

OPERATIONS OF BASE CENSOR'S OFFICE.

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The Base Censor's Office was established in August 1917 at St. Nazaire, France, in the building occupied by the American Army Post Office. Its personnel, numbering four enlisted men and one officer, confined its work to the examining of a small portion of the mail received at the post office. Later, when it was seen that a very small portion of the out-going mail would pass thru St. Nazaire, and when the importance of the location of Paris in relation to the transportation system of France and the probable location of American troops was realized, the office and personnel were removed to Paris, located in the Hotel Mediterranee, where it still remains. Within a few days of the establishment of the office in Paris, several officers were added to the force and the number of the enlisted personnel increased.

The amount of mail handled by the office began to increase very rapidly during the month of December 1917; that increase continued until November 1918, when the peak was reached and the receipts began to decrease. The appended table will show the amount of mail received and examined per month and the character of the mail.

During this month, December 1917, the work of the office was systematized by dividing it into departments, roughly as follows: Foreign language mail; mail destined for Allied and Neutral countries; mail from and to points in the A.E.F., including mail originating around Paris; the Regimental or re-censoring section; the Blue Envelope section; and the Recording section, which includes the administrative force of the office and the receiving, sorting and despatch of mails.

Starting with one officer and four enlisted men at St. Nazaire, the office force has increased, fluctuating from time to time, until at the present writing there are thirty-three officers, one hundred and eighty-three enlisted men, and twenty-seven civilian employees.

The Foreign Language Section is that part of the office devoted to censoring mail written in languages other than English. The personnel capable of reading the various languages found in the American Expeditionary Forces was drawn from the A.E.F., and, excluding Chinese and Japanese, forty-nine languages have been found and handled in the Base Censor's Office. Such Japanese mail as has come thru has been read for us by the British authorities at the War Office in London, and the Chinese letters have been read by Y.M.C.A., secretaries attached to the Chinese labor camps.

The Allied and Neutral Department handles mail written in English addressed to Allied or Neutral countries; the mail of this character in foreign languages being handled by the Foreign Language Sec-

ion. It was realized that letters addressed to these points, especially on the continent of Europe, gave the widest opportunity for the prompt forwarding of dangerous information which might be availed of by the enemy, and this class of mail has received very close attention.

The Local Department has handled mail from and to points in the American E.F., and this mail also has received very close attention because of the fact that information written in this class of mail, which might be entirely harmless if allowed to go to the United States, may be exceedingly dangerous if it were found on the person of prisoners or dead in the front lines.

The Regimental Department is devoted entirely to the re-censoring of mail which has already been censored once in the organization and has been sacked for transport direct to the U. S. This mail has been intercepted without previous warning to the organization, and a check has thereby been obtained on the manner in which censorship by company officers has been performed. Also in the re-censoring of this mail, the mail of officers, which otherwise would be forwarded under their counter-signature, has been read and information obtained as to the conscientiousness in which they have censored their own mail.

The Blue Envelope Section has dealt with the mail of soldiers which has been enclosed in the so-called Blue Envelope furnished the troops in specified quantities in order to afford the enlisted man an opportunity to send letters of a private or personal character without subjecting same to the supervision of officers of his own immediate unit with whom he is in close personal relation.

During the month of March 1918 the issue of censor stamps became a function of the Base Censor's Office, it being found that it was absolutely necessary to centralize the issue of stamps to one agency that was centrally located, and also it was found to be absolutely essential that the Base Censor's Office be informed at all times in regard to the holder of any given stamp in order that communications needing attention could be immediately traced.

Shortly after the arrival of American troops in France in any considerable number, the Army Postal Service was instituted and troops were forbidden, in localities served by the American Army Postal Service, to use the French civil post. In such localities in France not reached by the American post, the mail of American units there was transported by the French, thru the French Bureau Central Militaire, to the American Post Office in Paris. This mail being censored either by the organization censors before transported by the French, or by the Base Censor after being turned over by the French, was not handled for censorship at all by the French authorities, and we have at no time been dependent on the French authorities for the censorship of any A.E.F., mail.

Certain units of our Army, however, were located in the area of the British Expeditionary Forces, and as this area was entirely served by the British Army Postal Service, it was more feasible to

have them take over the mail service of these units than to attempt to do it independently ourselves. To obviate the necessity of throwing the work of censorship on the British authorities, and also to meet any possible objections of our people to having the British censor the mail of our units, officers from this office were detailed to the Chief Censor's Office, British E.F., at Boulogne to handle American mail. This mail, although it bore the British censor stamp, was censored entirely by American personnel, but the actual handling of the mail was largely done by the British.

In Great Britain the mail of organizations stationed there was at first handled by the civil postal service, and handled for censorship by the British authorities at their civil establishments in London and Liverpool. At their urgent request officers were sent from this office to Liverpool in the latter part of August 1918 to take charge of this work and to relieve the British both of the responsibility and the work itself. This work was carried on by these officers by the opening of an office at present located at No. 30 James Street, Liverpool, in which the work is done under their supervision by civilian personnel hired by the American Government. At the present writing the American units have been entirely removed from the B.E.F., area in France, and the American personnel of the British Censor Office has returned to the Paris office. The office at Liverpool still continues to function although the amount of mail handled has decreased by over 50% and is rapidly decreasing.

The principle on which our entire system of censorship is founded is that of making the smallest military unit responsible for the censorship of all its mail, with the exception of the Blue Envelope mail, which is only handled by the Base Censor. The carrying out of this censorship requires the reading of the mail by the detachment or platoon commander; his counter-signature on the face of the envelope and at the foot of the letter to indicate that he has censored same and found it O.K.; the application of the censor stamp by the stamp holder after he is satisfied as to the correctness of the commissioned officer's signature; and then the re-censoring of such mail as is deemed necessary by the trained personnel of the Base Censor's Office, in order that a check may be kept on the character of the work done by the local or organization censor.

This system is very largely that followed by the B.E.F., and developed by their experience of nearly four years before we entered the war, and I desire to take this opportunity to express my hearty appreciation of the advice and assistance which has been most willingly and generously offered by the British authorities in helping us to establish our own system. In the main this system has worked well, and in the main the organization censorship has been well and conscientiously performed, but the censorship as a whole has suffered thru several causes. The principal one, perhaps, being the abnormally rapid growth of the A.E.F., in France during the Spring and Summer of 1918, and the lack of opportunity for proper instruction of newly arriving units as to the correct way of exercising censorship. If it had been possible to establish a school in the United States where at least one officer for every troop transport had received

before sailing instruction in the censorship regulations and the proper method of applying them, a great deal of difficulty and a great deal of improper letter writing could have been avoided. A second difficulty has been the shortage of personnel in the Base Censor's Office to adequately supervise and examine the mail that was passed thru the office.

During the latter part of August and the month of September 1918 the physical handling alone of the mail received at the office was a severe task for the entire personnel, to say nothing of subjecting it to any adequate censorship. Conditions became better in the last half of October, and on November 14th, three days after the signing of the Armistice, seventy-nine limited service men and two officers arrived from the United States for work in the office, which gave us adequate personnel for the first time since the month of June 1918. Pursuant to the policy adopted at the first establishment of the office, the personnel has been drawn from the officers and enlisted men of the Army.

The Base Censor's Office has three main functions: (a) Original censoring of mail, which is principally confined to that written in foreign languages and that contained in the Blue Envelopes. (b) Re-censoring of mail in order that supervision may be had over the character of work done by local or organization censors, and in order also that for the more important mail special precautions may be taken by trained men who are in close touch with the General Staff. (c) The gathering from all mail of information concerning the morale of troops; the feeling of the troops towards public questions; the detection of irregularities and abuses that should receive the attention of inspectors; and close cooperation with the Intelligence Section in the supervision of individuals of uncertain character or standing. As a part of this third function, there was established in the Paris office during the month of July 1918, a chemical laboratory with facilities for experimenting in the development and detection of secret writing, and for experimentation in new developments along that line.

In the month of September 1918 the office took over from the Prisoner of War Information Bureau of the Adjutant General's Office, the censorship of mail to and from German Prisoners of War in American custody, and of mail destined for American Prisoners of War in Germany. This work is at present being carried on at the Central Records Office at Bourges, France, by a personnel of five officers and twenty-six enlisted men, and the information found in these letters is proving to be of value in affording an insight into present conditions in Germany and of the feeling of the German prisoners themselves towards the American Army and Americans.

As has already been stated, the phenomenally rapid growth of the American Army in France during the Summer of 1918 made the task of the Base Censor's Office, in keeping up with the growth of its work, an exceedingly difficult one, and certain features of the work, which should have been emphasized, had to be neglected. As for example the re-censoring of mail already censored in the organizations. The system of censoring regimentally can only be successful when it

is thoroughly and adequately supervised by an authority specially trained in censoring, for the average regimental officer has his hands more than full with other work of his organization, and the work of censoring is often only the addition of a most disagreeable and time-consuming duty, which he often feels he would take any method to escape. It is a self-evident truth that censorship could be better performed, both from the stand point of thoroughness and also with less objectionable features to the individual letter writer, if it could be done entirely by an impersonal organization such as the Base Censor's Office. The difficulty, of course, is the supplying of adequate personnel, particularly when the war is fought at such a great distance from the Army's base, as has been the case in Europe. Even so it would not be impossible nor impractical to employ personnel enlisted for this purpose and no other at strategic centers back of the advance zone where the mail could be routed without necessarily delaying it. A rough outline of this scheme would be a central office having control over all censor personnel, being responsible for its instruction and discipline; the issuance of censor stamps and bulletins on censorship which it would get thru direct and frequent touch with G.H.Q.; sub-offices strategically located according to centers of transportation, and local offices at each large training area or cantonement. With this system the necessity for the use of the Blue Envelope would be obviated and the work would be more expeditiously performed, as well as much more efficiently.

There have been complaints in regard to the delay of mail by the censor, but there has been little ground for these complaints so far as the present Base Censor's Office is concerned, for it has been a rule of the office, except in the case of letters requiring disciplinary action, to forward all mail within twenty-four hours after its receipt at the office. In the case of foreign language mail this twenty-four hour limit is sometimes increased to forty-eight, but as a rule the shorter time prevails even here also. The office has often noted, however, a considerable difference between the written date on letters and the postmark on same, occasionally amounting to two weeks or more, apparently indicating that the time required for local censorship, plus the time required to transport same to the nearest Army Post Office, has been the cause of great delay.

It has been our observation that the privilege of the Blue Envelope has been highly appreciated by the troops, but it has been subject to severe abuses. The first, which perhaps should not be classed as an abuse, has been the interpretation of the definition of the kind of mail that can properly be enclosed, as the average soldier thinks that any letters which he writes to his family or friends are 'Personal and Private', and they often enclose postcards, etc., which never meet that definition. There have been relatively few attempts at including in the Blue Envelope letters of a sort which are definitely prohibited by censorship regulations and which the soldier would not attempt to write in letters subject to ordinary censorship. There have been enough of these, however, to make it necessary for this office to examine as large a percentage of the Blue Envelope mail as possible. There have been instances where the organization officers have attempted to have all the mail

written by the members of their units sent to the Base Censor in the Blue Envelope, thereby relieving them of the duty of censoring it. This is a very difficult matter to prove usually, but ~~we have been~~ ^{the B.S.} enabled to detect enough flagrant cases of this sort to act as a deterrent to others who might attempt it, but there have undoubtedly ^{the case} been many cases that ~~we have~~ let go because ~~we were unable to prove~~ our case. We have never detected in the letters we have read any serious objection to censorship of mail, provided it was done impersonally, but there is a most decided objection on the part of the enlisted men to having the censorship done by their own officers, and they bitterly resent having it done by non-commissioned officers, as has been attempted from time to time. There have been many attempts to improvise Blue Envelopes so as to take advantage of the facilities of the Base Censor's Office while unable to secure the authorized envelope. In one instance an Engineer outfit which had access to a printing plant, prepared a large supply of counterfeit envelopes for its own use. Unfortunately however, from their stand point, the Sergeant in charge of the printing, printed a few envelopes for his private use with his own counter-signature and the name of his correspondent thereon. This, of course, gave away the whole story the first time the envelopes came into the office.

We have detected relative few attempts at conveying military information for the use of the enemy. We have, however, discovered many attempts at the conveying of forbidden information for the satisfaction of the curiosity of friends and relatives at home. This information is usually in the form of the location of the writer; the troops near him; and where he is to go, and ordinarily is in some form of an easily detected code. In a few instances this information has been conveyed by the use of invisible inks. In these cases, and in all others involving violation of censorship regulations, disciplinary action has been instituted by the Base Censor, the matter in question being taken up with the soldier's immediate or higher commander, or thru the Adjutant General's Office if the seriousness of the case seemed to warrant it.

The statistical tables of the amount of work handled each month are on file in the monthly reports sent to G.H.Q. The appended table gives only the total number of pieces of each class of mail handled up to January 1, 1919. It should be borne in mind in considering these figures that the Base Censor's Office has confined itself entirely to the examination of mail originating in the A.E.F., and has at no time examined the mail coming to the A.E.F. The amount of regimental mail re-censored is not included in the totals therein, although it has been noted on the table.

The office, when established at St. Nazaire, was under the command of Major (afterwards Colonel) W. F. Creary. He was relieved on November 17th, 1917 by Lieutenant Colonel (Afterwards Colonel) Homer B. Grant, who, in turn, was relieved in May 1918 by Major A. L. James, Jr., who was succeeded the following month by Captain Burton A. Adams, who is Base Censor at the present writing.

Paris, France,
Jan. 13, 1919.

B. A. Adams
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Captain, USA,
Base Censor.