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vertical focus | Defense

neither rain nor heat nor sandstorm ...

By Steve Geary

Mail from home means the world to troops stationed in far-away, often dangerous places. A special unit of the services goes to great lengths to make sure the mail gets through, whatever the obstacles.

At the moment, the United States has hundreds of thousands of men and women in uniform deployed around the world, many in harm's way and often in remote locations. Some serve in the Army, some in the Navy, the Air Force, or the Marines. Some are stationed in Fallujah, some in Berlin. Some are colonels, some are privates. But they have at least one thing in common: they all look forward to mail call.

Even in a digital age, mail matters. And the military is well aware of that. "Few things impact a unit's morale more than mail," says Maj. Gen. Sean Byrne, commander of the Army Human Resources Command. "Letters are not left behind on a nightstand or on a cot when soldiers go into battle. They are taken along and read over and over. A small piece of correspondence from home means the world to these brave young men and women."

It has become an unshakeable tenet of the U.S. military that the mail must always get through. That's no small challenge. Consider the difficulties of delivering to someone who's constantly on the move, the way a unit in combat might be. Or think of the issues associated with moving mail in a conflict zone. And yet, with a first class stamp, families and friends back home can get a letter to somebody stationed at Camp Lemonier in Djibouti, Victory Base Camp in Baghdad, Forward Operating Base Salerno in Afghanistan, or a thousand other out-of-the-way places, many of them pretty dangerous, often in less than two weeks.

The agency responsible for making sure the military mail gets through is the Military Postal Service Agency (MPSA). As an extension of the U.S. Postal Service (USPS) run by the Department of Defense, the MPSA provides mail services to Defense Department personnel and their family members as well as other authorized users around the world.

Before the agency was created in 1980, each branch of the military service managed its own mail program. Today, the MPSA is the single military mail manager, operating from a jointly staffed headquarters in the Washington, D.C., area. It is the overall coordinator for military mail, relying on the manpower and capabilities of the Armed Services themselves to get the job done overseas.

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There are 423 full-service military post offices around the world and 636 satellite locations. Most USPS special services, such as Express Mail, Certified Mail, and Registered Mail, are available at most military post office locations. Retired U.S. military personnel living overseas may also have limited access to the military postal service, depending on their country of residence. Even U.S. citizens not associated with the U.S. Forces may use military post offices to send absentee ballots.

Destination anywhere

Military mail is collected alongside regular domestic mail by the Postal Service, which sorts it by destination and delivers it to one of five gateways. The gateways are located in the New York City area, Miami, Chicago, San Francisco, and Seattle.

As you might expect, the heaviest volume of mail from the United States today flows to the U.S. Central Command, or CENTCOM, which includes Southwest Asia, the Middle East, and East Africa. For the typical CENTCOM-bound letter or package, the process works as follows:

- The U.S. Postal Service delivers the letters to the International Service Center at John F. Kennedy Airport in New York. Parcels, however, are delivered to the Mail Terminal Services Operation and Bulk Mail Center in New Jersey.
- The letters and parcels are sorted, packaged, and placed into containers. Packages and parcels are loaded onto dedicated aircraft at Newark's Liberty Airport, while letters are loaded as freight onto passenger aircraft at Kennedy airport. A typical day requires a 747 to move the parcels and packages, but the highest-volume day, this past December, saw the movement of 792,000 pounds, requiring six 747 aircraft.
- All letters, parcels, and packages are delivered to the international airport in Bahrain. In Bahrain, mail for service members is sorted and cross-docked. DHL opened a separate Military Distribution Center (MDC) in July 2005 exclusively for handling military mail.
- Mail is loaded onto smaller cargo planes, operated by contractors. Those are flown to the 10 "Air Stops" around Southwest Asia. Baghdad and Balad, Iraq, receive daily service, as does Camp Arifjahn in Kuwait. Bahgram, Afghanistan, and Al Taqadum in Iraq receive service six times per week. Al Assad and Mosul in Iraq receive service deliveries five times per week, while Tikrit and Kirkuk have deliveries four times per week. The Air Stop at Kandahar in Afghanistan also receives a plane four times per week.
- Once the mail arrives in Iraq, the individual military services (Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines) pick up their own mail at the Air Stop and move it to the military post office, generally via surface convoy.
- Individual units arrange for the delivery of their mail from the military post office to the Forward Operating Bases and from there

Dear John ...

Of course, there is always the downside to effective military mail ... the "Dear John" letter. There's a story that has made the rounds about a young Marine stationed in Al Anbar, a dangerous and desolate province in western Iraq.

One day, after mail call, the young Marine was in a funk. He'd received a "Dear John" letter.

His sergeant talked to the kid, found out what happened, and disappeared. A short time later, he returned with a manila envelope full of pictures—photos of the wives, sisters, and girlfriends of just about everybody in the unit. He then ceremoniously added a photo of the now ex-girlfriend to the collection and wrote a note for the young Marine to sign:

Dear Jane,

I've forgotten what you look like. Can you pick your photo out of this collection and mail it back, so I can remember who I need to forget?

All my love,
John

Military mail can boost morale in unexpected ways.

onward to the service member.

- The last step: "Mail Call!"

Serious business

Up to the Air Stop, the mechanics of the operation are very similar to those of a commercial network. But at that point, things take on a distinctly different flavor. Movement from the Air Stop usually takes place via armed and escorted military convoys, and occasionally via helicopter. That's how seriously the military takes the mail.

The way the military assigns accountability for the mail is another indicator that it regards mail as a special case worthy of special attention. It doesn't hand responsibility for the mail to the logistics function, as you might expect. Responsibility for mail resides with the manpower and personnel directorates.

The deputy director of MPSA is Col. Dave Ernst. Though he shows a hint of a smile when he is called a mail carrier, it's clear that he knows that military mail isn't about moving things; it's about lifting morale and it's serious work. In fact, Col. Ernst probably is where he is today not because he understands military mail (which he does), but because he understands what it is like to be out there, far from home and family. On his ACUs (short for Army Combat Uniform, what the Army calls fatigues these days), the colonel has a Ranger Tab, an Expert Infantryman Badge, Airborne Badge, and an Air Assault Badge.

The commitment to getting the mail to the troops echoes through the ranks of those who have the responsibility. "Even in the tremendous heat, we work hard to make sure every piece of mail is sorted. One thing you don't mess with is a soldier's mail," says Staff Sgt. Leland Jones from Camp Lemonier in Djibouti. "I am a former Marine and am a soldier now, and there has never been a time during my military career where getting a letter from someone didn't help ... every one of these letters and boxes that go to soldiers, sailors, Marines, and airmen will literally change their day."

Hard copy

The importance of mail has not diminished in the age of worldwide connectivity. "Mail remains the primary means of communication between military members and their families," says Bahrain Regional Supply Officer, Cmdr. Ivan Stamegna. "Most would presume that postal mail volumes would decrease with the technological advances in communication such as the Internet, e-mail, instant messaging, and online video conferencing," he adds. "Nothing could be further from the truth. Military mail volumes have actually increased."

There are a number of reasons for that: Troops don't always have access to e-mail or phones. And even in places where they do, printing can be problematic. Plus, you can't send a dozen of Mom's home-made brownies down a fiber optic cable. Whatever the reason, the result is an enormous volume of mail. That creates challenges, particularly in combat environments, and the military mail system is often forced to get creative. "You have to push the envelope," says Ernst, without intending the pun.

The U.S. military actually has a long tradition of finding ways to reduce mail volume without cutting off access. In World War II, it created the Victory Mail program, sending microfilmed copies of letters to overseas sites where the images could

be developed and delivered. (For more on Victory Mail, see the sidebar titled "before there was e-mail")

The modern day equivalent of Victory Mail is a Marine Corps program called Moto-Mail that combines the advantages of electronics with the personal touch of paper. Senders can access a Web site from anywhere in the world and compose a message. The message is printed at the military post office closest to the recipient, and the letter then moves into the regular flow. Moto-Mail saves on freight, speeds up delivery, and still gets a physical letter into the recipient's hands.

Not all of the MPSA's current initiatives involve ways to digitize mail, however. For example, with the election coming up, the military postal service is busy rolling out a promotional campaign at every military post office in the world. It has already established recommended federal election mailing dates, by destination state, and has distributed the information worldwide. At the same time, it has begun gearing up for a possible last-minute surge in volume. Says Faye Johnson, the operations division chief for MPSA, "We've done the worst-case scenario math. My job is to move your ballot."

before there was e-mail ...

E-mail may be the best-known method of sending compressed messages from one part of the world to another, but it wasn't the first. Before there was email, there was V-mail. V-mail, or Victory Mail, was a program launched by the military during World War II that used photographic technology to conserve valuable cargo space.

V-mail letters, as explained on the National Postal Museum's Web site, were written on standard pre-printed 3- by 4-inch forms that folded to form their own envelope. A V-mail letter had room for 100 to 300 words, depending on the author's handwriting. V-mail was collected by the postal service at processing centers, much the way military mail is collected at gateway locations today. Each letter was photographed and converted to a postage-stamp-sized image on microfilm by high-speed equipment at a rate of 2,000 per hour. Letters that ordinarily would have required 37 mail bags to carry could be handled in one. At the far end of the network, the images were developed, printed on lightweight photographic paper, placed in an envelope, and delivered.

V-mail wasn't just about logistics, however. It also eliminated the threat of spies using microdots or invisible ink to send reports. Any microdots on the paper would not be photographed with enough resolution to be read. The use of standardized forms also simplified the censorship task and made it more difficult for the enemy to intercept the mail.

Despite a publicity campaign in the United States promoting V-mail as the patriotic choice, its acceptance was slow at first. In June 1942, only 35,000 letters were sent via V-mail. But one year later, in June 1943, several million letters were sent by V-mail. Between June 15, 1942, and April 1, 1945, 556 million pieces of V-mail were sent from the United States to military post offices and over 510 million pieces were received in the United States from military personnel abroad.

In spite of the appeals to their patriotism, however, most people decided to stick with what they knew. In 1944, for

instance, Navy personnel received 38 million pieces of V-mail, but over 272 million pieces of regular first class mail.

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