Airmail in the Dutch East Indies during World War II

by J.R. van Nieuwkerk

When war breaks out, postal connections are one of the first lines of communication to be impacted. Such was the case when Germany invaded the Netherlands on 10 May 1940. One of the consequences was that the postal connection between the Dutch East Indies and the Netherlands was interrupted, and that mail en route at the time of the German invasion was returned to sender.

A nice example is the letter shown below. It was posted on 5 May 1940 at Soerabaja, and sent on to Batavia where it was censored. The next flights to Amsterdam left on 6 and 9 May, but mail from those flights was removed en route and returned. As shown on the cover, it was returned to sender (RETOUR AFZENDER) because the postal route had been discontinued (POSTVERBINDING OPGEHVEN).

Airmail connections to Europe did continue via other routes outside the war zones. However, the encroaching war in South East Asia meant that routes changed regularly as the Japanese advanced. Finally, these also had to be abandoned, when the Indies were invaded in January 1942. The last flight of the Royal Netherlands Indies Airline Company (Dutch acronym KNILM) was a flight from Broome (Australia) to Batavia on 17 February 1942. Two days later, KNILM transferred its fleet of 11 aircraft to Australia. On 8 March 1942 the Dutch Indies army capitulated to the Japanese.
Airmail during the Japanese occupation

One might be tempted to think that there was no airmail during the Japanese occupation of the Dutch East Indies. One would be mistaken. In the Celebes Shinbun (newspaper) of 10 July 1943, there appears the following announcement:

Airmail service will be available again as of 10-7-1943, but only for Japanese companies for mail between Celebes, South Borneo, the Lesser Sunda Islands, and the Moluccas, as well as with Japan. The service can only be rendered at Makasser and Menado.

Mail from private persons is not yet allowed, except for urgent and essential business (for example, official documents), which have been censored by the authorities. Tariffs:

- Up to 20 grams – 50 cents
- 40 grams – 1 gld
- 60 grams – 1½ gld (maximum)

A domestic airmail letter sent from Makasser to Pontianak is shown at right. It was franked with 150 cents, the rate for a letter between 40 and 60 grams. The cover was sent by the Makasser South Seas Warehousing Corporation (Nan’yō Sōko K.K.) to its affiliate in Pontianak on West Borneo. It is marked “by air” (kōkū, the faint red pencil mark 航空 between the stamps and the red vertical censor mark). The vertical censor marking reads “Navy Civil Administration censored” and one of the censors was Yamauchi (the legible red censor seal under the vertical censor mark). The censorship marking is not one used by the post office.

The franking consists of the 50 sen Japanese stamp depicting the Golden Pavilion at Kyōto, and a 1 guilder Navy occupation stamp depicting the Kinshi or Golden Kite. The Kinshi is a mythical bird that according to Japanese legend had brought victory to Japan in the past. The use of Japanese stamps in the Indies is not unusual as they were valid in all occupied territories. More interesting is that the Kinshi stamp is denominated in Dutch Indies guilders, particularly because these stamps were designed and printed in Tōkyō in 1943.

The stamps were cancelled with a dateless Japanese cancel introduced in the Navy occupied area in 1943. At the top it has 大日本 (Dai Nippon or “Great Japan”), in the middle segment the name of the city マカッサル (Makasser), and at the bottom 帝國政府 (Teikoku Seifu or “Imperial Government”).
The Celebes Shinbun of 5 July 1944 published new postal tariffs that had come into effect on 1 July 1944. It reported the following regarding airmail:

Airmail business correspondence: Limit 20g, 50 sen surcharge on standard rate.

The letter from Balikpapan shown at left was sent in October 1944, and was franked with a pre-war 10 cent Queen Wilhelmina stamp with a Navy anchor overprint, and a 50 cent Navy Golden Kite stamp. Ten cents was the normal rate for a letter up to 20 grams, and the 50-cent stamp covered the extra fee for airmail.

The letter was sent by Ogasawara Shigeyuki from Balikpapan (a major oil producing center on Southeast Borneo) to the Asano Bussan Corporation in Tōkyō. It is marked “by air” (kōkū, red vertical marking 航空 below the stamps), and “airmail” (kōkūbin, hand-written 航空便 next to the vertical rectangular censor mark). The censor mark is a hand-drawn rectangle with the text 海軍民政府検閲印 meaning “Censor’s seal, Navy Civil Administration”. The censor seal itself is that of a censor named Harada.

The letter was cancelled with the pre-war circular date cancel from Balikpapan. Unlike the rest of the Navy occupied area, most of the post offices on Borneo continued to use their pre-war cancels.

The airmail letter shown below was sent from Menado, North Celebes, to Japan. It is addressed to Mr. Kaneko Kenji of Nitta-gun, Gunma Prefecture. The hand-drawn red marking on the left reads 航空郵便 (kōkū yūbin) meaning “air mail”.

The franking consists of a 1 EN (i.e., ¥1) Japanese stamp depicting the Great Buddha at Kamakura, and a 10 cent definitive stamp for the Navy occupied area, which depicts the Japanese flag over Southeast Asia.

The cancellation is a dateless bilingual cancel introduced on Celebes in 1942 and used sporadically well into 1944. It has Dai Nippon and Teikoku Seifu as described earlier, but the name in the middle segment is in Latin script, in this case MANADO. Because the letter is not
datestamped, we do not know which tariffs apply, and we cannot establish how the 110 cent franking was determined.

The hand-written censor mark メナド州知事庁検閲済 stands for “Menado state governor’s office / censored”. The round censor seal reads 小佐田, “Osada”.

The hand-written and unusual censorship markings in the above examples indicate that airmail letters were subject to special censorship. On the other hand, the postal cancellations were the normal ones used at the post offices, indicating that the letters did pass through the post office.

**Stamps used for airmail**

The stamps used on the airmail letters were regular Japanese and Japanese occupation stamps. There were no specific airmail stamps issued during the war, but a pre-war Indies airmail stamp was overprinted by the Japanese.

It is a triangular 30-cent stamp issued in 1933 for special flights, and it was still present at many post offices when the Japanese invaded. These stamps were overprinted with Japanese overprints at several locations on Sumatra and in the Navy occupied area, even though there was no airmail from most of these locations during the war. This was because the postal clerks had been ordered by the Japanese to overprint all stamps. The clerks did not ask why they needed to overprint a useless stamp; they just did it.

There is only one known example of non-philatelic use of the overprinted airmail stamp. Shown below is a postal parcel address card from West Borneo. The 1 kg package was sent from Mampawa to Pontianak on 30 May 1945. The tariff was 60 cents, and presumably because of a shortage of 30 and 60 cent postage stamps, two 30-cent airmail stamps were used that had been overprinted with a large violet anchor (symbol of the Japanese Navy). This is one of great rarities of the Japanese occupation of the Dutch East Indies.
Airmail from unoccupied Dutch New Guinea

It is often forgotten that there was one part of the Dutch East Indies that was not occupied by the Japanese, namely, South New Guinea. Although the Japanese had intended to conquer the entire island, they received a major military setback at the hands of Australian and Allied troops on the famous Kokoda Trail on southeast New Guinea in September 1942. As a result, the southern part of the island, including Dutch South New Guinea, remained free.

Most mail from South New Guinea is from Australian troops, who were stationed there during the war to ensure that the area would not be used by the Japanese to launch an attack on Australia. This mail was sent from Australian Field post offices (FPOs), franked with Australian stamps, and censored by the Australian Military Forces.

Australian troops serving in the South Pacific region in World War II were allowed free postage on service mail. The 3d (3 pence) franking on the letter from Australian FPO 192 shown below paid the airmail surcharge for a letter sent within Australia and its territories.

Cover from Australian Field Post Office 192, Merauke, Dutch New Guinea, franked with a 3d Australian stamp, sent per airmail to Melbourne, 1 August 1945
In addition, Dutch Indies’ civilian post offices also functioned at Digoel and Merauke for the occasional letter or package to or from this isolated part of the world. The mail went to Australia and, if necessary, from there to the USA and beyond.

The post office at Digoel was in a very remote area more than 450 kilometers upstream on the Digoel River. It had been established in 1927 as a camp for political exiles. At the time of the war there were some 550 exiles, an army barracks for 110 Australian soldiers, an administrative area and housing for non-exiles. Because Digoel and Merauke had been bombed, and mounting fears that the political exiles might be liberated, they were transferred to Australia in 1943.

The cover shown above was sent from Digoel to the Netherlands Navy Headquarters in Melbourne, Australia. It was sent by airmail and franked with 17½ cents, the pre-war airmail tariff. It was censored by the Head of Local Administration - Tanah Merah, the district in which Digoel was located. The Head of Local Administration was the local army commander.

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**Bibliography**