

Speeding Up the Mails for American Soldiers

Every Week 450,000 Letters Go to France, and Lack of Ships Has Complicated the Postal Problem—Cantonment Service Systematized

IN recent dispatches from the American front in France there was one paragraph to the effect that the only complaint our soldiers made was that when they returned to camp from the firing line trenches there was no American mail awaiting them.

The grievance of the soldiers was repeated the other day to the three men in the Postmaster General's Department in Washington who have the most to do with the getting of letters and other mail matter to all American soldiers. These men are John C. Koons, the First Assistant Postmaster General, responsible for the mail service of all the camps and cantonments in the United States; Otto Praeger, the Second Assistant Postmaster General, in charge of the mail for all our expeditionary forces in France, and Robert L. Maddox, Superintendent of Foreign Mails, who had just returned from France where he had been at work for four months in organizing the postal service there for American troops. These officials freely admitted that there had been delays and that there must continue to be delays from time to time because of unavoidable conditions both here and abroad. For the most part these have been and will continue to be due to the wartime uncertainties of transportation, especially transportation across the Atlantic.

That the army itself appreciates the difficulties and is grateful for the mail service that has been established is indicated by the letters which have been received by the Post Office Department from General Pershing and from Major Gen. Blatchford, who commands the line of communications in France, commending the system that has been put in operation by Superintendent Maddox. It is through the headquarters of General Blatchford that the Postal and Military Departments co-operate.

"Possibly," said Mr. Praeger, in explanation of the complaint referred to. "the time when the soldiers from the firing line did not get the home mail they were hoping for came at the end of one of the eighteen-day periods in which it was impossible to send any mail from America because there were no ships going over. There have been two such periods since our troops arrived in France.

"We have two ways of sending the mail to the troops abroad. They are by means of the army transports and the merchant ships of the French Line, which, as a rule, has a sailing once a week. But there are not many French ships available for the purpose and it is sometimes necessary to cancel a sailing to haul a vessel off for repairs. Twice



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Robert L. Maddox, Superintendent of Foreign Mails, Who Was Recently in France Organizing the Postal Service for the American Troops.

that has happened on occasions when no troopships happened to be ready to go, and that gave us the two unavoidable eighteen-day intervals with no mail departures. In one of those periods, however, I did send a batch of mail by a British ship, but that was of little help in the matter. The English are having all that they can do to get their own mail over, and we have used a British vessel for postal purposes only on this one occasion.

"All the American soldier mail for France originating west of the Mississippi River is made up at Chicago and all from east of the river is made up at New York. At those two points we work the mail down as fine as the company organizations. Each company has a mail sack of its own. All sacks for the companies of a single regiment are also kept together on their own rack, and the bags thus made up in New York and Chicago go intact to the troops. From the American port of departure to the arriving port in France the mail goes in either a troopship or a French liner. There are delays, of course, in this country in getting mail to the embarking point because of the wartime congestion of the railroads. There is further delay on the other side



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John C. Koons, First Assistant Postmaster General, Responsible for the Mail Service of All Camps and Cantonments in the United States.

due to the same cause. There, of course, the land transportation is more severely taxed than it is here. The troops themselves with their supplies have the right of way and it generally takes two days after a troopship arrives in France before we can get the mail from that ship taken away and distributed to the interior points where our troops are stationed.

"Service by means of the French merchant ships is faster than by the transports, so we send letters on the liners whenever possible and put printed matter and parcel post packages on the transports. Between the two we will average a mail departure from this country about once in every four or five days. A letter mailed within twenty-four hours' railroad time from New York on the day before a sailing will reach the soldier in France to whom it is written in two weeks, perhaps a day better than that. Two weeks is about the best that is physically possible under war conditions. On the other hand, thirty days would be about the maximum due to an unfortunate combination of all the elements of delay, including such a serious one as a canceled sailing. But that has happened only twice.

"Another thing that takes time in the

matter of the parcel post is the necessity of examining the contents of every package. It must be examined first by the Postmaster in the town at which it is mailed and again at the port of embarkation to make sure that it contains none of the articles prohibited by the postal laws. Failure in some instances on the part of local Postmasters to understand this rule has caused some congestion at the sea-coast shipping point. The rule, of course, applies to Christmas packages and all other parcels and covers all intoxicants, poisons, inflammable material such as matches, all compositions which may kill or injure a person or damage the mails. Improperly packed perishable matter is also barred.

"So far, in the tens of thousands of parcel post packages that we have examined and shipped abroad, we have found not the slightest trace of willful violation of the rule, nothing in any sense malicious or suspicious. In some of the comfort kits sent from families to soldiers there have been boxes of safety matches. We have simply removed them and then let the kits go to destination.

"Of course, the Post Office Department lets go of the mail before it actually is delivered to the individual soldier. We take it to the railheads in France nearest to the various groups of our men. There it is delivered to the mail orderlies of the several regiments and done up in the company bundles. Distribution from that point on is by the army's own machinery.

"All this system works remarkably well save in the case of unavoidable exceptions to the general rule. For example, many thousands of reserve officers have been sent over to France without being attached to any particular organization when they first arrive. We can do nothing with mail addressed to them except deliver it to the Adjutant General at the main headquarters.

"Another problem has been made for us by the sending over of parts of regiments which have been merged with other organizations after their arrival, thus losing their numbers and designations which they had when they left America. A letter addressed to a man in such a merged regiment gets held up over there till we can learn what organization he has been blended with. Furthermore, many of our engineer officers are detailed with French and British organizations. We have to reach them through the headquarters of the French postal system at Paris. But delays due to failure to find men not clearly classified are being rapidly eliminated because the American army in France has now completed a very

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comprehensive card index of its entire personnel, with every man's location accurately indicated. Of course the old causes of delay are bound to persist with each new batch of men or officers to arrive in France until they can get indexed, unless they are definitely attached to some organization from the start.

"Of course, there is always that familiar cause of delay which always exists in war or peace—the failure of the sender of mail to properly address it. A letter for a soldier in France should bear on the envelope his name and the designations of his company and regiment; nothing more nor nothing less than that. But we have thousands of letters simply addressed to So-and-so of the American Expeditionary Force or the American Army in France. For every such letter we have to apply the directory service test just as is done in the case of a letter addressed to a civilian in a large city without street and number being given.

"In spite of all these difficulties, we shipped more than a million letters for American soldiers in France in the first sixty days after our troops began to arrive here, and of that million and more only two thousand were undelivered. According to the October reports we are now sending 450 sacks of letters a week to our soldiers in France. That means 450,000 letters a week. At the same time we are sending 1,800 sacks of parcel post and printed matter each week. The mail traffic from the troops in France to the folks in America is considerably less, of course, because each soldier receives more letters than he writes. But, even so, we are bringing back from our troops 376,000 letters a month. There is very little printed matter and practically no parcel post bound this way from the army."

Robert L. Maddox, Superintendent of the Foreign Mail Service, went to England the middle of last June and, after studying the British system for handling soldier mail both in England and on the British front, began the work of building up the American system for the same service. When he left France early this month to return to Washington he turned the work over to John Clark, the United States postal agent in Paris with a working personnel of more than a hundred mail clerks at the several railhead Post Offices of America within easy reach of our troops.

"I have had the heartiest co-operation of the French postal authorities and of

the American Army officers," said Mr. Maddox, "and I believe that we have got the best system that can be built up for the mail service of an army in the field. A letter from as far west as Kansas in this country was delivered to General Pershing at his headquarters in France fourteen days after it was mailed. The soldier mail from the eastern part of the United States ought not to take more than twelve days for delivery to the trenches. It will average just about that. If we sent it by way of England we would have to allow three or four days more. Going direct to France, mail shipped on a French liner requires about ten days; mail shipped on a transport takes anywhere from thirteen to twenty days.

"From the French seaport where the mail is unloaded from the vessels it is taken by French railway trains to our field Post Offices. I would like to say that the French Government charges nothing for this service nor for carrying our mail across the Atlantic on the French liners. Later on we will transport the mail from the seaport to the troops on our own supply trains.

"Our policy has been and is to establish a Post Office at every railhead that is near any considerable body of American troops, say from 5,000 up. So far we have twelve such Post Offices in France, and of course there will be more as the demands for mail service increase. From these offices the mail is delivered directly to the mail orderlies of regiments, through whom it gets to the companies and the individuals. From some of the offices we also have what corresponds to our rural free delivery in America for the benefit of small and scattered special groups of soldiers. To them the mail

is taken in motor trucks furnished by the army for the purpose and manned by a military chauffeur and a civilian mail clerk.

"As in the French and British Armies, the greatest secrecy is maintained in everything that has to do with our mail service. Major General Blatchford, commanding the American line of communications, with whom I worked, never would



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Otto Praeger, Second Assistant Postmaster General, Who Directs the Handling of Mail for the United Expeditionary Forces in France.

Naturally the mail service for the American troops still held in the camps and cantonments of the United States is a much simpler matter so far as transportation is concerned. Nevertheless, it is a gigantic undertaking and makes up in greater bulk of mail delivered what it lacks in distance of haul.

"All told, we have to provide service for eighty-one camps in this country," said Mr. Koons, the First Assistant Postmaster General, who has worked out the system. "Of this number, all the national army cantonments and the National Guard camps will average 40,000 men. And a camp of 40,000 soldiers is the postal equivalent of a city with a population of 200,000 people. That is

give me a scrap of written instructions or information. Everything that we did had to be ordered orally. I would be told that a Post Office would be needed in such a place at such a time and then go to work to establish it. In each case the mail facilities were there when the troops arrived. No Post Office may be referred to by the name of the railhead or village in which or near which it is established. Instead of a name that would reveal its location, it has a number, and our postal clerks at the seaport office must have a record showing the location of every military unit with reference to the number of one of the twelve Post Offices."

because the man who goes into the army receives more letters in six months of his military life than he would get in six years of civilian life. He will also write many more letters than he would under normal conditions. This is as it should be, for the cheerful, encouraging effect of his correspondence with his family and friends is an indispensable asset in keeping a man in camp fit for his work as a soldier. It is a most important factor in the matter of soldier psychology, and the Post Office Department of the National Government is doing everything it can to further the welfare and the efficiency of all the troops by keeping them in daily touch with the people they have left at home.

"Our records show that we are delivering to the soldiers in the American camps and cantonments an average of 240,000 letters a day; also fifteen tons of parcel post packages every day. The outgoing letters written by the soldiers average about 80,000 a day for all the camps. The other forms of mail service are not so extensively used by the friends of the troops. We average only about 7,500 special delivery letters a month, 2,100 money orders aggregating \$42,000, and 3,300 registered letters.

"Each camp is under the postal jurisdiction of the nearest large city which has the proper facilities for expansion of service to meet the new strain. The Brooklyn Post Office, for example, takes care of the national army camp at Yaphank, although it is sixty miles away. But the service is much better than it could be if placed under the supervision of one of the nearby village Post Offices. Camp Meade is served by Baltimore, twenty miles away, and so on through the entire list of camps.

"At each camp we have our own postal personnel living in barracks of our own furnished by the War Department.

"Of course there is some delay in delivering the mail to the individuals of each fresh draft contingent as it comes into camp, but that delay ends as soon as the new men are assigned to their military units and located in their barracks. Then, too, there is the delay which army mail suffers in common with that of civilians because of the unusual war conditions. Many trains are missing connections nowadays because of troop movements, and the right of way of other trains carrying military supplies and mails can move no faster than the trains which carry them."