

Forces Mail from Afghanistan 2001–14

By Robert Jack

At least 52 nations have contributed to the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan since 2001. As the ISAF begins to wind down its operations, Robert Jack takes a timely look at the philatelic legacy left behind by the field post facilities that have served international troops in Afghanistan during the mission.



ISAF, the International Security Assistance Force, was established by the United Nations Security Council on 20 December 2001 following the invasion of Afghanistan by Western powers which began on, 7 October of that year. The invasion was a direct consequence of the September 2001 attacks in the United States ('9/11') and had the aim of removing the Taliban from power. At first, the ISAF mandate did not go beyond the boundaries of Kabul, however, on 13 October 2003 the UN Security Council voted unanimously to extend the ISAF mission beyond the capital. As the ISAF mission now draws to a close it is timely to look at the philatelic legacy it will leave behind.

Over the years, since 2001, at least 52 nations have contributed to the ISAF force to a greater or lesser degree. Troop commitments have varied from 93,000 US troops to fewer than a dozen personnel from countries such as Iceland, Ireland, the Ukraine and Luxembourg. Not all nations have had field post facilities of their own, so some have used those of other nations and mail from their contingents is only identifiable by other markings on the cover. Despite the length of the operations, mail has not been generated in quantity, communications at the start of the 21st century being carried on via mobile phone, Skype and email rather than by post. Mail from the United States and United Kingdom contingents is particularly difficult to locate despite both having had large numbers of troops in Afghanistan for the entire period. There are many countries for which the author has not yet seen any mail, including large troop contributors such as Australia. Commemorative and philatelic mail

is prevalent, but this article illustrates (so far as can be ascertained) examples of non-philatelic material from some of the nations involved. With so many countries participating this just touches on the material available.

Austria

Austria contributed 170 soldiers between February 2002 and August 2003. It subsequently sent 93 soldiers from August to October 2005 to Kunduz to support the parliamentary and provincial elections. Since then, Austria has provided only a handful of liaison officers to the ISAF. Fig 1 shows a cover from the Austrian Commando contingent sent via the German Feldpost on 18 July 2002. Feldpost 1371 was based at Camp Warehouse, near Kabul Airport. It was operational from 22 February 2002 to 31 December 2004. The Pashto writing in the ISAF symbol means 'Help and Co-operation'.



Fig 1 A cover from the Austrian Commando contingent sent via the German Feldpost in 2002 (Reduced)

Belgium

The Belgian contingent arrived in July 2003 and consistently numbered around 500 personnel, being deployed in Kabul, Kunduz and Kandahar. Fig 2 shows mail from the Belgian ISAF contingent based in Kabul, 2006.

Canada

Canadian troops first arrived in Afghanistan in January/February 2002, since when more than 40,000 troops have served there. Initially their role was to help train the Afghan National Army and police, facilitate reconstruction and provide security. They were then redeployed to Kandahar Province and from 2006 were involved in major operations and battles around Kandahar. The Canadian Air Force also had a major presence. They left in March 2014. Field Post Office numbers seen are 5050 and 5113, however there may be others.

The cover shown in Fig 3 was posted during 'Operation Apollo', the codename for an operation conducted by Canadian forces in support of the United States in its military operations in Afghanistan between October 2001 and October 2003. The Canadian stamp has been cancelled with a 'CFPO 5050' field post office postmark (location not known).

France

French troops served in Afghanistan from late 2001 until November 2012, numbering around 3750 at any time. Since the end of 2012 French forces have had a logistical presence only. The ISAF military mission of the French forces in Afghanistan was called 'L'Operation Pamir' and covered a vast area comprising Kabul and the Shamali Plain to the north.

Fig 4 shows a cover from military post office 240, sent on 3 May 2002. The office opened on 8 January 2002 at Kabul Airport, moving in 2006 to Camp Warehouse, 15 miles away.

Germany

The German Parliament approved the participation of the *Bundeswehr* in the ISAF on 22 December 2001. A maximum of 1200 troops were to be deployed. However, Germany soon became the third largest contributor to ISAF forces (after the US and the UK) with in excess of 4000 troops. Mail from the German contingent is perhaps the easiest to find and the German Feldpost is often used by other contingents.

FPOs and periods of use known are:

- 1300, code a—ISAF HQ, Kabul, April 2003 to January 2005
- 1301, no code—Kunduz, December 2003 to December 2004
- 1371, no code—Camp Warehouse, February 2002 to December 2004 (see Fig 1)
- 1391, no code—Kabul, July 2002 to December 2004 (previously used at Termez, Uzbekistan from May to June 2002)
- 6430, code b—Camp Warehouse, from January 2005
- 6431, code a—ISAF HQ, Kabul, from January 2005
- 6432, no code—Kunduz, from January 2005
- 6490, code a—ISAF Operations North, from July 2012

Fig 5 shows an inbound cover to the German contingent addressed to Kunduz and sent Freepost via the German Feldpost address of 64298 Darmstadt. For examples of the German Feldpost postmarks used in Afghanistan, see Fig 1 and Fig 10.

G.S.M. July 2014

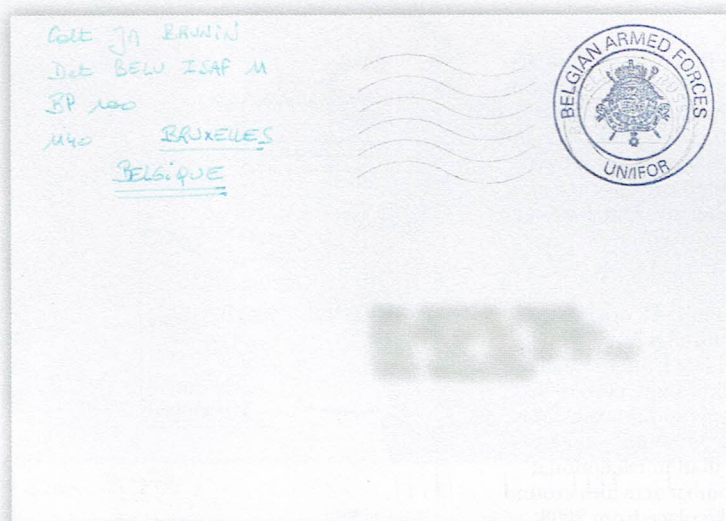


Fig 2 A cover sent from the Belgian ISAF contingent based in Kabul (Reduced)



Fig 3 Canadian 'Operation Apollo' cover with a 'CFPO 5050' postmark (Reduced)



Fig 4 A French cover sent on 3 May 2002 from military post office 240 (Reduced)

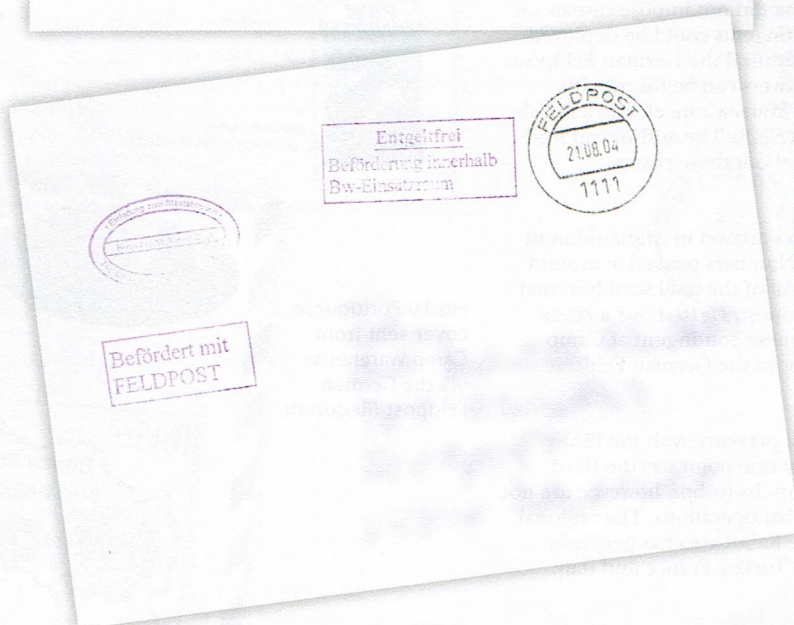


Fig 5 Mail from the German ISAF troops is perhaps the easiest to find and the German Feldpost is often used by other contingents (Reduced)

Holland

Holland was involved in ISAF from January 2002 and had between 650 and 2000 troops in Afghanistan until August 2010. The Dutch returned to Kunduz between June 2011 and October 2013. The undated cover shown at Fig 6 is from the Dutch contingent with a German Feldpost cachet and Dutch postage paid cancel (Reduced)

Italy

Italy has been present in ISAF operations since 2002 and is the fifth largest troop contributor. The mandate from the Italian parliament did not allow Italian forces to take part in combat operations against the Taliban insurgency in the south and east of Afghanistan other than in exceptional circumstances, but combat activities around the Farah area did take place from 2008. After Germany, material from the Italian contingent is the next easiest to locate.

Fig. 7 shows a cover sent from Kabul to Italy on 6 February 2008. It has been postmarked 'ISAF AFGHANISTAN', a cancel used at the Italian ISAF HQ in Kabul. Another postmark which can be found reads 'ISAF PRAESIDIUM' which was used by the provincial reconstruction team based in Herat from 1 April 2005.

Norway

Present in Afghanistan since late 2001, Norwegian troop numbers peaked at around 500. When the troops first arrived they used the German field post for their mail. However, the piece shown in Fig 8, dated 26 October 2011, is from Norwegian Feltpost 100 and bears a Mazar-e-Sharif Feltpost cachet.



Left: Fig 8 Norwegian cover with a Feltpost 100 postmark and a Mazar-e-Sharif Feltpost cachet (Reduced)

Poland

The first Polish deployment of troops into Afghanistan was of 200 men in 2002, but this grew to 3000 troops, making Poland the seventh largest contributor to the ISAF. Over 25,000 Polish personnel have served in Afghanistan in total. Poland is also one of the few countries that did not impose caveats on where their contingents could be deployed.

Poland initially used the German Feldpost, but from 2010 covers can be found with Polish stamps, a Warsaw cancel, and a Polish Bagram cachet (Fig 9). The author can find no information about these covers.

Portugal

Portuguese forces arrived in Afghanistan in February 2002. Numbers peaked at around 250 personnel. All of the mail seen has used the German Feldpost. Fig 10 shows a cover from the Portuguese contingent at Camp Warehouse, sent via the German Feldpost.

Turkey

Turkey has had a presence with the ISAF since 2002 and at one point was the third largest contingent. Its troops, however, are not engaged in combat operations. The regional command of the Kabul area has generally rotated between Turkey, France and Italy.



Fig 6 Dutch cover with a German Feldpost cachet and Dutch postage paid cancel (Reduced)

Fig 7 A cover with an 'ISAF AFGHANISTAN' postmark sent by an Italian soldier in Kabul in 2008 (Reduced)



Left: Fig 8 Norwegian cover with a Feltpost 100 postmark and a Mazar-e-Sharif Feltpost cachet (Reduced)



Fig 9 Polish cover with a Warsaw cancel and Bagram cachet (Reduced)

Fig 10 Portuguese cover sent from Camp Warehouse via the German Feldpost (Reduced)



Turkey has also had command of security in the central-eastern province of Wardak.

Covers from the Turkish contingent are cancelled on arrival in Turkey. Fig 11 shows an inbound cover, postmarked 20 May 2002, from Maltepe Military High School, Ankara, to a member of the Turkish ISAF contingent in Kabul.

United Kingdom

Mail from BFPOs in Afghanistan is very hard to find. UK soldiers on operations are entitled to 30 minutes of telephone calls per week for deployments up to six months. In addition, providing the operational situation allows, they can have access to email and SMS texts. Families of British service personnel have traditionally been able to send letters on official blue stationery (known as a Blueys), however, now the family and friends of soldiers can also send Electronic Blueys (e-blueys), Photo Blueys and Fax Blueys which are printed out in colour. This means that electronic mail can be delivered within 24 hours even to some of the more remote locations . . . which may account for the scarcity of BFPO material.

UK forces have been present with the ISAF from the start of operations in 2001. Troop numbers peaked at 10,000 personnel in late 2009. The UK has been the second largest contributor after the United States. The British contributions to the ISAF force have been given various 'Operation' names over the period. The cover illustrated (Fig 12) is from Operation Jacana which involved 45 Commando Royal Marines, US forces, Australian SAS and the Norwegian FSK. It was a 'mopping up' exercise to kill or capture Al Qaida and Taliban rebels after a previous operation—Anaconda. It ran from April to July 2002 in Khost and Paktia provinces.

United States of America

The US has been by far the largest contributor to the ISAF, with at times over two thirds of all combat personnel. As at 20 February 2014, 33,600 of ISAF's 52,686 personnel were American. The remaining 19,086 coming from 48 different nations.

Fig 13 shows a cover sent from APO AE 09355, located at Kandahar, on 22 October 2004.

Nations who have contributed to the ISAF:

Albania, Armenia, Australia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Canada, Croatia, Czech Republic, Denmark, El Salvador, Estonia, Finland, France, Georgia, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Jordan, Republic of Korea, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Republic of Macedonia, Malaysia, Mongolia, Montenegro, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Singapore, Slovakia, Slovenia, South Korea, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Tonga, Turkey, Ukraine, United Arab Emirates, United Kingdom, and United States.

There may be others as it has been difficult to keep track of troop deployments over the decade-long involvement. Other countries have also been involved, but without formally being part of the ISAF. For example, China has provided mine-clearance and police training for Afghan Security Forces, but always resisted the deployment of troops to Afghanistan, apparently because of fears that casualties would provoke large scale anti-war protests because of China's One Child Policy.

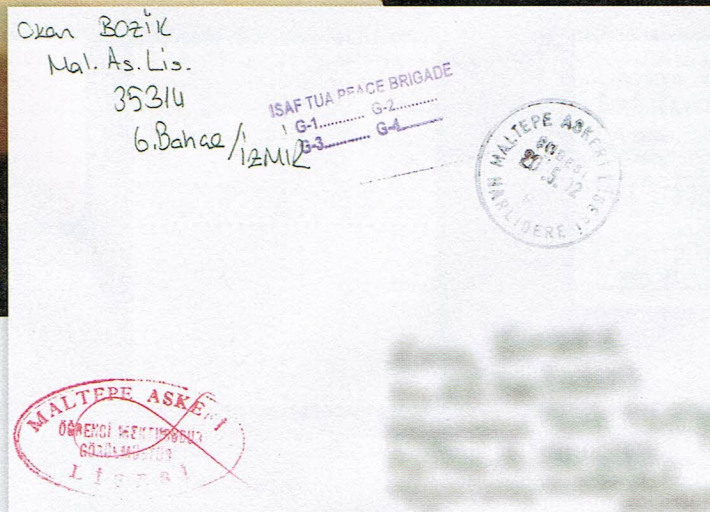


Fig 11 An inbound cover from the Maltepe Military High School, Ankara, Turkey, to a member of the Turkish ISAF contingent in Kabul (Reduced)

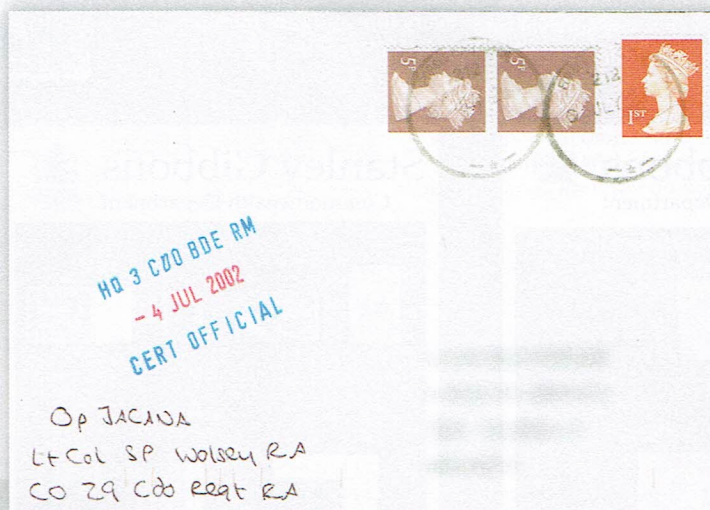


Fig 12 Cover from Operation Jacana, dated 6 July 2002, from Forces Post Office 212 (backstamped Bristol 13 July 2002) (Reduced)



Fig 13 US cover sent from APO AE 09355, located at Kandahar, on 22 October 2004 (Reduced)