

This Day in History... June 15, 1942

Start of V-Mail Service

On June 15, 1942, the Post Office Department inaugurated its V-Mail Service.

Prior to the war, ships and airplanes that operated on regularly scheduled routes transported mail intended for an overseas destination. A friendly Europe saw to their safe and speedy delivery under the terms of the Universal Postal Union.

The outbreak of World War II changed all this; ships no longer sailed on a regular schedule and enemy submarines lurking in the water made it impossible to guarantee delivery. Planes had to fly a roundabout route. That meant using more petroleum which was already quite scarce. Since fewer flights were made, cargo space became extremely valuable.

Recognizing that correspondence to and from the Armed Forces in battle zones was vital to the war effort, the Postal Department introduced its V-Mail Service on June 15, 1942. The service took its name from the “V for Victory” symbol developed during the war.



This stamp was issued to bolster support for the war effort.

Those sending messages by V-Mail used a special combination letter and envelope that was given preferred sorting and transportation. Specially designed forms were made available for free at stationery stores and distributed to service personnel overseas. V-Mail forms had limited space for a message on one side and instructions for sending on the other. Once sealed shut, they would apply a stamp. At first, people weren't allowed to enclose any other items, but eventually, the post office allowed people to send pictures of babies under a year old, or those that had been born after their fathers had left for the service. Military authorities read all of the letters and censored them if need be.

Once received at the V-Mail stations, these letters were opened and then filmed at a rate of 2,000 to 2,500 per hour to be transferred to microfilm. About 1,600 letters could fit on one roll – making them about three percent of their original weight and volume. For instance – 150,000 regular letters would weigh about 1,500 pounds and fill 22 mail sacks. The same letters microfilmed weighed just 45 pounds and fit in one mail sack – which freed up valuable space for other items on transport planes.

When the letters reached their destinations, they were reproduced onto five-by-four inch photographs and sent to the recipient in special V-Mail envelopes. The film wouldn't be destroyed until the recipient received their letter. If they didn't, the letter would be reprinted.

Servicemen and women could send their letters for free. They simply had to write “Free” along with their name, rank, military branch, and return address in the upper left corner. For civilians, the cost was 3¢ for surface mail and 6¢ for Airmail, which was later increased to 8¢.

During 1943, V-Mail reached its peak – in one month 20,120 rolls of film containing 33,355,554 letters were handled. By the time the service was suspended on November 1, 1945, more than one billion letters were sent by V-Mail. After that, people were allowed to continue to use V-Mail stationery until the remaining supplies ran out in March 1946.



Stamp from the 1942: Turning the Tide sheet



World War II-era airmail that covered the 8¢ rate for V-Mail traveling overseas.

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