

## The cover that didn't (go through Afghanistan)

- Robert Jack



Well, this is a tatty cover from January 1942. Roughly opened (if I'm being charitable) and a stamp missing to boot. So why the interest? I saw it online and the vendor described it thus:

*'This is a cover posted from Iran and addressed to Karachi. Obviously it went through the very difficult land route via Afghanistan and landed up in Quetta where it was censored before being forwarded to Karachi'*

'Obviously'? Hmm, I doubted that very much, but anything vaguely Afghan related was going to pique my interest. However it was late at night and the auction ended in the early hours. There was no time to do research, but the cover intrigued me whatever route it had taken, so I put in a bid, went to bed . . . and promptly forgot about it. A couple of days later my inbox received an invoice and a couple of weeks later the cover arrived.

If you look at a map, it is easy to see why the previous owner thought that the cover 'obviously' went through Afghanistan. The cover originates in Meched, at the top left on the map, from where it would be a hop, skip and a jump across the border to Herat, then down to Kandahar, across to Quetta and on to Karachi. 'Simple', as a certain meerkat would say. However the two neighbours were not exactly on the best of terms. Iran laid claim to Herat (which it once owned), Afghanistan to Meched (which it once owned) and whilst there was a border crossing at Islam Qala/Taybad, the chance of mail crossing it was nil. Until 1941.

In August 1941 a joint Anglo-Soviet occupation of Iran

had been effected, to prevent Germany gaining access to Iranian oil and the Persian Gulf. It was only after that occupation that it became possible for mail to cross the Afghan/Iranian border – the Iranians no longer had any say in the matter. Nevertheless mail travelling directly between Iran and Afghanistan is rather scarce – I know of only four covers to travel that route, three from Afghanistan to Iran and one in the other direction. The earliest of those covers arrived in Teheran in December 1941. This cover is from January 1942 . . . so could it possibly be another cover to cross the border? Well, no.

Unfortunately, if we look at the postmarks it is evident that it did not cross from Meched to Herat, or indeed enter Afghanistan at any point at all. Instead, from Meched, 8th January 1942, it travelled south, bypassing Koh-i-Malik Siah Ziafet the tri-country border town where Iran, Afghanistan and India (we're in 1942) meet. KMSZ, or 'Shrine at the Mountain of the Black Chieftain' used to have an Indian post office, but that had closed in 1924 and it is probably a good thing that the cover didn't stop there anyway: in 1909 Frederick O'Conner, British Consul in Sistan described it as *'... the most boring and horrible place that [I have] ever had the displeasure of supervising.'* So, it travelled on a further 25 miles to Zahedan, formerly known as Duzdab. That was a canny and rather recent name change made by the Shah on a visit there in 1929, after all would you rather come from a place called 'City of Thieves' or 'City of the Pious'? Actually 'City' was a touch grandiose at that time. Even by 1956 the population was only 17,500, so more like a large village really. Nowadays it is a meg-

acity with a population well in excess of half a million, a large number of whom are Afghan refugees who fled there after the Russian invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. Anyway, the cover gets a transit mark there dated 15th January 1942. Zahedan, in its Duzdab incarnation, also had an Indian post office, but that too had closed in the 1920s, so no Indian markings as yet. We are now within touching distance of the Iranian/Indian border at Mirjaveh/Taftan. Looking at the map again, the cover needs to head south east from the border to get to Karachi, but instead it travels slightly north east to Quetta. There is a good reason for that: geography. This part of what is now Pakistan and known as Balochistan comprises 44% of the country's land mass, but only 6% of its population. It is dry, arid, desert. To head south would mean crossing the Kharan Desert, so the transport links simply don't. Still, the cover is currently in Zahedan and that was one end of the Trans-Baluchistan Railway, the other end being Quetta.

The railway opened in 1922, so did the cover travel in comfort by train to Quetta? Well, maybe, maybe not. The railway opened just when the British were leaving Persia, so its raison d'être was gone before it had begun. By 1932 British interest had waned to such an extent that the line was closed, the rails taken up and used elsewhere. World War II however saw a renewed interest in the line, as a means to supply Soviet Russia through Persia, and so it was hastily re-opened on the 20th April 1940 (according to Wikipedia), or the 20th April 1942 (according to trains-world-expresses.com). The earlier date seems suspiciously quick considering the track had to be re-laid, the later date would mean our cover arriving at Zahedan station three months before the first train, and there are no markings to tell us whether or not it caught the train anyway.

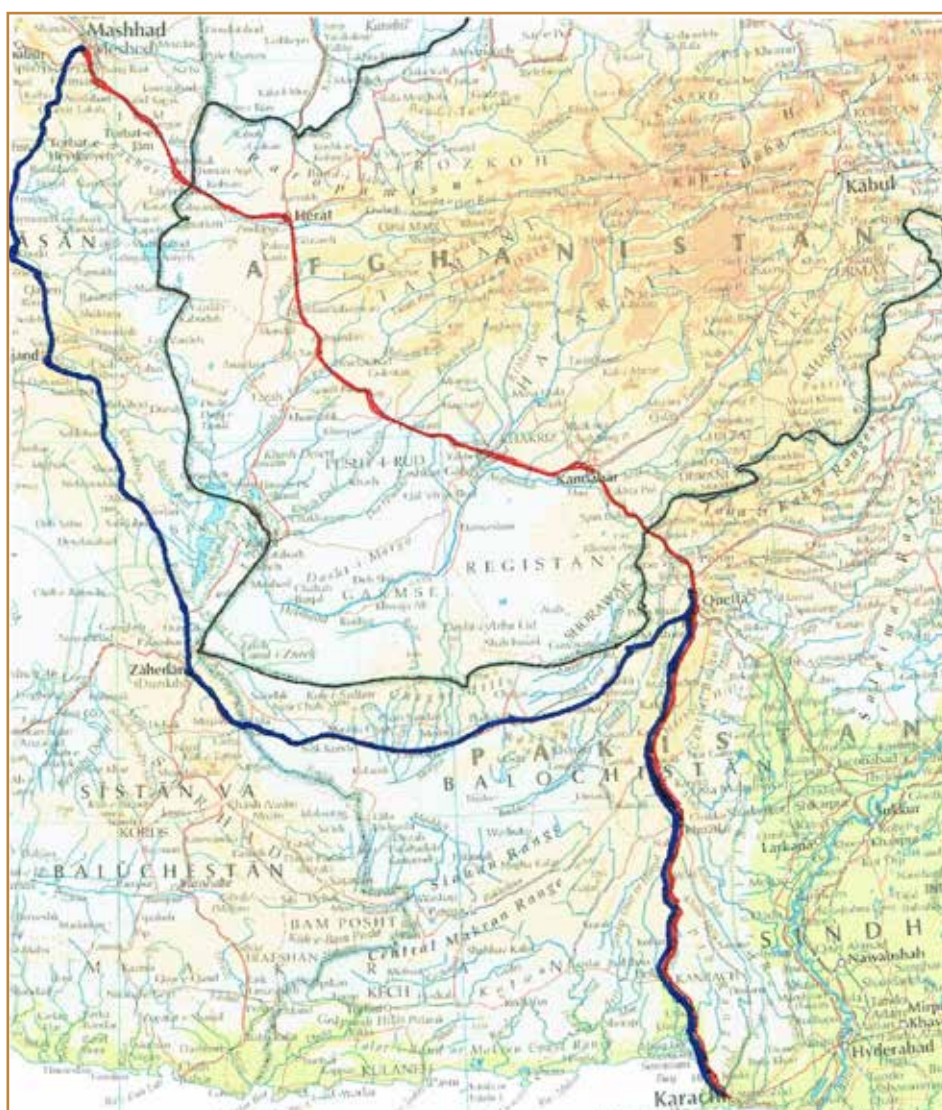
No matter, if the train wasn't available the roads were, and like the rails, all roads lead to Quetta, by which I mean *the* road leads to Quetta, it's not

as if there was a choice. And so to Quetta we go. There is no postmark to tell us when it arrived there, or indeed when it departed, but there is a triangular PASSED BY CENSOR marking with code I 5, and an OPENED BY EXAMINERS censor label with code 4-I, the code for Quetta being the letter 'I'. The triangular marking is recorded by Morenweiser in his tome on *British Civil Censorship Devices, World War II, British Asia* (1997) as being used from July 1940 to January 1942, so we're just within his dates. The censor label however is only recorded by him as used between March 1942 and July 1943 with Codes 1-I and 2-I, so Code 4-I used in January 1942 is an unexpected bonus.

From Quetta we are now on the home run and so, having skirted halfway around Afghanistan without actually entering it, we head due south and Karachi is reached on the 21st January, 1942, a mere two weeks after setting off from Meched. Which is about the time it took to reach me from Singapore in the here and now.

So it may be tatty, and it may not have gone through Afghanistan, but there are still reasons for me to treasure this cover.

Map reproduced from *The Times Atlas of the World, Concise Edition, 7th Edn, 1995*, p.39 with kind permission of Harper Collins.



\_\_\_\_\_ Afghan Border

\_\_\_\_\_ The 'obvious' route

\_\_\_\_\_ The actual route