troops stationed in the United Kingdom it is nevertheless extremely important that all ranks should be instructed in, and should observe, the principles of unit censorship as laid down in Sections 18 to 25 of Field Service Pocket-book, No. 3, 1939....

(C.M.H.Q. file 4/SENSOR/5).

4. Beginning in July, 1940, the Canadian Army in the United Kingdom were granted the benefits of a Free Postage Concession which permits officers and men to send letters to Canada without payment of postage, subject to the letters being marked "C.A.(A.F.)" and bearing the unit's orderly room stamp.¹

5. After the discontinuance of unit censorship in units of Cdn Corps, and the almost simultaneous institution of the Free Postage Concession, the situation was that Canadian soldiers' letters to Canada were not subject to censorship except in the case of those posted at civil post offices, which were exposed to the possibility of being opened by the British "sample" censorship. (It is now

1 This privilege became effective on 8 Jul 40. Documents on C.M.H.Q. file 7/MAIL/6.

provided, by C.A.R.O. (Overseas) 847 (25 Jul 41) that "All mail will be dispatched through an Army Post Office where facilities exist"; but cases of contravention of this regulation continue to come to notice.)

6. A special case was, and is, that of the Canadian Forestry Corps units stationed in No. 1 Protected Area in Scotland (cf. Historical Officer's Report No. 29) where it is considered that unusual precautions are necessary. On instructions from H.Q., North Highland Area, unit censorship of mail addressed to destinations other than Canada was undertaken in these cases commencing 8 May 41. Subsequently arrangements were made for the censorship of the "free mail" addressed to Canada by these units; this is undertaken by the British censorship authorities at INVERNESS (Documents on file 4/SENSOR/5).

7. INSTITUTION OF SAMPLE CENSORSHIP OF CANADIAN ARMY FREE MAIL.
By the summer of 1941 the British military authorities were beginning to express concern over the fact that there was no censorship of Canadian Army "free" mail; this they naturally regarded as a serious loophole in their security system. The issue was clearly stated in a letter written to General McNAUGHTON by Lt.-Gen. Sir H.R. POWELL, V.C.I.G.S., on 18 Jul 41. This runs in part as follows:

You may or may not know that a considerable proportion of the letters written by Canadian troops in this country is passing to Canada and the United States without being subjected to any kind of scrutiny or censorship...

I feel that the passage out of this country of such a large amount of uncensored mail represents a very serious source of possible leakage of information. In the event of the Canadian Corps being about to undertake a more active operational role this danger might become very real; furthermore this lack of censorship has continued long enough for it to become generally known that such letters are uncensored, and this channel might therefore be used by subversive persons to send information to the United States via Canada.

A memorandum accompanying this letter pointed out that there were three possible channels for mail despatched by Canadians soldiers

to Canada or the United States: (a) via civil post, sea-borne - which involved exposure to a partial civil censorship; (b) via civil post, air mail - which involved exposure to a 100% civil censorship; and (c) via Canadian Army Post Office, sea-borne with free postage, and uncensored. Mail sent under (c) was estimated at approximately 70,000 letters a week. General Pownall remarked with respect to the absence of censorship of free mail, "This places the writers of letters through this channel in a unique position compared to other troops and civilians in this country."

8. Discussions had already been in progress between C.M.H.Q. and the War Office, and an informal agreement reached as to the method to be pursued. Following General Pownall's formal communication, this was rapidly implemented. Canadian Military Headquarters formally accepted a selective censorship of free mail by a letter sent to the War Office on 28 Jul 41, and detailed arrangements were made forthwith.

9. The arrangement arrived at was that the British censorship authorities (in this case, M.I. 12, War Office) would collect three bags of mail per day from H.Q. Canadian Postal Corps at ACTON, returning them censored two days later. As the bags would contain mail sorted according to destination in Canada, a fair cross-section of units in Britain was assured, the more so as care was to be taken to ensure that all the seven regional destinations in Canada recognized by the C.P.C. received due attention. M.I. 12 borrowed 25 Postal Censorship examiners to carry out this censorship operation, and the first bags were collected for examination on 23 Aug 41. Sample censorship has been in progress since that date; the proportion of Canadian Army free mail read has varied from 4 to 5 per cent. M.I. 12 maintains liaison in this matter with the M.O. & I. Section at C.M.H.Q., and serious breaches of security regulations, when discovered, are notified to C.M.H.Q.

10. Paras. 7-9, above, are based upon documents in C.M.H.Q. file 4/SENSOR/1.

FIELD CENSORS' NOTES ON CANADIAN ARMY MAIL

11. An interesting result of the institution of censorship of free mail has been the availability of the comments of the British censors on the mail examined. These are now received fortnightly at Canadian Military Headquarters over the signature of Major J.C. BRAITHWAITE, O.C. Field Censors (Home), under the title "Notes on Mail examined". These notes are based on the reading, each fortnight, of from 10,000 to 16,000 letters received from the Canadian Base Post Office under the procedure described above, and of from 3,000 to 6,000 air mail letters addressed to Canada and the U.S.A. The latter represent from 17 to 25 percent of the total number of air mail letters received by the censorship; although all such mail passes through the censors' hands, it appears that they are not equal to examining the whole of it.

12. The notes compiled on this basis are relatively exhaustive. They include as a rule several pages of "General Comments" followed by remarks on conditions in individual units, of which a large number are referred to each fortnight. Many quotations from letters are given, though the writer's name is never supplied. The names of individuals mentioned by writers, on the other hand, are not suppressed.

13. These notes appear to have a very definite interest as source material for the Official Historian. It is doubtful whether he will have at his disposal any material which comes closer to affording a genuine cross-section of the thinking of the man in the ranks of the Canadian Army. The actual letters on which the notes are based will, most of them, be destroyed; and of those that are not, few, particularly from other ranks, will be available for the historian. These notes, however, offer the possibility of preserving significant portions of them in a form in which the historian can make convenient use of them.

14. It is obvious, of course, that this material must be used with caution. The truth of any statement made in a soldier's letter cannot be accepted without investigation; the writer may well be ignorant, malicious or actually mendacious;¹ he may write to vent his spite against an individual; he may exaggerate or misrepresent experiences in order to make himself appear to his correspondent as a hero or a martyr; and sometimes letters are written under the influence of passing circumstances - very bad weather, lack of mail from home, etc., etc. - which lead the author to paint an unduly black picture.

15. Obviously, too, one cannot be certain that the letters quoted represent a wholly accurate cross-section of the whole. The natural tendency of the censors is to choose those passages which are most critical or most dramatic; these are the things which catch the eye. And the censors, being English, may not always be in a position to form a completely accurate judgement of things Canadian. It is clear, however, that the compilers of these notes are making every effort to present a justly balanced picture.

16. When all necessary reservations have been made, however, these Field Censors' notes appear to afford very valuable information upon the state of morale in the Canadian Army Overseas; and the Official Historian should find them a useful supplement - at times, perhaps, a corrective - to War Diaries and other records of a more official type.

17. The writer has arranged to have an additional copy of these notes furnished to Canadian Military Headquarters for historical purposes. He proposes to turn these copies over, from time to time, to the Canadian Records Office, ACTON, with a view to their being

¹ He may equally well, of course, be a man of intelligence and education, whose comments carry some weight.

preserved for the purposes of the Official Historian.

MORALE OF CANADIAN TROOPS AS REVEALED IN
CENSORS' NOTES

18. It may be well at this point to summarize some of the observations of the censors on Canadian morale as indicated in the letters read.

19. SITUATION IN FEBRUARY, 1940. On 23 Feb 40 the Deputy Chief Postal Censor forwarded to the Senior Officer, C.M.H.Q., a report on the contents of "a small number of letters" addressed to Canada which had been examined in connection with currency control (above, para. 2) and a proportion of which had been written by Canadian soldiers. This report is of some interest. It must be remembered that it has reference to letters written in the course of the most severe winter Britain had experienced for many years, which was also a season of inaction - the so-called "phony war" period - intervening between the German campaign in Poland and the attack on Norway. It runs in part as follows:

Boredom, homesickness and a feeling of not being really needed appear to be the main reasons why nearly all these Canadian soldiers grumble. The majority of the writers warn their friends and relations not to join the Army.

The recent bad weather has made them dislike this country considerably. One writer says: "This is the worst country I have ever been in. If anybody ever asks me to go to England, I'll kill the b---s," and this remark is typical.

The insufficiency and bad quality of the food annoys the majority of the writers. One writer says "Whatever you do don't get in the army if you don't wish to starve..." Another soldier writes: "Don't believe anything you hear over the radio or read in the newspapers. They are only trying to keep the truth away from you. We get no entertainment unless we pay for it, and the food is absolutely disgusting..."

On the whole, however, although they all are disgruntled, they appear to have no particular grievance other than the food. They miss feminine society, and are disappointed at not being able to have the "good time" they expected, although a certain number seem to have enjoyed themselves in London considerably. One writer sums up his letter, and the attitude of most of them, when he writes: "Well, honey, I've had supper. Never mind that last paragraph, I was just letting off steam. We all get sore now and then about coming over here."

20. At this time the troops of 1 Cdn Div had spent a considerable time in ALDERSHOT - a station which, as noted in earlier reports, has been very unpopular, largely on account of the fact that it is a peacetime garrison town, to which soldiers are no novelty, and which has little civil population with the means or the inclination to offer hospitality to visiting troops.

21. MORE RECENT SITUATION. The writer has before him three of the fortnightly Field Censors' reports referred to above, covering the period from 1 Sep to 12 Oct 41. It is interesting to compare these with the earlier report just quoted.

22. There is considerable similarity, and there are still many complaints, but the tone is certainly considerably less savage than that reported in February 1940. The following general comment is made for the period 1 Sep - 14 Sep 41:

MORALE in general is quite good. Men are feeling very fit, in good health and spirits, and are anxious to finish off the war. They are very optimistic, but desirous of action.

There is some homesickness among those who have been over here a long time particularly amongst French Canadian units, but the impression is given of wanting to get on with the job of fighting, which is what they came for.

23. One thing is constant and permanent: what the same report terms "the extraordinarily large number of food complaints from Canadian units". Men complain both of insufficiency of food and of its quality; some remark - in many cases doubtless with reason - that good food suffers in the cooking.

24. The censors have been at some pains to account for the number of Canadian complaints of this sort. They have found instances of men writing to the effect that (to quote one letter), "Some of the good letter writers get parcels and parcels of stuff by writing to everyone they know and hinting that food is scarce. It is quite a racket..." Undoubtedly there is some intentional exaggeration of this sort; and it is only fair to point out that the censors find a fair proportion of letters which speak well of the food the writers

receive. The food complaints, however, are too widespread and too circumstantial to be wholly explained away.

25. Next to food, inactivity is the most universal complaint. Some of the censors' comments on this point have been incorporated in the Historical Officer's report on the SPITZBERGEN operation, which will be forwarded shortly. See also Report No. 49, dealing with Exercise "BUMPER".

26. Relations with British troops get considerable attention, and there are a good many references to friction with them. On the other hand, there are a quite surprising number of references to the superior ability and knowledge of English n.c.o. instructors with whom the troops have come in contact, and undoubtedly the healthy respect felt for these men makes for better relations generally.

27. On evidence of the troops' appreciation of visits by the Royal Family, see Report No. 50.

28. In general, as noted above, the censors regard the condition of Canadian morale as reflected in the letters read as quite satisfactory. The following comment refers to the period 29 Sep - 12 Oct 41: "Most units show very good morale, and are apparently quite happy and enjoying the life over here. The general tone of letters - with, of course, the usual exceptions - is a cheerful one."

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