V-mail from Gander – and it wasn't a voice-mail!

(by Robert Pelley 20 December 2016)
http://bobsganderhistory.com

During the 2nd World War, Britain, Canada and the US had air force, naval and army personnel all over the world, including "overseas" in Gander. They needed to be supplied with all the tools and accessories of war from guns, planes, tanks, petrol, munitions, radio tubes to boots, with a lot more in between. Mail took second place.

But for members of the armed forces, the importance of mail was second only to food, water and munitions. It was most important during WWII for troops overseas to get mail from home, to let them know that they were not forgotten. On the other hand, getting mail from men in the field was essential to keep up morale at home.

Mail from and to troops in the field was extremely slow, as huge numbers of bags of letters had to be handled manually, loaded on to ships, with a long 2-3 week journey to a port. Unloading, sorting and sending it on to its destination added even more delay. And if something more urgent was need, the mailbags could well be left on the wharf.

The first attempt to solve the problem of the weight and space of mail was made by the British. The "Airgraph system", based on micro-filming, was a 1930s project involving the Eastman Kodak Company, Imperial Airways and Pan-American Airways. It was first created to provide a faster mail service to British forces in the Middle East and Africa. Before the Airgraph, a letter from Cairo to the United Kingdom took an estimated 24 to 30 days. It took even longer when the Italians cut off the Mediterranean and mail went around the south of Africa. The Airgraph reduced that time by at least half, because the microfilmed letters could travel by air instead of by sea. At their destination, the microfilm negatives were reprinted on paper and delivered as Airgraph letters via the Army Postal Services.

The St John's Daily News wrote about Airgraphs on 05 January 1942. This covered Airgraphs sent to troops in Europe.

AIRGRAPH SERVICE MEMBERS FORCES BEGINS JAN. 12TH

Will Afford Relatives and Friends a Faster Service by Mail.

Major Haig Smith, O.B.E., Secretary for posts and Telegraphs, informed the Daily News Saturday afternoon, that the Airgraph Service from Newfoundland to members of His Majesty's Land and Air forces (including logging units) serving in the United Kingdom, and to men serving in His Majesty's ships, address c/o G.P.O. London, will commence on Monday next, January 12th. Airgraph forms may be obtained at the counters at the General Post Office, and at the East and West End Post Offices in St. John's.

Only messages on the appropriate Airgraph form will be accepted, and nothing of any kind may be affixed to the front of the form. The fee for each form is 15 cents, and not more than two postage stamps to that value must be affixed to the back of the form. Only one form should be used for each message, and the instructions on the back of the form must be strictly complied with. Completed forms must be handed in at the Post Office counter, flat or folded across each way once only, to a fourth the size of the flat form. Airgraph forms for a particular mail will not be accepted in St. John's after 1 p.m. on a mail day.

The purpose of the new Airgraph Service is to afford the relatives and friends, a faster service by mail, than the present ordinary mail service presents. It is hoped that the new service will reduce that time by at least two weeks and in some cases by even more. Senders of Airgraph messages are asked not to use a fine nib pen when writing on the form, and not to write too small or use flourishes. Typewritten messages will be accepted if a good ribbon is used, and the typing is double space, there is space on message for about 150 to 170 words.

The Airgraph service was later extended to mail going the other way, from Great Britain to Canada and Newfoundland. The clipping below is from the Montreal Gazette of 07 August 1942.

AIRGRAPH CHANGES SOON

### U.K. to Canada, Newfoundland Service to Begin

Ottawa, August 6.—(P)—Airgraph service from Great Britain to Canada and Newfoundland is being instituted immediately, Post Office officials said today. The service is already in effect from Canada to Britain.

Rates on Airgraph messages from Britain will be the same as those here—15 cents when addressed to civilians and six cents to members of the forces. Announcement of the British service marks the success of lengthy negotiations between the two postal services.

Airgraph messages are written on special forms provided at post offices and are photographed on micro-film which is flown across the ocean, developed and enlarged there and forwarded to the destination.

A Canadian or Newfoundland Airgraph letter, from that manuscript and typewriter era, would have looked like this:
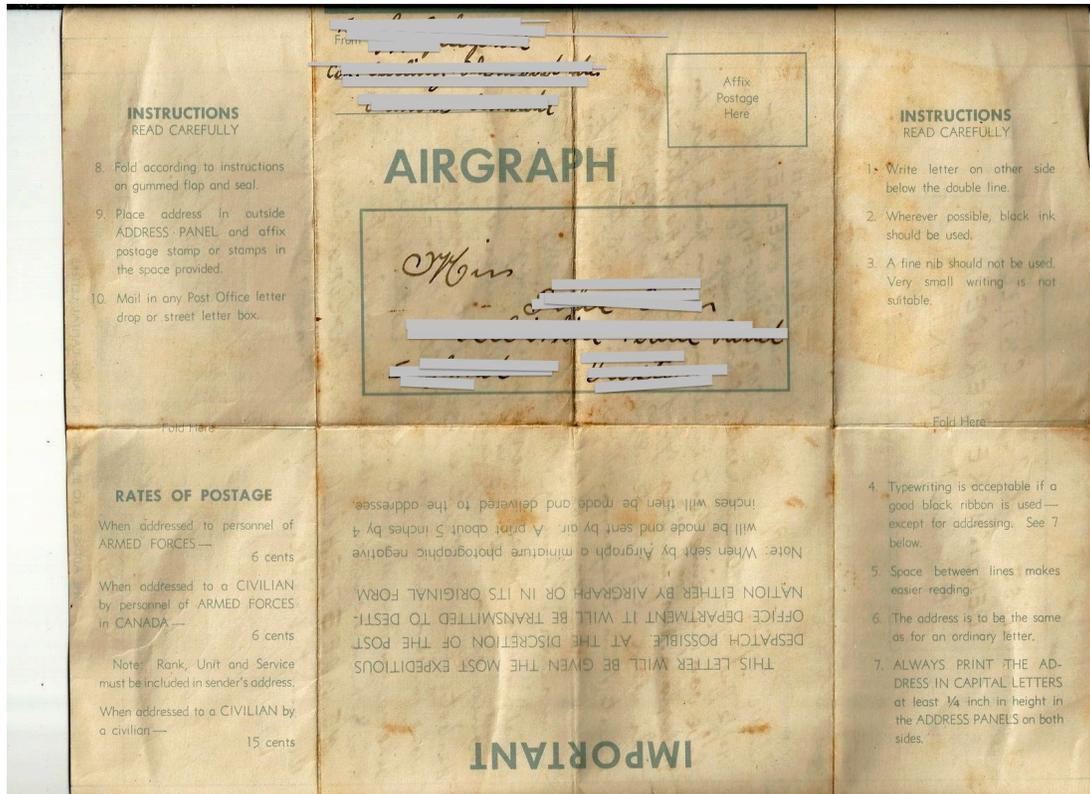
On the "mainland", Canadians turned in their Airgraphs at their local post office, from where they sent them to a special forwarding bureau of the Toronto Post Office. After censoring, they were then turned over to Canadian Kodak, photographed and placed on microfilm. Each reel could hold some 1,600 Airgraphs and weighed about four ounces, package included. Sent as ordinary letters, these messages would have weighed 25 pounds and filled half a mailbag.

It also eliminated the threat of spies using microdots or invisible ink to send reports. Microdots could not be photographed with enough resolution to be read.

The Toronto Post Office collected the reels, packaged them and sent them to a central postal facility in Ottawa, from where they were sent to overseas postal corps offices, first in England and then to units in

the field. The messages were transferred back from film to paper and then distributed to the troops.

It would appear that Airgraphs from Newfoundland were shipped directly to the General Post Office, London, by air, via Gander, on ferry flights. There was apparently not enough mail to justify a microfilm system and it seemed unproductive to send it to Toronto and then back through Gander, especially as Newfoundland was technically a separate country.

Delivery of these microfilmed letters was more certain than delivery of a traditional letter. A University of Fraser Valley internet article explained that in early in 1943, a RAF plane en route to Gander carrying 32 rolls of mail, or 50,000 letters, crashed in Newfoundland. The original letters were re-photographed and new films were dispatched on a later plane.

The US armed forces developed a similar system commonly called a V-mail. The V represented Victory and generally also had the V written in Morse code "dit-dit-dit-dah". The US forms were slightly larger than the British model but functionally the same, as seen below.

(use your zoom as necessary)

In the US armed services, servicemen were supplied the V-mail forms free of charge, and could send them free as well.

For a soldier on operations, to start the process, he would hand his V-mail directly to his Platoon commander, or some other Official Censor, who cut out or hid any sensitive information – dates, places, town names, unit designations, etc, so that if captured by the enemy, it would be of no intelligence value. It then went off to an Army Post Office close behind the battlefield where the microfilming was done. The microfilm was then flown out to an Army Post Office processing center in New York City, San Francisco, or Chicago, whichever was closest to its destination. At the V-Mail center, the 16 mm film was printed, folded, put into an envelope, postmarked and put in the normal mail for delivery.

On occasion these V-mails from soldiers in the field showed their sense of humour or perhaps of fatality:

V-mail sent *from* the US was first sent to a V-Mail processing center, where the letter was opened, censored and sorted by destination. It then was copied onto a 16mm film along with about 1,500 other

letters headed for the same location. A copy of the microfilm was saved, in case the air shipped reel did not make it to its destination.

To get this mail from the US to the soldiers, Army Post Office mail centers moved with the troops in the field. A majority had a V-Mail processing capability. When such a facility received a roll of V-mail microfilm from home, it processed it back into letters, exactly as it was done in the US. Each letter was printed onto photo paper at about ¼ its original size - about 4¼ by 5½ inches.

This process may seem to be laborious, but in fact saved a lot of time. But it really came down to saving space. For every 150,000 letters microfilmed as V-Mail, over a ton of shipping space was freed up. One can see below the difference between two V-mail film rolls and the equivalent regular mail.

(from the US Postal Museum)

A video of the whole V-mail process came be seen here:

http://postalmuseum.si.edu/victorymail/video/PostalMuseum.wmv

The use of V-mail was constantly pushed by authorities and cast as an important patriotic duty. There were constant reminders before the movies and in the paper and magazines.

In spite of the patriotic appeal of V-mail, most people still sent regular first class mail. In particular, many women chose to write on personalized stationary, since the V-Mail format didn't allow for unique touches. For instance, a lipstick mark on the paper might clog the machine that processed the letters and was therefore discouraged.

Between 15 June 1942 and 01 April 1945, roughly 570 million V-mail letters were sent from the U.S. to military post offices and over 510 million pieces were received from military personnel abroad.

In Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan*, one of the more poignant images of World War II is that of Caparzo, a GI lying in the middle of a street. He is alone, dying in the rain, holding out a letter to his dad and calling out to his buddies who are still under sniper fire. Later that night, after Caparzo's death, the letter was taken by Medic Wade, who recopied the letter to a fresh V-Mail form, with detached, quiet emotion.

In Gander, on the American side the postal stations were called US Army Post Offices. It may seem strange at first glance that an army post was used on an aviation base. However, in those days, it was not the US Air Force but rather the US _Army_ Air Force.

When the Americans first arrived, the number of the Gander Army Post Office was 801-C. Sometime in 1942-43 the American military chain of command in Newfoundland was slightly modified and the APO numbers were also changed. The new APO number became 865.

The document shown below was recently transacted on an on-line auction site.
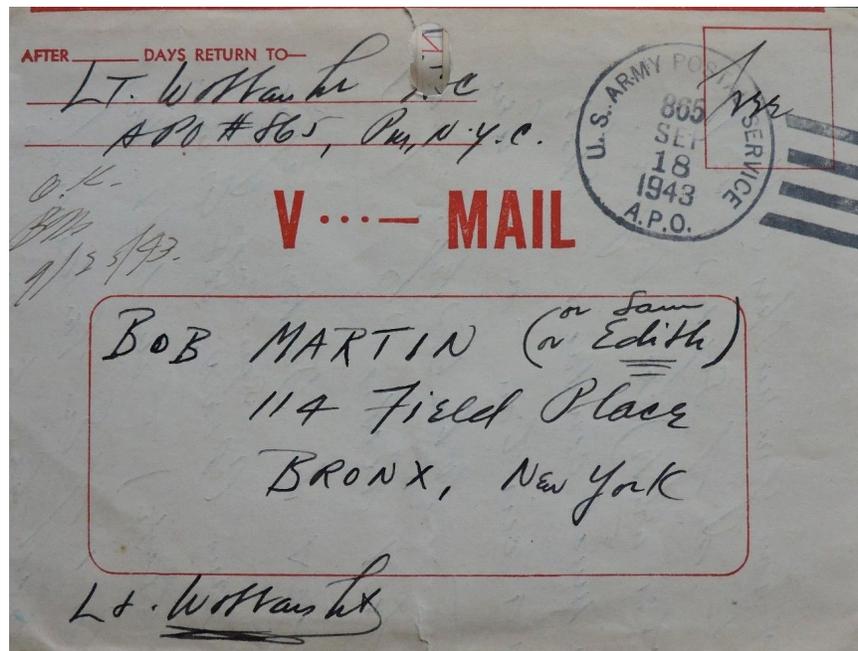
This particular V-mail letter has a couple of interesting points. For example, in the small square in the top right corner there is no stamp. As mentioned previously, for troops in the field, sending V-mail was free – and Gander, for Americans, was "overseas".

Another interesting aspect of this letter is the absence of a censor's mark and signature. This is because officers, as opposed to enlisted personnel, had the privilege of self-censorship and usually signed in the bottom left corner, (with or without the word "censored"). The

initials under the return address appear to be from New York, done a week after initial franking.

Like the British Airgraphs, V-mail was a brilliantly smart invention for the time. It appears that Lt Williams on the American side in Gander was able to understand and appreciate it.