

Malta is of strategic importance in the 'Med', straddling the north-south supply route between Italy and her North African colonies and Britain's west-east passage between Gibraltar, Egypt and the Suez Canal. Despite continuing Italian air attacks the island is tenaciously and successfully defended.



Winston Churchill decides that Malta must be defended at all costs.
Missing gold (left) with normal.

Grand Harbour is sufficiently deep for even the largest Royal Navy vessels and big enough for large numbers of ships to berth at the same time.



The air defence of Malta initially relies upon three Sea Gladiators, their heroic exploits leading them to become known affectionately as "Faith", "Hope" and "Charity".

Dobble is appointed Governor of Malta in April. His first act is to issue an Order of the Day invoking divine aid and protection. He then turns his attention to the practical difficulties of the island's defence.



The first delivery of Hurricanes flies onto Malta off the carrier HMS Argus on 2 August.

Type R1 RAF Censor No 37 was used on Malta until September 1940. The reverse bears an oval 'HEADQUARTERS R.A.F. / MEDITERRANEAN MALTA' cachet. Mail was despatched from Malta on any available transport. The Plymouth paid die suggests this item of mail left the island by sea. Two squadrons are on the island at the date of posting. No 261 consisting of the original three Sea Gladiators and the few recently arrived Hurricanes and No 230 with Sunderland seaplanes.



While buildings are reduced to rubble the population shelter in cellars and caves.

The 2nd Battalion Devonshire Regiment is part of Malta's defence force throughout 1940.

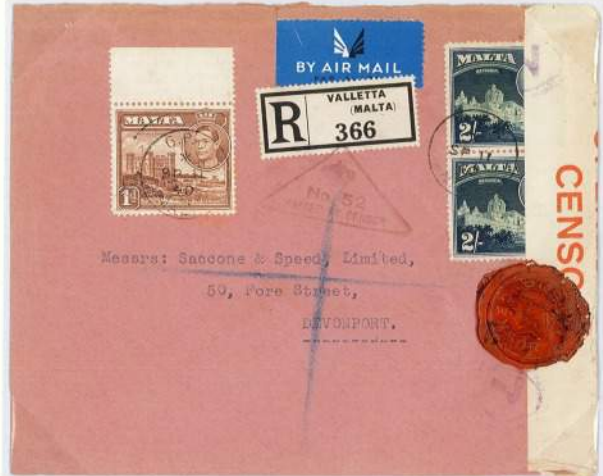
During August and September unit cachets were applied to mail to indicate the sender was military personnel and therefore entitled to free postage.



On 11 June the Regia Aeronautica carries out its first operation against Malta, the first of a constant bombardment of the island.



The base ship HMS St Angelo withstands 69 direct hits between 1940 and 1943.



Registered civilian mail was sealed back and front by the censor using a wax seal. The 'NAVAL INTELLIGENCE CENTRE / MALTA' cachet applied to the reverse of this cover was possibly used when mail was referred to the naval authorities because it contained naval references. A retired naval reserve officer, Lieutenant Commander R G Giddings, is appointed to command the submarine base in Valletta Harbour. He is also employed part-time as the sales representative for the wine company Saccone & Speed. The combination of the Saccone & Speed imprint and the naval cachet suggests he is the sender of this letter.



Reverse reduced

6.2 and military engagements in north and east Africa.

The British Army presence in Egypt is crucial to ensure the Suez Canal, the major artery of imperial communications, remains open. The defence of the eastern Mediterranean coast and the Red Sea passage is consequently vital. British forces go on the offensive almost immediately following Mussolini's declaration of war.



With the outbreak of war British military mail from Egypt is censored and Egyptian stamps have to be used. The MPO/E601 cancel is used in Cairo and the transit back stamp BPO/E602 in Alexandria.



RAF action commences on 11 June when obsolete Bristol Bombays of No 216 Squadron flying from Heliopolis carry out bombing missions over Libya.



On 14 June the 4th Armoured Brigade pass through the 'wire' into Libya and capture the Italian border forts at Capuzzo and Maddalena.



An 'Honour' envelope from a member of the RAF. At this stage of the Desert War the RAF has only seven bomber and fighter squadrons equipped with Gladiators and Blenheims in the theatre. As elsewhere, the RAF used its own distinctive censor cachets. The BPO/E602 cancel was used in Alexandria.



Reverse reduced



The Royal Navy is dependent on oil from Iran and Iraq.



Italy's large military garrison in Libya comprises mainly of local troops officered by Italians. Each division consists of one artillery and two infantry regiments.



Posta Militare 263 was allotted to the 63 Infantry Division 'Cyrene', at the time of posting stationed in Tobruk. Three months later the division was advancing into Egypt.



Lieutenant Raffaele Bonanno is posthumously awarded the Gold Medal for 'Military Merit' for his heroism during the British assault at Nezeit Ghibra on 16 June. This Italian illustrated 'Carlolina Postale per le Forze Armate' card is one of a series commemorating other recipients of this award.

The Italians are soon undertaking incursion into neighbouring British held territory confident in their numerical superiority. Italy has an army of 350,000 deployed in Eritrea, Abyssinia and Italian Somaliland.



Reverse reduced

Rather than run the gauntlet of the British blockade 138 German seamen trapped with their ship at Asmara in Italian Eritrea elect to form a unit, the 'Compagnia Autocarrata Tedesca', within the Italian army rather than being interned. Italy's declaration of war legitimises their status. Endorsed with Italian and German censor and postal markings this cover, from a member of this unit, was probably carried by a Savoia-Marchetti trimotor of Servizio Aerei Speciali from Gondar to Benghazi, then forwarded to Rome in a Cant Z 506 seaplane before onward transmission to Bremen.

This Italian military 'Africa Orientale' postal stationery card indicates the Italian dominance in the Horn of Africa.



British forces are reinforced by Indian troops. The Rajputana Rifles, as part of the Indian 5th Infantry Division, disembark at Port Sudan during September to reinforce the British garrison.

From 19 September until 7 October the Division is based at Gebeit. On 8 October it moves to Gedaref, close to the Abyssinian border.

The Indian Army FPO 23 was used by the 5th Indian Infantry Division throughout 1940.



Attacks into Sudan in July herald the beginning of Italian offensive activities.



On 4 July, attacking from Abyssinia and Eritrea, Italian forces capture the British outposts of Kassala and Gallabat on the Sudanese border.



Italy enjoys air superiority, the RAF having only three squadrons stationed in Sudan, two of which, No 74 and 223, are flying outdated Vickers Wellesleys.



Cover endorsed with a rarely seen 'H.Q.S.D.F.' (Headquarters Sudan Defence Force) censor cachet. The SDF, consisting of native recruits under the command of British officers, is tasked with defending the Sudanese border. The Force also undertakes hit-and-run raids into Italian Abyssinia.



The successful Italian invasion of British Somaliland commences on 3 August when the Duke of Aosta, commander of Italian forces in East Africa, launches an army of 25,000 men against the British colony.



British Somaliland at the southern end of the Red Sea is of strategic importance to Britain.



The invading Italian force is supported by heavy artillery.



The Duke of Aosta and advancing Italian troops are illustrated on this 'Cartolina postale per le Forze Armate' card issued in 1941.

Italian incursions into Egypt start on 13 September, five divisions and 200 tanks under Marshal Graziani crossing the Libyan-Egyptian border. Within three days Sidi Barrani, sixty miles inside Egypt, is captured. Inexplicably the Italians halt their advance at this point and they proceed to 'dig in'.



Italian forces drive on towards Buq Buq, a deserted salt-pan on the Egyptian coast. Between 3 August and 22 November the Posta Militare N. 303 cancel is used at Bu Amud by the 142^a Reggimento Fanteria. At the date of posting, as part of the Divisione di Fanteria 'Catanzaro', the regiment is advancing towards Buq Buq. The card bears both unit and censor cachets.



The advancing Italian troops are well equipped with armour, motorised troops and air support. Italy issued a set of 'propaganda' stamps in 1942 consisting of the Imperiale design with attached labels. Three airmail stamps with similar labels were also produced, including the 2 Lire, but these were not issued.



Much of the fighting takes place in inhospitable desert terrain.



The defending troops, a mixed force including Indian troops of the 3/15th Punjab Regiment and local Askari, are only able to put up token resistance against the Italians.



The light cruiser HMS Carlisle and the sloop HMS Auckland are among ships evacuating Allied troops from Berbera on the 18 August. Italian forces entering the port the following day.



The 'S.C.C., KAR' cachet identifies this correspondence as coming the Somaliland Camel Corp, a unit within the King's African Rifles. Capt. E. Berry (details on back flap) follows common practice by censoring his own mail, the initials 'EB' appearing in the censor cachet. The Somaliland Camel Corp is a highly mobile unit, but too small to offer significant resistance against the Italian forces.



Italian troops briefly occupy Buq Buq for three weeks. According to the sender's details on the back flap he was a member of the 270^a Legione CC. NN. 147^a Btg. 1^a Compagnia. The Posta Militare N. 304 cancel was used at Buq Buq from 26 November to 15 December during the Italians' occupation of the location.

Reinforcements are sent despite Britain's defence being of paramount importance. On 15 August the Chief of the General Staff, realizing the desperate situation in North Africa, authorises the sending of tanks and artillery to Egypt. Dominion troops further strengthen the British garrison.



The FPO 368 cancel is used on board the liner H.M. Transport Andes while transporting the 2nd Armoured Division from Britain to Egypt via the Cape. Sailing during November, mail is put ashore in Freetown on 29 November and Durban on 13 December. Andes docks in Suez on 28 December.



The troopship Dominion Monarch sails in Convoy AP3, arriving in Suez on 22 October.



The first Hurricanes arrive in Egypt via Takoradi during September.



Churchill judges 'the decision to give this blood transfusion while we braced ourselves to meet mortal danger was at once awful and right.'



Australian troops previously stationed in Palestine begin moving into Egypt during September.

The '1st BGE H.Q.P.O. M.1' cancel was used by the Australian 6th Division P.U. at Qastina, Palestine and then at Helwan Camp near Cairo when the Unit moved there at the beginning of September.



Convoy US-4 arrives in Suez on 29 September bringing troop reinforcements from Australia and New Zealand. The New Zealand commander is Lieutenant General Bernard Freyberg.

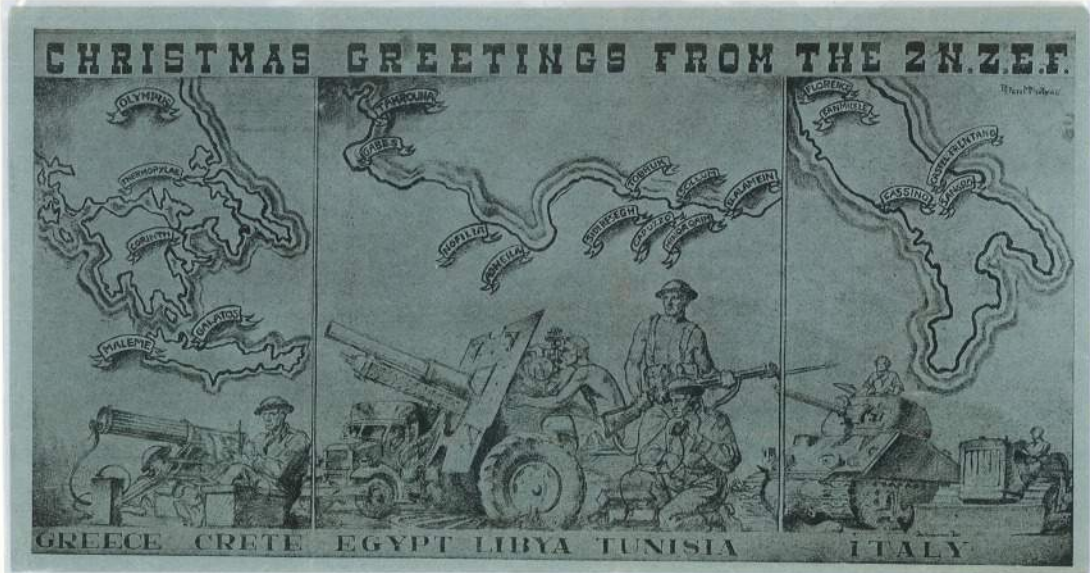


New Zealand military 'On Active Service' aerogramme.



Small contingents of Polish and Czech troops further strengthen the Allied forces.

Although a build up of New Zealand troops is occurring in Egypt during September they take little part in the forthcoming operations against the Italians.



6.4 Greece becomes an unwelcome commitment.

Italy's invasion of Greece on 28 October compels General Sir Archibald Wavell, Commander-in-Chief Middle East, to dispatch forces to assist the Greeks in the defence of their country. This inconveniently coincides with his endeavour to strengthen his forces in Egypt to enable him to counter Italian advances in the Western Desert.



Italy annexed Albania in April 1939. It is across this country's southern border that Italian troops launch their invasion of Greece five months later.



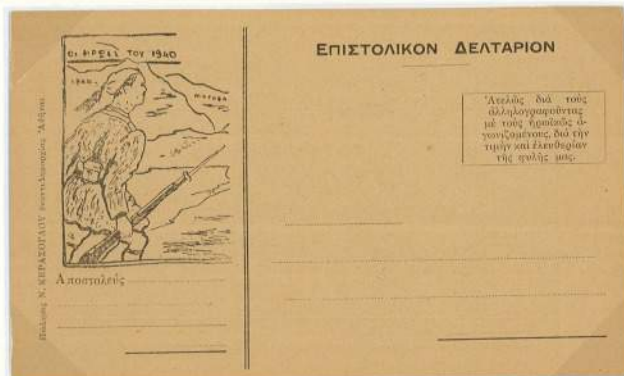
Overprint marking Italy's annexation of Albania.



The La Division "Murge" advances into Greece on 30 October. The 'UFFICIO POSTALE MILITARE 52' cancel was allotted to the La Division "Murge" and was used in Albania by the Division throughout 1940. At the time of posting units of the Division were located in the southern coastal city of Porto Edda (Santi Quaranta).



Following the Greek's rejection of the Italian ultimatum, that its troops should enter Greek territory and occupy certain unspecified "strategic locations", Greek forces move up to their northern border to repel the invaders.



Greek military field post card, the text reading 'For the heroic fighters for the honour and freedom of our country.'



The naval base at Suda Bay is of strategic importance to British interests in the Mediterranean. The FPO 192 cancel is used at Suda Bay, Crete, from 20 November 1940 until 3 February 1941. The cover is back stamped with a square boxed 'Unit Censor / 259' cachet.

British troops land on Crete from 31 October and while all Greek units are sent to the front Allied troops become responsible for the defence of the island.



On 31 October HMS Ajax escorts a convoy carrying men of the 2nd Yorks & Lancs Battalion from Alexandria to Crete. More reinforcements follow.



Greek troops heavily defeat the Italians at Koriza on 21 November and then successfully push them back into Albania.



Large numbers of Italian troops are taken prisoner by the Greeks. From an Italian prisoner in 'Campo 2', this Greek Red Cross POW card bears Greek censor cachets and a Rome International Red Cross cachet on the reverse. The message is dated 12.12.40.

A gradual build up of Allied forces in Egypt and Kenya enables the Allies to mount successful operations against Italian forces in North and East Africa.



Operation "Compass", launched on 9 December, sees the 30,000 strong Western Desert Force advancing westward. So successful is the offensive that by 20 December Italian troops are being driven out of Egypt and Allied forces are advancing into Libya.

RAF Type R2 censor No. 114, when used in conjunction with FPO 246, is thought to have been used by RAF units giving tactical support to General O'Connor's troops as they advanced in Libya. RAF censor No 114 was used in Egypt from August and FPO 246 from 25 September by the 7th Armoured Division.



Recently arrived Hurricanes provide air cover for attacking troops.



Australian troops support the British offensive in North Africa.



Armour is used to full effect.



The offensive is not without loss. This cover is back stamped with a straight line 'CAPTAIN & ADJUTANT / 3RD COLDSTREAM GUARDS' cachet with signed manuscript 'Deceased'. Guardsman Frederick Stanley Birtles was killed on 11 December, his body being interred in Halfaya Soltum War Cemetery, Egypt.



The fight back in East Africa commences on 16 December. Colonial troops in Kenya, reinforced by units from West and South Africa, successfully drive Italian forces out of El Wak before advancing towards their main objective, the port of Kismayu in Italian Somaliland.



Units of the King's African Rifles and South African troops move into Kenya in readiness for operations against the Italians.



South African troops lead the advance. The South African 'A.P.O. - U.M.P.K. 11' cancel was used at Gilgil Camp, Kenya from 17 September. (The initials 'M.F.F.' and 'U.D.F.' stand for 'Mobile Field Force' and 'Union Defence Force'.)



Squadrons of the South African and Southern Rhodesian Air Force flying mainly obsolete biplanes including the Hawker Fury give support to the ground troops.



The Type R2 RAF censor is used in Kenya from November, three numbers, 19, 79 and 137, having been recorded.



7.2 the threat of invasion receding Britain remains defiant.

As 1940 draws to a close the British people led by Winston Churchill are, despite initial defeats, facing with grim determination and sacrifice the struggle against German and Italian aggression. Britain is bloodied, but not bowed.



RAF Fighter Command has retained air supremacy over Britain and Bomber Command has rebutted Hitler's claim that Germany will never be bombed.



The Blitz continues, but city dwellers remain resolute, this family defiantly emerging from their back garden Anderson shelter following a German raid.



Despite the hardships being endured the celebration of Christmas goes ahead as normally as possible. This seasonal slogan was used from 2 to 21 December in 1940, having been used every year since 1925.



Rather than cease trading due to German bombing businesses move to alternative premises out of city centres. Reverse reduced.



Prime Minister Churchill's inspiring oratory continues to raise people's morale and resolve to fight on.



A Philatelic Footnote Combatants keep writing letters thus providing many of the items that enable this story, 1940, A Desperate Year for Britain, to be told.



The Royal Navy is proving more than a match for the German and Italian fleets, but the struggle to protect convoys against U-boat attack continues.



Members of the armed forces are not forgotten. Military personnel are given a Christmas postal concession, being permitted to send one airmail letter to the UK free of postage before a closing date of 8 December. FPO 122 was used in Tulkarm, Palestine from 5 April.



The British Empire is giving increasing support ensuring Britain does not stand alone. The New Zealand stamp depicts HMNZS Achilles and the troopship Dominion Monarch.

The British FPO 443 cancel was used from July to November by Australian troops stationed on Salisbury Plain, there being no Australian cancels available at this time.

