Mail Call!

Nothing made the GIs' day like letters and packages from home. But how did the post office ever manage all those deliveries all over the world?

by Tom Harper Kelly

Second Lieutenant Paul Boesch was a long way from home. More than 3,000 miles of saltwater separated him from his Long Island stomping grounds, his family, and his friends. In that summer of 1944, the separation was starting to wear him down.

It had been two years and several months since Boesch had walked away from his pro wrestling career to join the army. He had completed Officer Candidate School and become a lieutenant in the 8th Infantry Division's 121st Infantry Regiment. Now here he was, fighting in France's embattled Brittany region. Eight weeks into the battle, along came a surprise: mail call! Boesch didn't bother. He was sure there would be nothing for him. But to his surprise, a sergeant came by and thrust a handful of letters into his tent. Boesch was overcome. He "opened the treasured letters eagerly, my hands almost trembling, and drank in every word…. It was such a happy experience, this hearing from home…. Now nothing could be too tough to take!"

Boesch was living proof of what Bill Mauldin, beloved cartoonist for the GI newspaper *Stars and Stripes*, observed about letters from home: "A soldier's life revolves around his mail." The government knew this, and so did the army. Mail from home was a crucial weapon in America's battle against the Axis powers. Consequently, steady streams of letters and parcels flowed around the world to, and from, America's WWII military men and women.

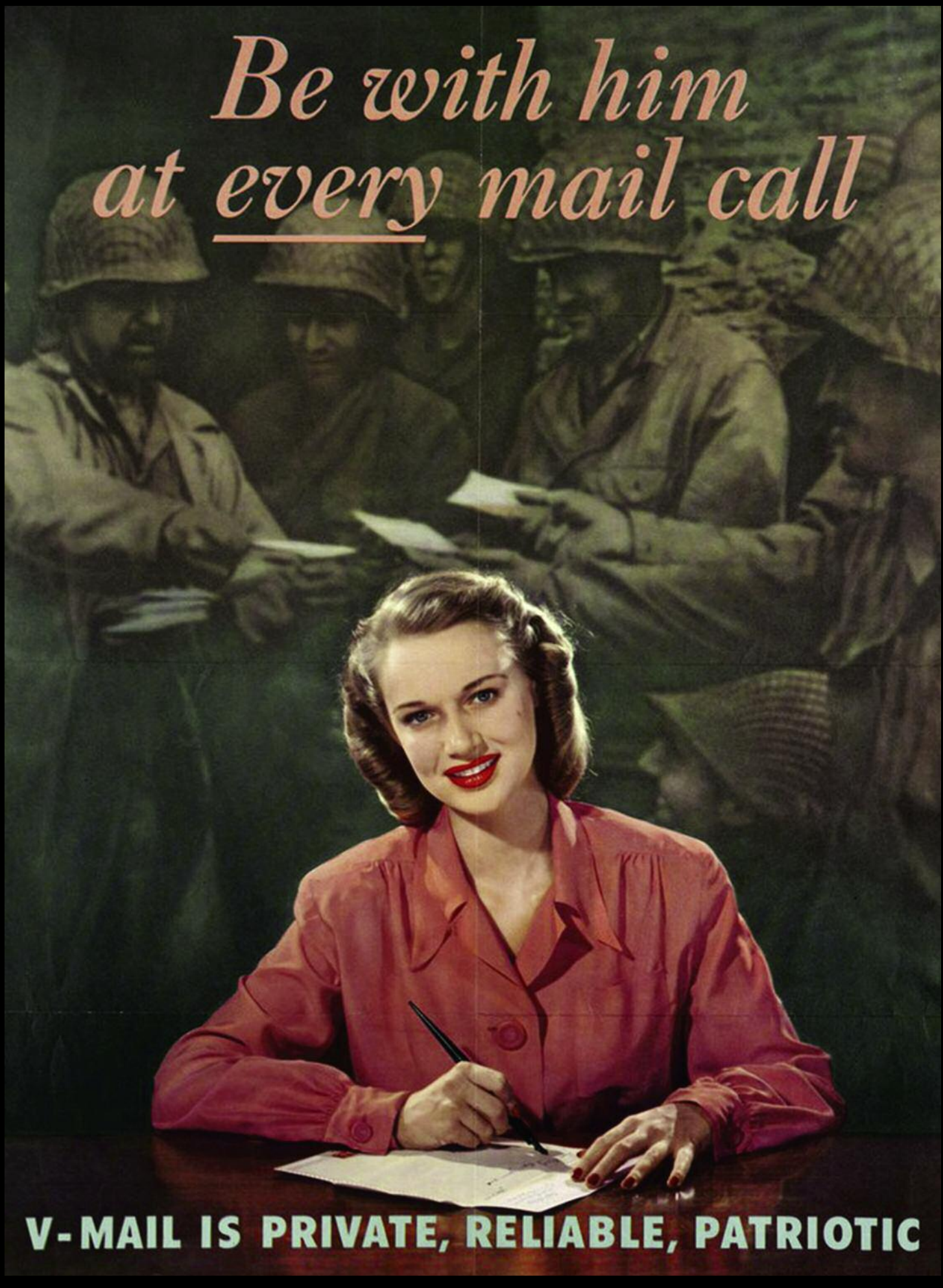
The arrival of packages and letters at the front had the power to resuscitate sagging morale. An official army report described the reaction when mail finally reached troops in Gafsa, Tunisia, after a two-month wait: "Only a war dance would have compared with the demonstration that followed the distribution at that mail!" Elsewhere, rifleman Homer Wagnon Jr. received a package from home and years later remembered how "the new labels, the bright colors, even the smell, the American stuff straight from Main Street in our hometown brought back memories almost lost to us." He and his buddies would "settle back in our foxholes, in a time of quiet solitude, and try to remember our homes, our streets, our parents, our sisters and brothers, and our special girlfriends as we tried to forget the present situation."

Infantryman Joe Windham of the 65th Infantry Division noticed that the "full range of human emotions" from "abject disappointment to the pinnacle of glee" were on display at his rifle company's mail call. "Up front would be the men that their wives or girlfriends wrote them everyday," he remembered. Then there were "the ones that receive pictures of their new born baby, that they have never seen. They want everyone to look at it and you feed their ego by telling them that it looks exactly like him and he smiles." But there were also the GIs waiting in vain for their names to be called. Windham referred to them as "neck stretchers," because they "stood in the crowd stretching their necks, listening for their names to be called, because someone back home promised them they would write everyday. After mail call they would walk by the mail clerk and ask them if that was all, sometimes even picking up the mail bag and looking inside to make sure their letter was not overlooked."

Morris Dunn of the 84th Infantry Division knew the crushing disappointment of not receiving mail. Fighting as a replacement during the Battle of the Bulge, in the Belgian part of the frozen Ardennes forest, Dunn bristled that while the "old boys" got let-

LEFT: COURTESY OF 517TH PARACHUTE REGIMENTAL COMBAT TEAM. RIGHT: LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

Above: "Mail call!" Men of the 517th Parachute Infantry, part of the 1st Airborne Task Force in August 1944's Southern France invasion, swarm a mail clerk, eager for letters from home. Opposite: The connection between loved ones in the States and servicemen overseas was a not-so-secret weapon. Whether it came via surface, air, or, as seen in this poster, V-Mail, a letter from home could work wonders.


Be with him
at every mail call
V-MAIL IS PRIVATE, RELIABLE, PATRIOTIC

ters, none of the replacements did. "My morale couldn't have gotten any worse," he admitted. "I hit bottom that day." A simple piece of mail could make the difference between hope and despair. An officer in the 28th Infantry Division summed it up: "Mail from home means a hell of a lot to the boys. They dream of letters from their loved ones."

Free Franking, Victory Mail, and Airmail

DURING THE SECOND WORLD WAR, US service members had a variety of options for sending and receiving mail. On March 27, 1942, Congress enacted legislation allowing all armed forces personnel, regardless of where they were stationed, to send letters by first-class mail without charge by "free franking" them. The sender simply wrote "FREE" in the upper right-hand corner of an envelope, where a stamp would normally go. During World War I, only US servicemen serving in the Allied Expeditionary Force in Europe had enjoyed this privilege. The WWII extension of free franking to *all* US armed forces members *everywhere* created a virtual tidal wave of free mail. In 1944, the US Post Office Department estimated that each service member was sending approximately six pieces of free mail per week. At normal postage rates, that much mail would have brought the post office $100 million in added annual revenues.

The sheer volume of wartime mail created a crisis of shipping. Space was at a premium on the ships, planes, trains, and trucks carrying war materiel and personnel to and from combat areas. Limited cargo space led to delays in delivering GI mail. The problem brought the Post Office, War, and Navy departments together in search of a solution. The result was Victory Mail, more commonly known as V-Mail.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

A pack of V-Mail forms promises "rush photographic mail" to GIs. The forms, with space for a note, were photographed, sent overseas on microfilm, printed, and delivered.

V-MAIL EMPLOYED special 8.5-by-11-inch stationery, on which senders wrote their letters—notes, really, because the space was tight, shared by address areas and a place for a censor's stamp. These letters were sorted based on their overseas destinations and then microfilmed. As many as 1,700 letters were fit onto one roll of film. Each roll was then sent to a processing center near the overseas destination, where the letters were printed out and delivered to the recipients. The V-Mail process reduced letters to 3 percent of their original size and weight. A Douglas C-54 cargo plane, which could carry about 264,000 full-size letters, could fit 36 million V-Mails.

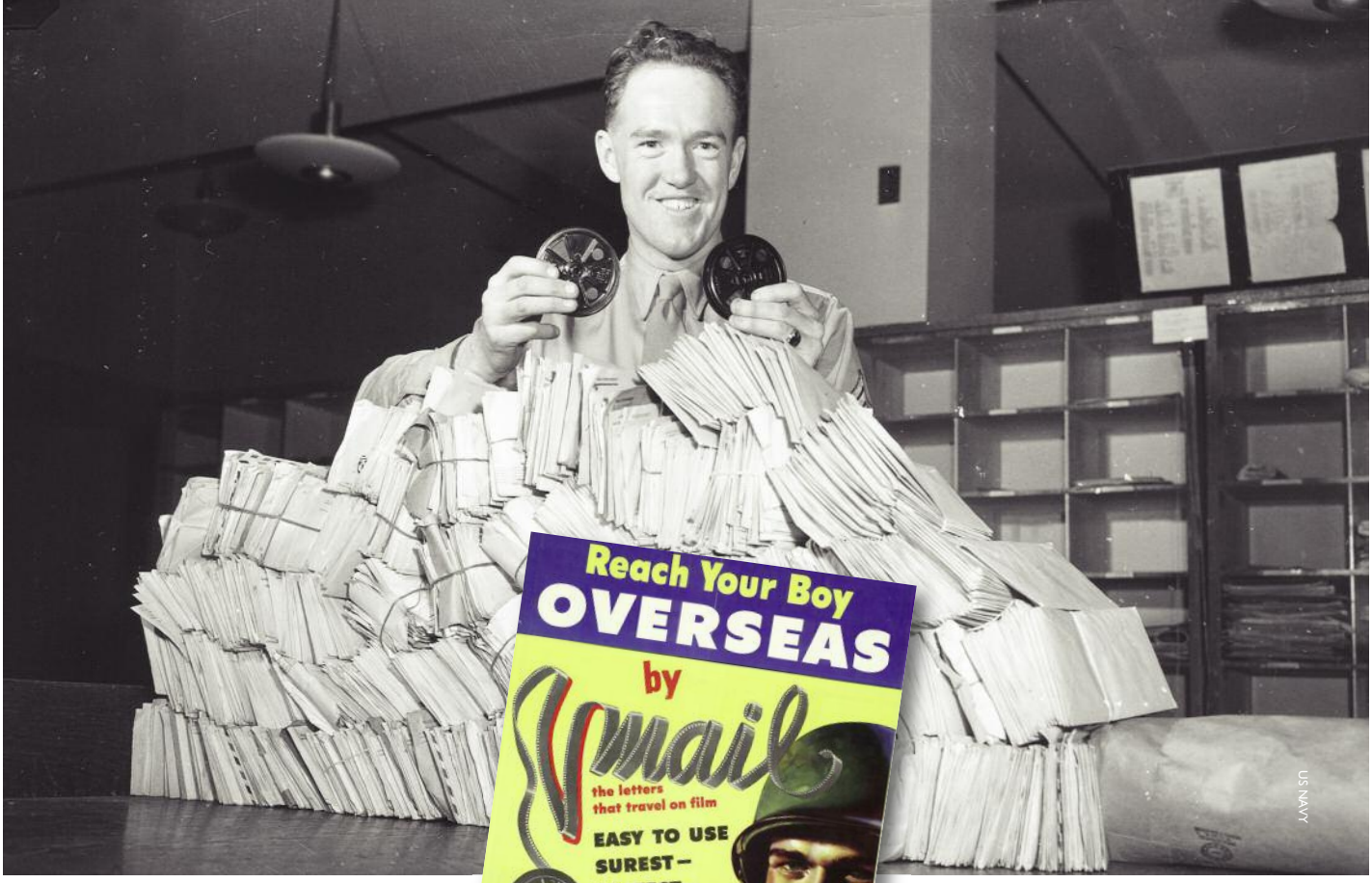
The post office was already in the advanced planning stages of a microfilmed dispatch service when the December 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor pulled the United States into the war. As a result, V-Mail was ready to launch on June 15, 1942. By 1945, there were three V-Mail microfilming stations, in New York, San Francisco, and Chicago. They could process approximately 100,000 letters a day.

The post office estimated that more than a billion V-Mails were sent between June 15, 1942, and November 1, 1945, and today V-Mail is an icon of the American WWII experience. But despite V-Mail's virtues, including that it was free for service personnel, GIs overseas most often turned to another form of postal service: airmail. Mail delivery could be erratic regardless of the method, but airmail was generally much faster than V-Mail. As rifleman Tom Bourne of the 100th Infantry "Century" Division put it, soldiers had to use airmail "if we expected the recipients to get to see [our mail] before the war was over." Another Century Division soldier, William Taylor, simply preferred airmail, even in cases when V-Mail would arrive in roughly the same time. In January 1945 he wrote to his parents, "T' hell with V-Mail. I more or less have to use it out here, but if they can't do better than that there is no reason why you should use the stuff." Centuryman Raymond Bumgarner shared Taylor's sentiments. He told his parents, "I shall only use V-mail when I ain't got t'other." Keith Winston, who served in a 100th Division medical unit and sent hundreds of letters to his wife in suburban Philadelphia, urged her in March 1945 to "continue with airmail, by all means, despite government propaganda to the contrary."

Even the post office acknowledged that V-Mail "was not always as practical as had been anticipated," that it often arrived later than airmail and that servicemen felt the photographic reproductions of letters were impersonal. Charles DiPietro of the 83rd Infantry Division perhaps typified many soldiers when he mentioned in a letter to his mother, "I don't like [V-Mail]. It doesn't seem like a letter and I don't like to receive V-mail so don't use it. It isn't much faster anyway."

In contrast to free franking and V-Mail, airmail cost something, even for members of the armed forces. But just weeks after the Pearl Harbor attack, the post office adopted a discounted flat rate of six cents per half ounce for all airmail emanating from or intended for servicemen outside the continental United States. This fee reduction increased morale *and* it paid off handsomely for the post office. It helped make airmail so popular with service personnel that in November 1943 the post office instructed its branches to restrict requisitions for airmail envelopes for civilians. Within several months, the entire production of embossed six-cent airmail envelopes was allotted for the armed forces. To help speed up production of more airmail envelopes, the post office removed the signature red-white-and-blue border late in the summer of 1944.

None of those efforts was enough. After July 25, 1944, 861 million envelopes were shipped overseas, and in March 1945, the post office ended up substituting two-cent envelopes and even commemorative envelopes from the early 1930s for normal air-

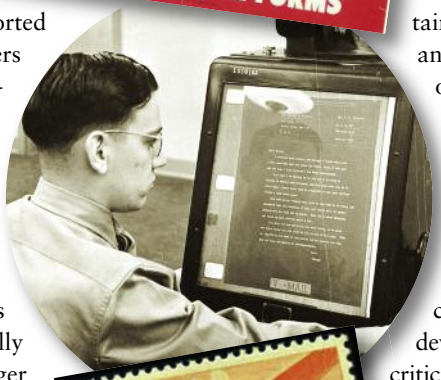


RIGHT: NATIONAL ARCHIVES. INSET IMAGES: LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

US NAVY

mail envelopes. The substitutes were overstamped with "6¢ Air Mail."

How much more popular was airmail over V-Mail? It's difficult to find an answer that covers all units and locations, but the chief postal officer in the Mediterranean reported that in 1944, in his theater of operations, soldiers sent 72,875,077 V-Mails and 164,746,950 airmail letters—more than twice as many of the latter. Only 36,390,000 letters from the Mediterranean theater went via surface mail using free franking.



Packages from Home!

AS WELCOME AS LETTERS WERE, it was packages from home that troops in combat areas especially yearned for, and requested. But parcels were larger than letters, and getting them to troop deployment areas around the world was a bigger challenge. The post office's regulations on mailing packages to soldiers overseas went through a lot of revisions before a workable solution evolved.

On January 8, 1943, because of military demands on shipping space, the Post Office Department announced, "No parcels shall be accepted for dispatch to APOs (Army Post Offices) outside the continental United States unless they contain such articles only as are being sent at the *specific written request* of the addressee, *approved by the battalion or similar unit commander of the address*." The post office amended that policy slightly in March 1943, allowing Americans to use first-class mail to send small parcels—containing items such as eyeglasses, fountain pens, and watches, and weighing no more than eight ounces—without written requests from the addressees.

The requirement that a soldier's commander approve each written request for a parcel made few if any friends in the military. It was a burdensome addition to the paperwork and red tape that already afflicted overworked unit commanders. *Yank*, the army's weekly magazine, devoted a full page in its issue of April 9, 1943, to criticism of this and other postal policies affecting APOs. A month later, the post office rescinded its requirement. Instead, the sender simply went to the post office and presented the soldier-addressee's written request along with the envelope in which it had been mailed. A postal employee would mark the request and envelope to prevent reuse.

A significant exception to this policy applied to Christmas and Hanukkah packages. During the prescribed period for mailing holiday packages to military personnel overseas (September 15 to October 15 in 1943 and 1944), civilians rushed to post offices.

V-Mail was good but hard to love. Sergeant Joseph Donnelly of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, illustrates V-Mail's virtue (top): 3,200 bulky letters fit on two microfilm reels. That saved space on crowded planes. And, as the poster says, V-Mail was "easy to use." On the downside, it was cramped, often slow, and arrived printed in grimy black and white (seen in negative form on the screen of a V-Mail inspector in the circle above). GIs preferred air mail (stamp, above) for longer, normal-size letters that *felt* like letters and arrived fast.

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During the 1943 holiday season, they mailed more than 20 million parcels. The next year's total was 82–85 million; more than 61 million of those were for army personnel. To handle this tidal wave of packages, the army had to construct additional buildings at the New York and San Francisco ports of embarkation, the two principle distribution points for overseas mail to APOs.

Because holiday packages weren't sent in response to specific requests, many soldiers were surprised—and not always pleasantly—by what they found inside. Frank Graham, serving in the 34th Infantry Division in Tunisia, recalled that when a Christmas package from his aunt finally reached him in March 1943, the package was "very welcome except it contained only twelve rolls of Life Savers, the same thing came in the C ration cans." Writing from Italy in 1943, war correspondent Ernie Pyle explained to his readers that "nearly every soldier's package had in it at least one ironic item" and that some soldiers "actually got cans of Spam. Others got fancy straw house slippers, and some got black silk socks—as though the boys were likely to put on full dress and spend an evening in a night club." When Dale Noble, fighting with the 100th Infantry Division in northeastern France, received "a fine pair of bedroom slippers" from his wife, he filled them with Alsatian mud and mailed them back. Bedroom slippers appear to have been a popular gift for servicemen in 1944; another Century Division soldier received five pairs, each sent in different boxes, in a single day.

Despite limits on parcels for military personnel overseas, gifts and goodies found their way into grateful hands, especially around Christmas. These kids in Italy are helping a GI enjoy his just-arrived holiday package.

Robert K. Adair, a 94th Infantry Division rifleman, wrote to his parents in December 1944, "I wonder just why everyone sends soap, shaving cream, etc. we get so much from the government that we can't use it all. At present I have enough shaving cream (about 5 tubes) and enough soap (about ten bars) to last me through the war. Everybody seems to be a victim of this. When someone gets a package everyone gathers around and watches him open it. Then we howl as they drag out soap, shaving cream, shoeshine kits, bathing suits, and God knows what else."

A survey of letters sent home by 13 soldiers of the 100th Division provides insight into the average infantryman's wants and needs. Each of the men requested food items. In fact, nearly three-quarters of all their requests were for various foodstuffs, from cans of evaporated milk to candy bars. Yes, food from home seems to have been the universal yearning of America's WWII fighting men. Franklin Gurley of the 399th Infantry Regiment wrote home voicing disappointment with a package that contained handkerchiefs and shoe laces because "there was simply no way we could eat those handkerchiefs and shoe laces. I told the boys how sorry I was that there was no food in the package."

Whenever a GI ripped open a package and found food from home, he could count on having plenty of help eating the coveted treats. Shortly after Christmas 1944, Theodore Strong of the 84th Infantry Division still hadn't received his packages and confided to his parents, "I feel a bit ashamed at present 'cause I've been eating food from all the other fellows boxes, and as yet have been unable to give them anything in return." He noted that "the food in those boxes sure hits the spot as a snack before you go on guard or as a supplement to a K-ration…."

It wasn't just *any* food that the men wanted. They wanted food unlike what the military gave them. Unless an army or marine unit was in a position stable enough to allow setting up camp and a kitchen complete with a supply of fresh foods, the men had to live on C- or K-rations. C-rations were canned, precooked rations for one man for one day; K-rations

Booze in a Box

Mailing alcohol was strictly forbidden by the post office. But the threat of fines or imprisonment didn't stop the folks at home from trying to send bottles of spirits overseas.

It's unclear how many illicit parcels of alcohol the post office confiscated and destroyed, but war correspondent Ernie Pyle believed the meanest trick he ever saw played on a soldier involved the interception of multiple bottles of whiskey. "The first bottle tasted fine to the cold kids at the front," Pyle recalled, "but when the second and third ones came the boys found they had been opened and drained along the way, then carefully resealed and continued on their journey. Of course, mailing them in the first place was illegal, but that's beside the point. *The point is that somewhere in the world there is a louse of a man with two quarts of whisky inside him who should have his neck wrung off."*

To avoid detection, senders disguised bottles of alcohol as benign items. When a soldier in the 2nd Infantry Division received a Christmas fruitcake so hard it was inedible, he cursed and threw it against a wall in disgust. But as the cake hit the wall, there was a sound of breaking glass, and when the soldier examined the remnants, he found a Jack Daniel's label. A witness recalled that "real tears came to his eyes as he saw his pint of Christmas bourbon soak slowly into the flooring."

Sometimes these ruses to disguise alcohol were successful. Robert Kreuger, a 99th Infantry Division soldier, received a fifth of whiskey that had been shipped in a square tin with popcorn as packing. Although the bottle arrived broken, the popcorn had soaked up the alcohol. Krueger and his buddies sucked on the popcorn and "didn't waste any!"

Tom Harper Kelly

OPPOSITE & RIGHT: NATIONAL ARCHIVES

Parcels reached addressees even under difficult circumstances. These infantrymen are engaged in the grueling Battle of Hürtgen Forest, Germany—and yet they've just received early-bird Christmas boxes, on November 14, 1944. No sign here of bedroom slippers, a common inappropriate gift.

were boxed temporary rations for one man, with an incomplete nutritional spectrum that made them unsuitable for long-term use. A 10th Mountain Division veteran spoke for all GIs when he explained that he constantly requested food from home not because he was hungry, per se, but because every soldier "cherished the package from home—particularly when he had been subjected for too many days to the theoretically balanced diet of straight C-ration or, worse, straight K."

When a food package arrived, it did *not* go to waste. After not receiving mail for more than six months due to several hospitalizations, 30th Division soldier Russel Albrecht received a Christmas package containing fudge that was "so moldy you couldn't tell it was fudge." Undeterred, he and his buddies devoured every single piece.

If the letters of these 13 men from the Century Division are any indication, the items GIs requested most often, after food, were writing supplies such as envelopes, stamps, stationery, small bottles of ink, and candles, which served as the infantryman's primary source of light, and even heat. Of course, having entered combat in November 1944 and fought continuously through the winter of 1945, the Centurymen also requested warm clothing such as socks, scarves, and gloves. In late November 1944, Private Thomas B. Harper III, fighting with the 100th Division in France's Vosges Mountains, sent his parents a detailed list: "Please send me chocolate bars, jam, cake (fruit[cake] keeps, yours should too), pastry, nuts, saltines, canned fruit, canned food (pork & beans—sardines, etc.), socks (heavy wool), hankies, stationary & airmail envelopes, candy and a scarf…." Perhaps Harper's request was more comprehensive than most because, as he mentions in the same letter, "I haven't received any packages yet and I'm anxious like mad!" Some of the more interesting items in the Centurymen's letters were a "bingo game" and "vitamin tablets." The most interesting item received in response was a "six pack of Cola-Cola."

IN THE END, WHAT SEEMS CLEAR is that, for troops overseas, letters or packages from home were more than just a way to stay in contact with loved ones or break up the monotony of army rations. They were poignant reminders of the lives that they had lived before entering the service and that they hoped to return to after the war. ☆

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