

Japanese Military Mail from a force North of Australia

by Stephen Dowd

Recently an English auction house offered a lot described, in part, as follows:

World War Two – Australia Invasion Force. The description went on to say that the 1942 blue stampless postcard had a return address of the “7th Air Division, 38th Airfield Battalion, North Australia Military Force”, from the forces intended for the invasion of Australia.

My interest was piqued. I particularly collect postal history concerning the expansion of Japan’s Empire, and its contraction, between 1931 and 1951. Furthermore, being an Australian of a certain age, my father fought against the Japanese forces in New Guinea, and as I grew up I heard stories of Japan’s planned invasion of my country. Indeed, so much was this a commonly held view early in 1942 that a rather frightening propaganda poster (illustrated below) was published in Australia.⁽¹⁾ The poster, referring to the threat of a Japanese invasion, was criticized for being alarmist at the time of its release, and was banned by the Queensland state government.



As I got older my research revealed that it was unlikely that Japan ever intended to invade Australia. It was far more likely that it was Japan’s intention to disrupt Australian merchant shipping on its east coast and damage the main harbor (at Darwin, capital of the Northern Territory) and airfields to the far north of the country, in an endeavor to interrupt supply and support from Australia to (in particular) American forces in the Pacific. It is to be noted that at this time America’s General MacArthur was stationed in Brisbane, in the state of Queensland, also in the north of Australia.

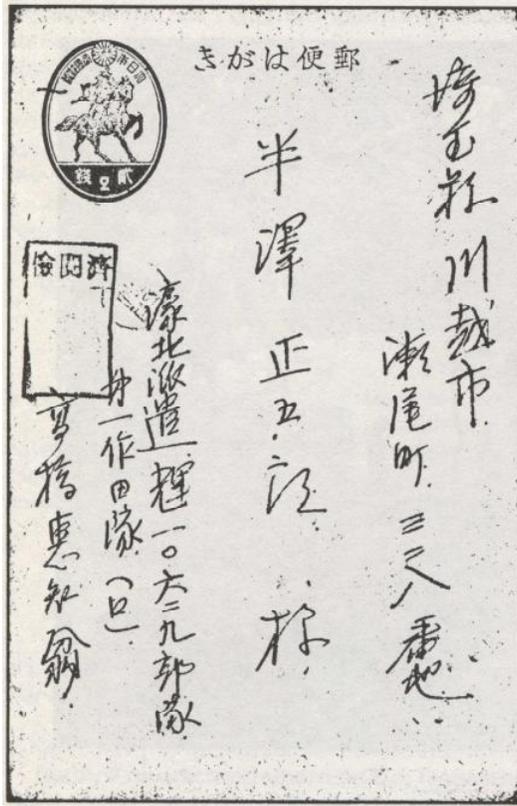
Subsequent philatelic research uncovered two articles about a similar “invasion forces” cover. Both articles appeared in *Japanese Philately*, the first in the December 1976 issue (JP 31/313-314), and the second in the October 1977 issue (JP 32/205-207).

The first card, the Ashmore card

The first reference to any such cards that I can find was when Mr. R. Hunter “Bud” Ashmore, Jr. wrote to the then JP Editor (Bob Spaulding) saying that he had a military mail postcard with a return address beginning “North Australia”.

Mr. Ashmore’s card, illustrated at JP 31/313, is reproduced at the top left on page 62. Editor Spaulding speculated that the return address was a reference to Japanese forces located to the north of Australia rather than the north of the Australian continent, and he asked for some help from the military mail historians, Stanley Jersey and Harry Weymer.

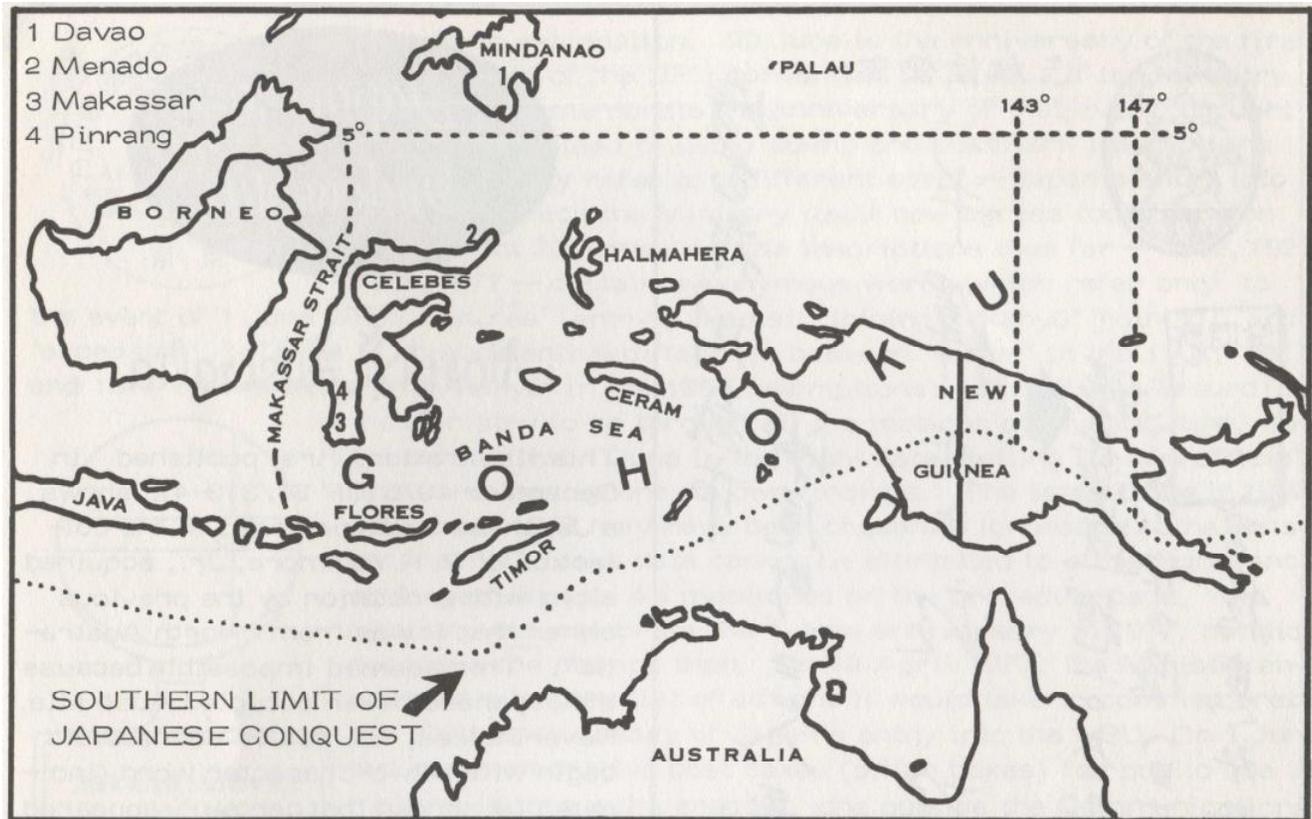
¹ Source: Australian War Memorial



Help was evidently forthcoming, because at JP 32/205-207 the editor resumes this topic and explains why the reference on the Ashmore card must be a reference to Japanese forces located to the north of Australia, most likely in the theater of war defined by the Japanese as extending from the Makassar Strait to 143 degrees east longitude (extended to 147° E in March 1945), and from 5 degrees north latitude south to the then limit of Japanese conquest. It was noted that the Japanese word 濠北 (Gōhoku or “North Australia”) was being used for a description that included Celebes, Halmahera, the smaller islands to the south of these in the Banda Sea (Lesser Sunda Islands and Moluccas), and parts of New Guinea. In fact, a rather useful map of these areas was also published at JP 32/206 and it too is reproduced, below.

The second card, the Webb card

By the time the October 1977 issue of *Japanese Philately* was published, it appears that Editor Spaulding had learned of a second card with a return address beginning with 濠北 (Gōhoku or “North [of] Australia”). He said that the card was in the collection of E. J. Webb of England.² This is the exact same card that I reported in my introduction above as having been recently offered by an English auction house, and which I have now successfully acquired.



² Erroneously described as “E. J. Wood” at JP 32/207.

As explained in the JP article, Japanese military units were assigned a code number and ideograph that are found in the addresses on military mail. Editor Spaulding reported that from an American intelligence report identifying a large number of these code designations that had been declassified by 1977, he was able to decode the addresses that appear on both cards as follows:

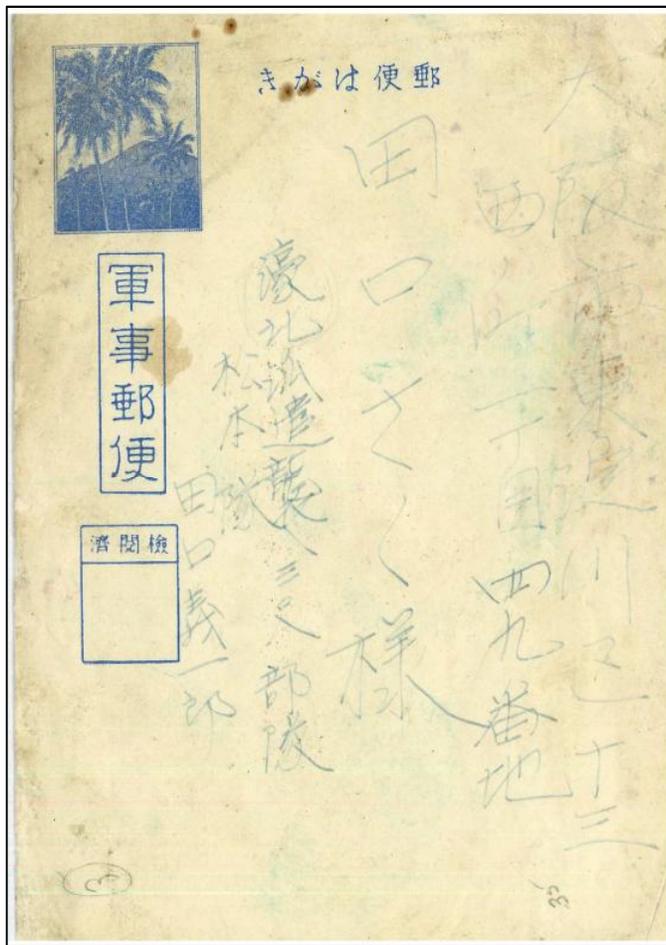
The Ashmore card, when decoded, was mailed from the 2nd Area Army Field Freight Depot; whereas the Webb card, when decoded, was mailed from the 7th Air Division 38th Airfield Battalion.

Rather curiously the Webb card has not, to the best of my knowledge, ever been illustrated anywhere. Indeed I have been unable to find any further writings on the subject of such cards. As mentioned above, I now own the “Webb card,” and it is now depicted at right for general reference. The Webb card is a typical unfranked military postcard inscribed **軍事郵便** (*gunji yūbin* or “military mail”). As noted by JP Editor Spaulding at JP 32/207, there seems no reason why the Ashmore card needed to be a franked postcard.

My purposes in writing this article have been to:

1. Illustrate the Webb card;
2. Enquire about the present whereabouts of the Ashmore card;
3. Ascertain whether any more such cards are known; and
4. Seek such further knowledge as anyone may be in a position to provide.

I am hopeful that some readers may be able to provide some help on this subject. All contact and correspondence should ideally be sent to the JP Editor (editor@isjp.org), but you can also contact me directly by email at tick4d@outlook.com. ■



Corrections to past issues of Japanese Philately

- 32/207 In the second line of paragraph 2, change “E. J. Wood” to “E. J. Webb”
 32/207 In the last line of paragraph 2, change “(Wood)” to “(Webb)”
 32/207 In the 15th line of paragraph 2, change “Ashmore and Wood” to “Ashmore and Webb”
 32/207 In the ninth line of paragraph 3, change “Mr. Wood’s” to “Mr. Webb’s”
 51/288 In the first Grenada Grenadines entry, change “Grenada Grenadines” to “Grenada”
 52/204 In the Ghana entry, change “1996” to “1996.7.31” and “1862” to “1882”
 53/76 In the first Dominica entry, change “1997.2.9” to “1998.2.9”
 58/27 In the 2001.5.1 Grenada entry, change “3100-1” to “3110-1”
 62/23 In the 2000.11.14 Guinea entry, delete the word “Women’s”
 62/81 In the first line of paragraph 2 in the Japonica article, change “1997.2.9” to “1998.2.9”
 67/30 In the first Mozambique entry, change “1861a-f” to “1881a-f”
 70/6 In the Cuba entry, change “2013.02.03” to “2013.03.02” and “1v/8” to “5368*”
 74/7 For Design 5 in the ¥82 sheet, change “Violin” to “Timpani”
 74/7 For Design 6 in the ¥82 sheet, change “Timpani” to “Violin”