

# Canadian Military Mail Study Group

## NEWSLETTER

MARCH 2013

NEWSLETTER NO. 208  
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THE CANADIAN CORPS OF OVERSEAS FIREFIGHTERS ("THE CORPS")--  
By C.R. (Ron) McGuire

This little known small group of 411 volunteers first came to my attention when my great uncle, James J. O'Kelly, was speaking to my Dad and some of his Ottawa firemen colleagues about the Second World War. My father managed the Ritz Hotel where we lived on the top floor. To pass the time after retirement Uncle Jim was employed in this working-man's hotel as the weekday night clerk. The hotel lobby was always a gathering place for his many friends. I enjoyed listening to their interesting stories on many evenings after dinner in the early 1950's. The exceptions were those about the fires they had fought. I had many ambitions as a young lad, but being a fireman was never one of them.

Uncle Jim escaped serving in the Great War because he had exempt status employment; having joined the Ottawa Fire Department on January 28, 1910 as a "temporary". He became a "permanent" one year later. Over the years he was promoted to increasingly more responsible positions until he became the Chief in 1937. He held the position during a period of great expansion for the Department as well as many very difficult years when serious fires plagued the city. During his tenure several important advances were made; often against stiff opposition from some quarters. Following a rash of apartment fires with terrible losses of life, for example, he insisted that it be mandatory for every floor to have fire alarms connected to the nearest fire station. Typically landlords, backed by the civic politicians, resisted this because of the expense they would have to incur. In the end Uncle Jim succeeded and it became law, not only in Ottawa, but across Canada. Fatalities from apartment fires dropped significantly as a

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result. Those were the days when the Chief would be at major fires to supervise and even help to fight them. Uncle Jim also held senior positions in the Dominion Association of Fire Chiefs and other related organizations. After retirement in 1943, he joined the "Home Front" and served with the Fire Marshal section of the Canadian Army until after the war ended. [1]

I can still remember Uncle Jim saying that in 1942 he lost dozens of "his lads" who volunteered to go to Britain and help fight the fires caused by the constant German bombing of major centres. Few know that the civilian population suffered over 140,000 casualties; of which 40,000 were deaths. I later learned these men had joined the Canadian Corps of Overseas Firefighters ("the Corps") and were replaced with temporary auxiliary firemen until after the war. This non-military Corps intrigued me and for over forty years I have searched for mail to or from its members. The two results are depicted in this article. I would like to know if any other Corps-related mail exists.

The Corps was first thought necessary in the summer of 1941 to help fight the terrible effects from "The Blitz" in London. An Order-in-Council (OinC) of January 30, 1942 appointed R.C.A.F. Flight Lieutenant G. Ernest Huff, MM, a veteran of the Great War, as the Corps' commanding officer. Huff was ideal as he had extensive civilian and military fire fighting experience. However it was not until the OinC of March 3, 1942, that the Corps was finally officially established. The volunteers came from across Canada: 148 were seasoned firemen from urban centres, 113 were rural volunteer or auxiliary firemen, and the remaining 149 had no experience and requested training. Ottawa's Number 4 Fire Station on Cumberland Avenue, with its training tower, was used to train those who needed it.

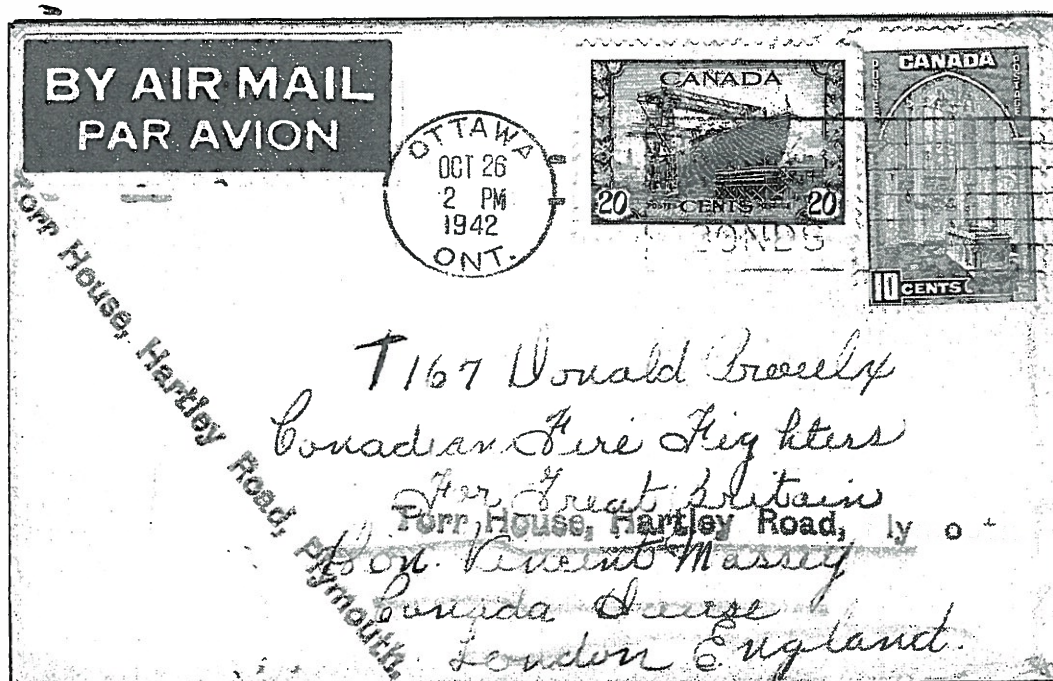


FIG. 1

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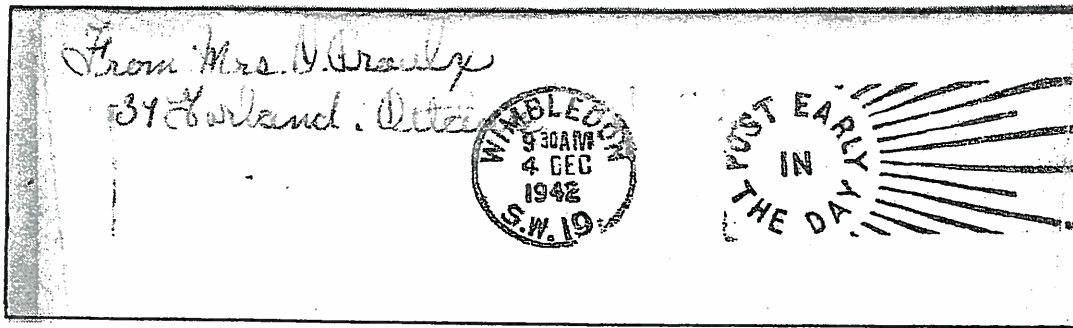


FIG. 1a

An advance group flew to Britain and arrived on May 21, 1942. The first contingent under Brantford, Ontario Chief John Hough followed in June, arriving after the air attacks on London were greatly reduced. As a consequence the Canadians were assigned to fight fires out of six stations: one each in Bristol and Plymouth, and two each in Portsmouth and Southampton. Members assumed active duty on August 1. Some 408 of the men served on fire duty and three staffed the Ottawa H.Q. office. The Corps' British H.Q. was in London at Canada House, the Canadian High Commission offices. Mail for the firefighters was to be sent "care of Canada House" and was forwarded by their mailroom on to the men. FIG.1 (and reverse FIG.1a) is a rare example of mail to one of the members of the Corps.

The cover was posted with an Ottawa "Buy War Bonds" slogan on "OCT 26/ 2 PM/1942" and addressed to "T167 Donald Proulx/Canadian Fire Fighters/ For Great Britain/ [c/o] Hon. Vincent Massey (he was Canada's wartime High Commissioner and later its first native-born Governor General)/ Canada House/London, England". Proulx had been sent to Torr (Fire) House on Hartley Street in Plymouth, which was manned by Canadians. The original address was crossed out and two strikes of the appropriate handstamp was applied in red ink for redirecting the letter to Plymouth. I assume the mail room at H.Q. had similar handstamps for all of the fire stations to redirect mail for the men. The sender was Proulx' wife with her name and address on the reverse (FIG.1a), along with a "Wimbledon/S.W. 10/9:30 AM/4 DEC/1942" "POST EARLY IN THE DAY" slogan. It is the only cover I have seen to or from one of the members of the Corps in Britain.

FIG.2 is the only other Corps cover of which I am aware. It was sent to "T-419/J/F (Junior Fireman) J.A.W. Cassidy/Canadian Fire Fighters,/No. 4 Fire Station/Ottawa, Ontario/Canada". Cassidy may have been at Number 4 undergoing training prior to his departure for overseas duty. It was posted in Gander, Newfoundland with a "C.A.P.O. No. 1" CDS on "AM/NO 26/ 42". It has a red PBMC #4 of the same date. Unfortunately there is no return address but I believe it was sent by another fireman with the R.C.A.F. assigned to the air base. Note that Cassidy was assigned "T-419", indicating he was one of the last volunteers. The higher number may support there were 422 Corps members as recorded by the Canadian Firefighters Museum web site. I have chosen 411 as Hart [2] has stated

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and supported with a breakdown. On the other hand it may also confirm numbers assigned to men who, for whatever reason, withdrew from the Corps and were not reassigned like the military practice.

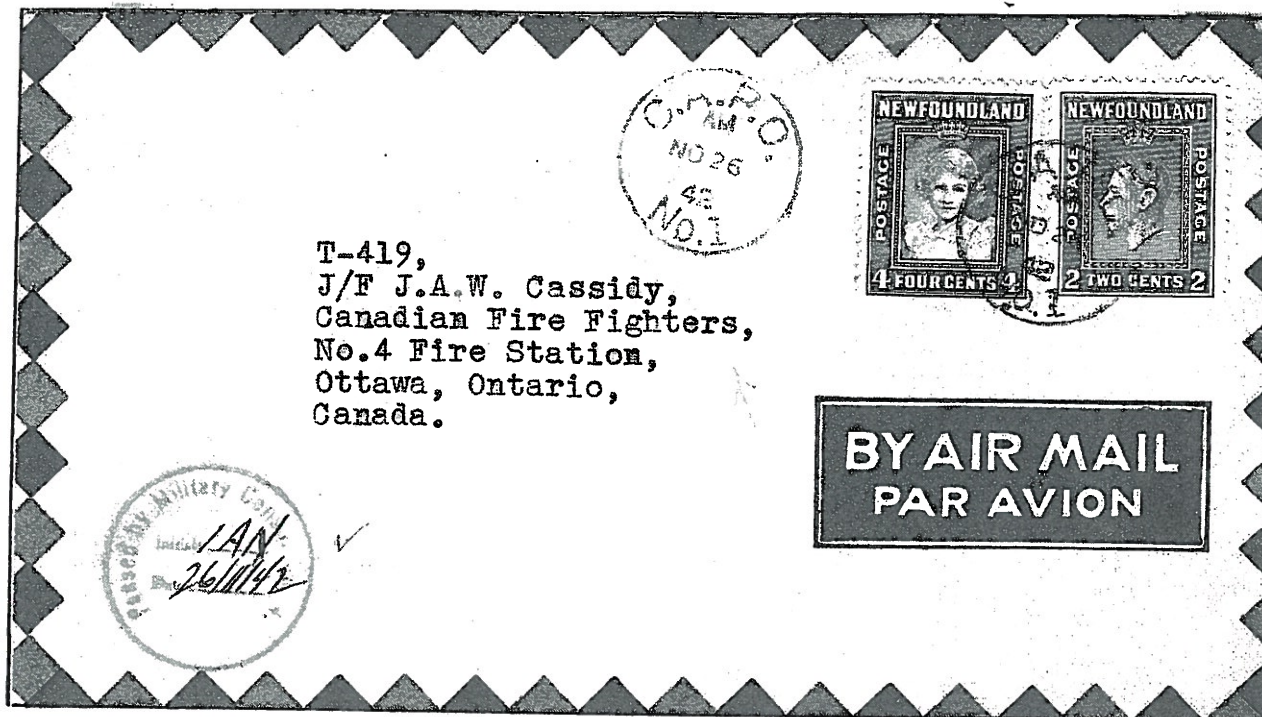
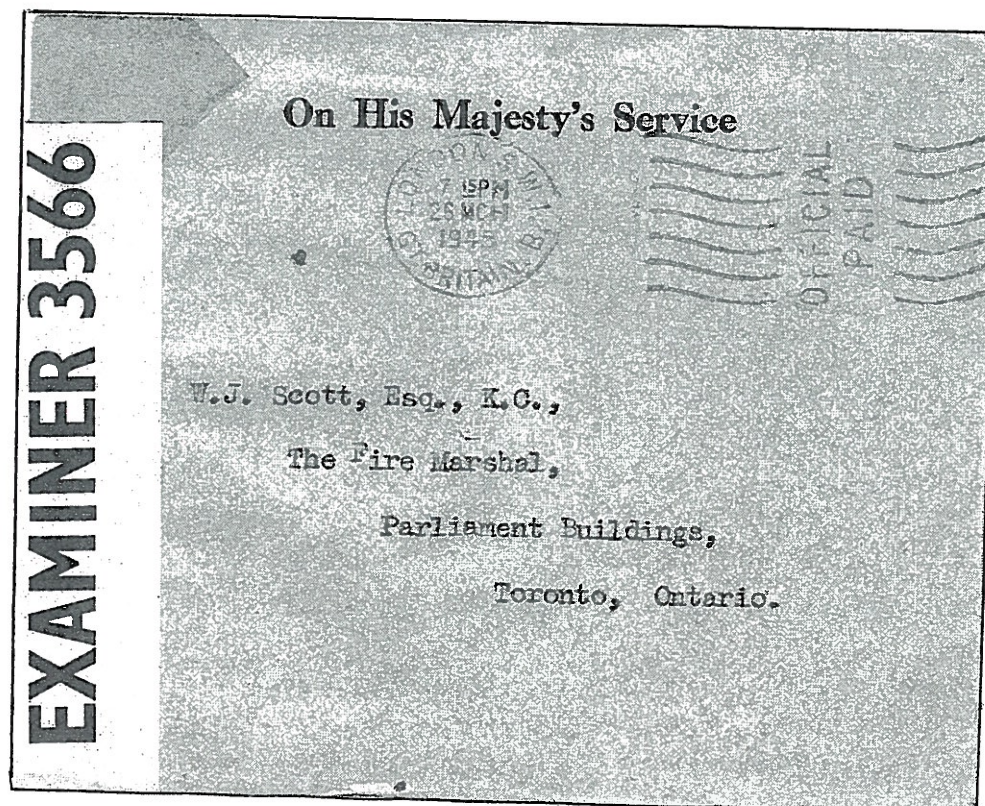


FIG.2

FIG.3



[Cont'd.]



FIG.3 is an official O.H.M.S. envelope posted after the Corps returned home. It has a red "OFFICIAL/PAID/London S.W.1/Gt. Britain. B./7:15 PM/25 MCH/1945" postmark and a P.C. 90 "OPENED BY EXAMINER 3566" censor label. It is addressed to "W.J. Scott, Esq., K.C./The Fire Marshal,/Parliament Buildings,/Toronto, Ontario". I believe it may have contained correspondence concerning the members of the Corps who volunteered from Ontario; possibly a letter of thanks for their services.

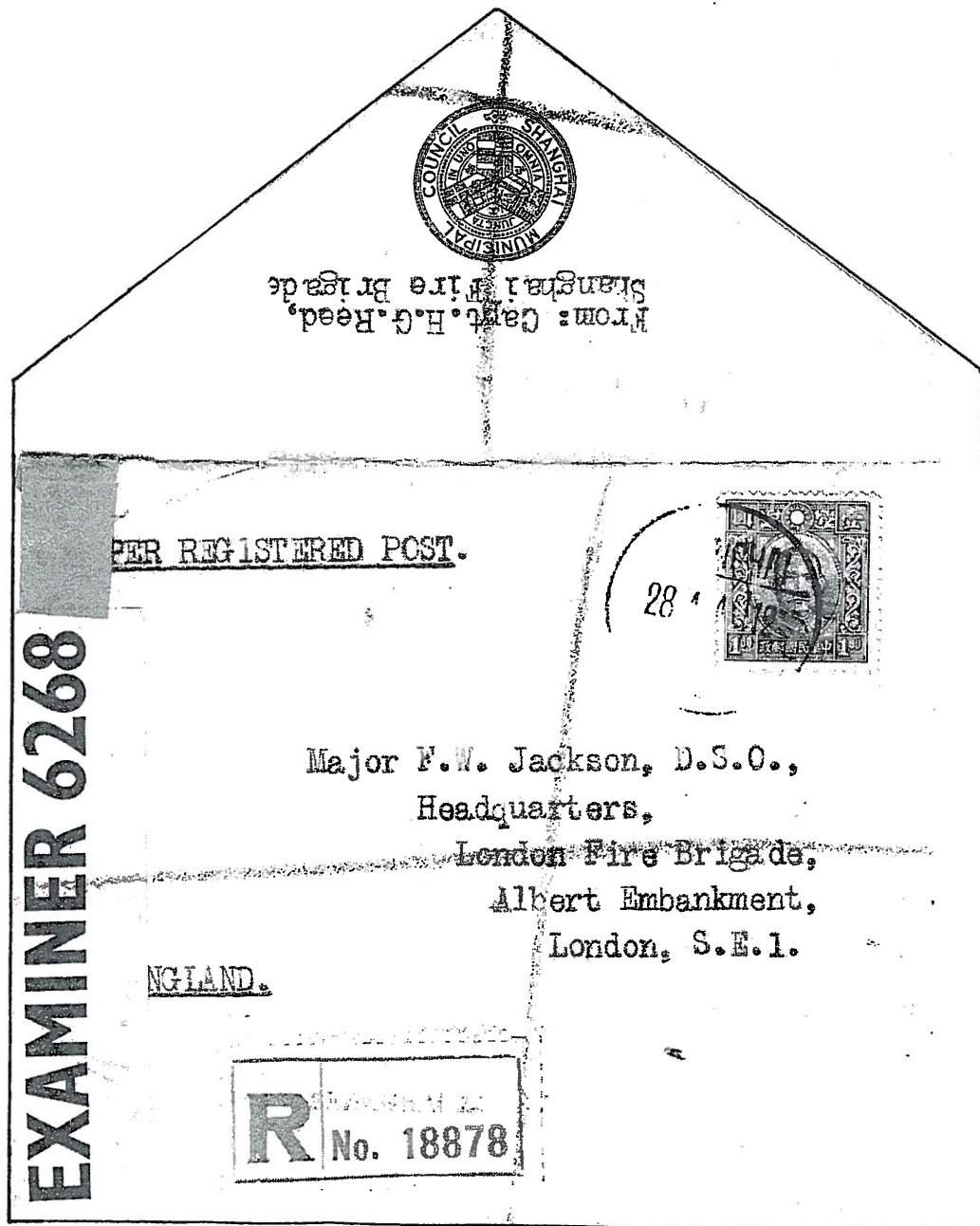


FIG.4.

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FIG.4 is a registered letter posted by Captain H.G. Reed of the Shanghai Fire Brigade on April 28, 1941. There is a much clearer strike of the postmark on the reverse side. It is addressed to "Major F.W. Jackson, D.S.O./Headquarters,/London Fire Brigade,/Albert Bank,/London, S.E.1.", with an "EXAMINER 6268" label.

Jackson was the Chief Fire Commander of the London Regional Fire Force and directed the Blitz fire defence from 1939 to 1943. For his services during those critical days, he was created a Commander of the British Empire (C.B.E.) in 1941. Major Jackson was a veteran of the Great War and he received the Distinguished Service Order in 1918 for his brave actions under fire. This envelope, with a single one dollar stamp paying the registration fee and postage (the way I prefer mail to be franked), has no obvious Canadian connection. However I include it because I think it is appropriate. Major Jackson would have undoubtedly known members of the Corps; particularly those at a senior level.

I often wondered what happened to Captain Reed, the sender, after the Japanese undeclared acts of war across the Pacific and South-East Asia later that year beginning on December 7 and 8.

#### REFERENCES

- [1] Fitzsimons, David R. and Matheson, J. Bernard. History of the Ottawa Fire Department-150 Years of Firefighting. Stittsville, Ontario: Love Printing, 1988, pp. 88-95.
- [2] Hart, Keith. "Always Ready for any Sticky Job--The Canadian Corps of [Civilian] Firefighters in the Second World War". Canadian Military History, Vol. 10, No. 3 (Summer 2001), pp. 74-80.

[Thanks Ron for a very interesting article. If members have other mail connected with the Corps, please send copies to the Editor for future issues. Coincidentally, the Friends of the Canadian War Museum's The Torch (Vol.23, No. 4, November 2012, pp. 1,3) contained "Remembrance", an article by Fred Collins who served on a fire department with one of the Corps: Captain Duncan Doan of the Welland Fire Department. Collins noted that there were numerous injuries to Corps members, but few were serious. Three members lost their lives: one in a traffic accident, one in the course of training, and the third due to a robot bomb. Ed.]

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#### "CAMP BORDEN MILITARY CAMP A"--By Dave Hanes

Camp Borden Military Post Office originally opened back in May 1916. There were four (4) Militia Field Post Office hammers proofed and two, possibly three, were used to a limited extent. Starting in June of 1916, three machines were introduced into use. Needless to say, it was much easier to turn a crank and have all of the letters cancelled and processed, than to cancel each letter by hand--thus the limited use of the Militia cancels.

On July 15, 1916 two new cancels (hammers) were proofed at Camp Borden:

[Cont'd.]

the "Camp Borden Military Camp A" and "Camp B". The "Camp A" cancel is known but the "Camp B" cancel is **yet to be found**. The late Ritch Toop only had a partial strike of the "Camp A" on a Two Cent plus War Tax Admiral (FIG. 1) at the time of his passing. The strike originally went to the Bill Robinson collection and, at his passing, ended up in my collection.

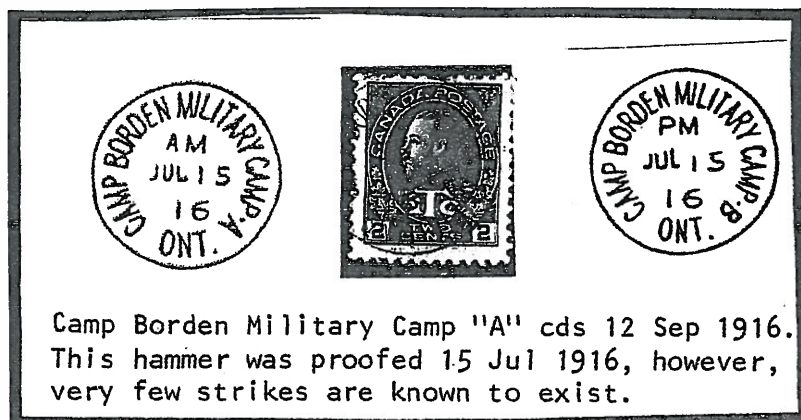


FIG. 1

In late January 2013, I became aware that a "Camp Borden Military Camp A" cover existed in the stock of study group member and dealer Hank Narbonne (Greenwood Stamp Company). It is now in my collection (FIG. 2 and FIG. 3). Upon questioning Hank on where the cover was acquired, he was not sure if it had been in the estates of the late Bill McCann or Doug Sayles.

It has taken ninety-some years to find the first "Camp Borden Military Camp A" cover!!! I guess there is still hope in finding the first "Camp Borden Military Camp B" cover.

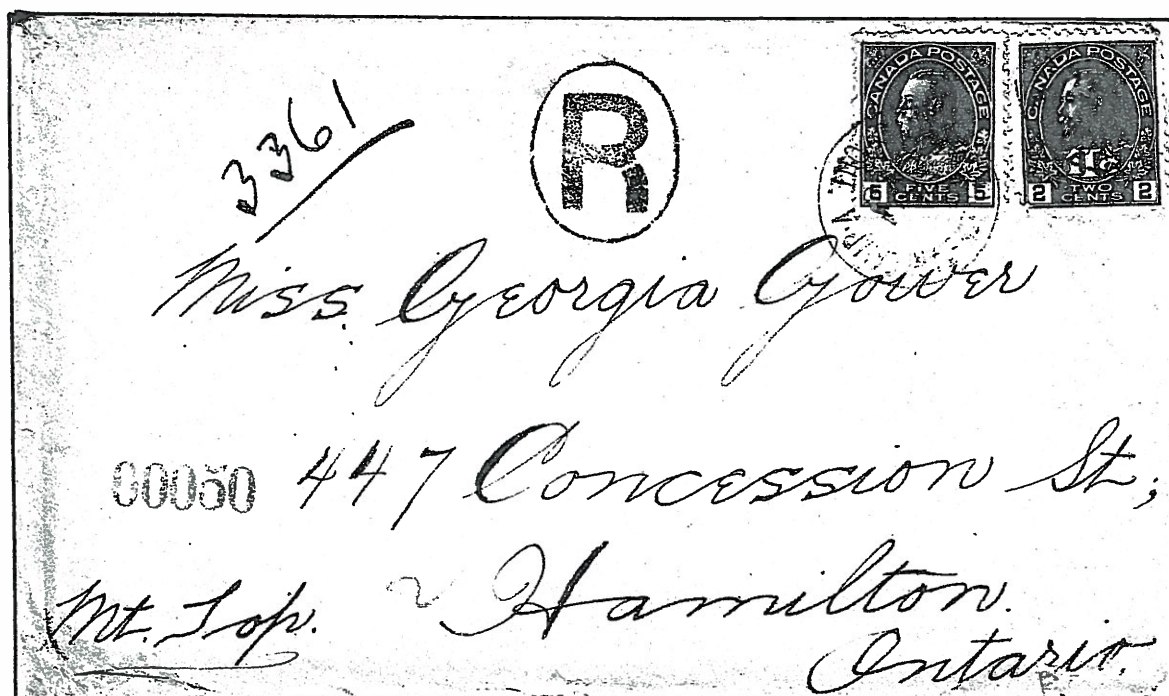


FIG. 2

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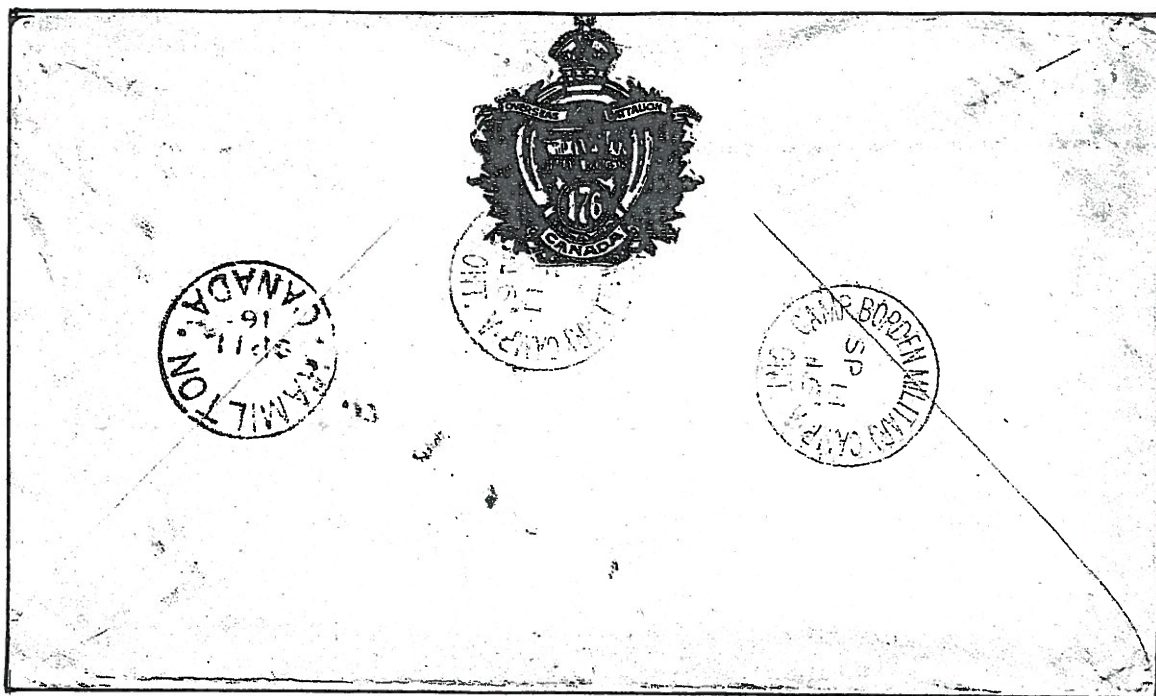


FIG. 3

[Thanks Dave. What an incredible find. Should members have the elusive "Camp B" please send in an illustration. The 176th Overseas Btn. had, on mobilization, its headquarters at St. Catharines, Ontario. Its original Commanding Officer was Lt.-Col. D. Sharpe, and it sailed overseas on April 29, 1917 with 18 Officers and 446 Other Ranks (J. Castell Hopkins, Canada at War: A Record of Heroism and Achievement, 1914-1918. Toronto: The Canada Annual Review Ltd., 1919, p. 96). While one cannot speculate on the evidence of one cover, might the hammers have been used only occasionally on registered mail (hence their scarcity)? Ed.]

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R.C.A.F. STATION ARMSTRONG, ONTARIO: REGISTERED--By N.F. Lee Dowsley

The following illustrates a registration rectangle from the above station dated September 9, 1964 to the "Commanding Officer, R.C.A.F. Station Sioux Lookout, Sioux Lookout, Ontario". A red "POSTAGE PAID CANADA/POST PORT PAYE" handstamp was also used. The closed circle "Armstrong Station/Ont." was utilized because of its close proximity to the Radar Base (as noted in NL#207, January 2013, pp. 1261-1262). It is similar to George Sawatzki's from NL#204 (May 2012, pp. 1227-1228) dated August 3, 1966 (but with a registry number of "AF211"). A "CENTRAL REGISTRY/RCAF STN./SIOUX LOOKOUT" time clock dated September 10, 1964 is also shown.

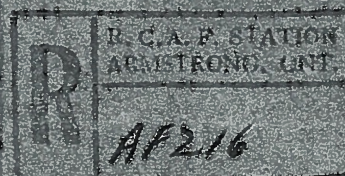
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DEPARTMENT OF NATIONAL DEFENCE  
MINISTÈRE DE LA DÉFENSE NATIONALE

POSTAGE PAID CANADA  
POST PAÏÉ

COMANDANT OFFICER  
RCAF STATION SIOUX LOOKOUT  
SIOUX LOOKOUT, ONT



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1919 SIBERIA TO DISTRICT BARRACK OFFICE/OLD DRILL HALL, VICTORIA, BC--By Ken Ellison

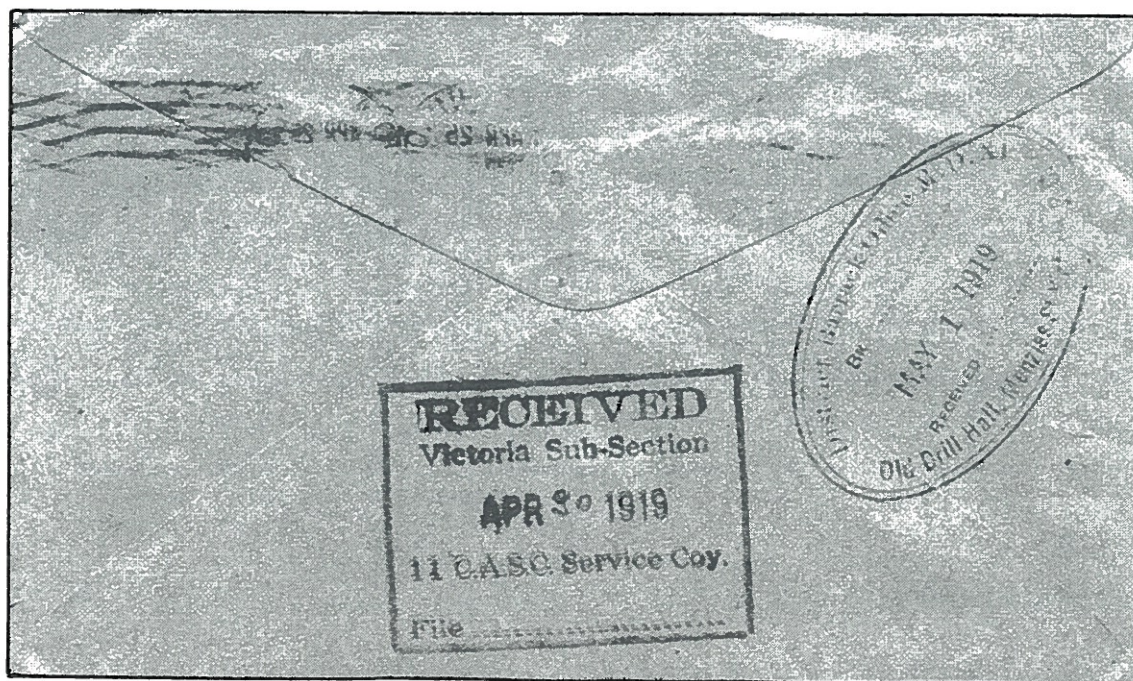
[Ken sent along copies of the following fascinating cover and details of the enclosed letter. We have not seen the oval marking previously. The cover bears the usual large FIELD POST OFFICE/SIBERIAN EXP. FORCE CDS and

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the scarcer BASE DEPOT/MAR 23 1919/SIBERIA postmark. It was sent by Adjutant McKenzie (?) to Lt. Wickson (?), C.A.S.C., Port Arthur, Ontario where it arrived on April 26, 1919 as noted by the machine cancel. It was re-directed to him at the "D.B.O." (District Barrack Office), Victoria, B.C., where it received the boxed April 30, 1919 Victoria Sub-Section/11 C.A.S.C. Service Coy. marking. Not only is the previous marking of interest, so too is the oval "District Barrack Office M.D. XI/Bk...../MAY 1 1919/RECEIVED...../Old Drill Hall, Menzies St., Victoria, B.C.".



[Cont'd.]



Ken also sent along the letter enclosed and it read:

"Base Depot  
22 III 19

Dear Wick:

Many thanks for yours of Jan 31st written from the old homestead, felt homesick right away [.] I would certainly like to see Edith again, but fate and a particularly jealous husband, besides being a few thousand miles apart has to be taken into consideration.

I have been adjutant of this show for sometime. The O.C. troops is a prince to work for, he is away inspecting etc. most of the time so I think [*italics the writer's*] I run the outfit. There is great unrest here just now and writing out operation orders is the order of the day. Just like being back in France, this is the damndest place for murders, they occur nightly, but haven't any damage to our force. The whole place is of course patrolled by large allied patrols otherwise chaos would spring up in no time.

I'm sorry to have missed the home coming of the 52nd, another excuse for a celebration. Oh well this isn't a dry country.

I expect we shall all be out of here before many more months slip by. Give my best regards to Major Ruttan [?] (the old rascal). I'll certainly never forget my very pleasant term of service in P.A. [Port Arthur]. Live & kisses to E.

As Ever,

[?] B McKenzie

[?] Troops [~~crossed out by the~~  
writer] damn" [.] Ed.]

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e-mail: [membership@forcespostalhistorysociety.org.uk](mailto:membership@forcespostalhistorysociety.org.uk)

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Dear CMMSG Members:

Spring is almost here and Henk and I want to wish everyone the best for the season. Another issue with some great items and thanks to the contributors. Have you something to contribute? Is there an area you wish examined? Why not send something in for a future issue?

BNAPEX 2013 will be held in Charlottetown, PEI August 30-September 1, 2013 and members are encouraged to attend the convention or exhibit. See the BNAPS website at [www.bnaps.org](http://www.bnaps.org) for more details or the previous BNA Topics for exhibit entry forms.

A warm welcome is extended to new member **Hugh Rathbun, Nova Scotia.**

Thanks to members' donated postage and extra funding, our NL#208 costs were as follows:

|                    |                |
|--------------------|----------------|
| Copies             | \$82.92        |
| Postage            | <u>\$ 9.19</u> |
|                    | (\$92.11)      |
| Balance            | \$1291.49      |
| Small Ad           | <u>\$ 5.00</u> |
| March 5/13 Balance | \$1296.49      |

Members are reminded about the call for assistance related to Doug Sayles' military postmark catalogue updates (see NL#206--Nov. 2012, p. 1260). Henk has been working on completing Volume I (From Confederation to the Great Depression). Contact Henk or Mike Street for more details.

Canadian military postal history seems to be still doing well on the market. David Collyer has sent along information related to a "DETAINED IN HONG KONG/BY JAPANESE" cover which sold recently on eBay for US\$1,225! More details in the next issue.

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#### SMALL ADS

Small ads from members are always welcome. Buy/Sell/Trade. Only Cdn. \$1 per insertion (or mint Cdn. postage @ face ok). Copy and payment to the Editor please.

WANTED: Camp Hughes, Sewell Camp, Camp Shilo postal history on covers and postcards. Buy, sell, trade. Contact: Darcy Hickson, R.R. #2, Box 24, Brandon, MB R7A 5Y2; (204) 725-0621; or [hicksondj@mts.net](mailto:hicksondj@mts.net) (2/10)

WANTED: All covers/cards related to Great War Newfoundland; Canadian POW's IN Germany (WWI/WWII); Canadians in Gibraltar/Malta during WWII. Contact: The Editor or [blueputtees@hotmail.com](mailto:blueputtees@hotmail.com) (2/5)

WANTED: Camp Borden MPO 208 and MPO 210--MOOD's and REGISTERED markings on postcard or cover. Contact: Dave Hanes (705) 722-6316 or [dhanes@sympatico.ca](mailto:dhanes@sympatico.ca) (1/5)

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