



**An American B-17 Flying Fortress long-range bomber from a base in Italy lands at the Poltava air base in Ukraine, U.S.S.R., on June 2, 1944, on the first shuttle mission flown by the U.S. Strategic Air Force in Europe, Eastern Command.**

## **Postal History of American Forces in the Soviet Union during World War II**

By Ken Lawrence

Contemplating a fresh postal history subject to conquer now that I'm no longer exhibiting, judging, or in need of a challenge that can mature over a period of years led me to wonder if I could acquire one attractive World War II cover from an American military base in Ukraine. Over the course of 2015 I managed to collect three of them, which I consider exceptional success. The story that lurks behind these covers is not well known.

They enclosed letters from the only group of American fighting men who were stationed in and operating from the Soviet Union during World War II (as distinct from diplomatic missions, military liaisons, observers, embedded war reporters, and Navy escorts that protected convoys to and from Russian ports).

At the November-December 1943 Tehran conference, Franklin D. Roosevelt had urged Joseph Stalin to allow the United States to use bases in the U.S.S.R. for American strategic bombers. Winston Churchill had counseled FDR not to pursue the plan, perhaps fearing that Stalin might insist on a quid pro quo such as reciprocal rights for Red Navy warships at Scapa Flow and San Diego, but the U.S. general staff urged the president to make a priority of the project despite Churchill's objection.

The stated purpose of the plan was to inaugurate shuttle bombing of German installations, sending strategic bombers from bases in Great Britain and Italy on missions over Axis-occupied territory, but instead of returning to their home bases they would continue flying eastward to landing strips in Soviet territory. There they would refuel and rearm, then conduct new bombing missions on the way back.

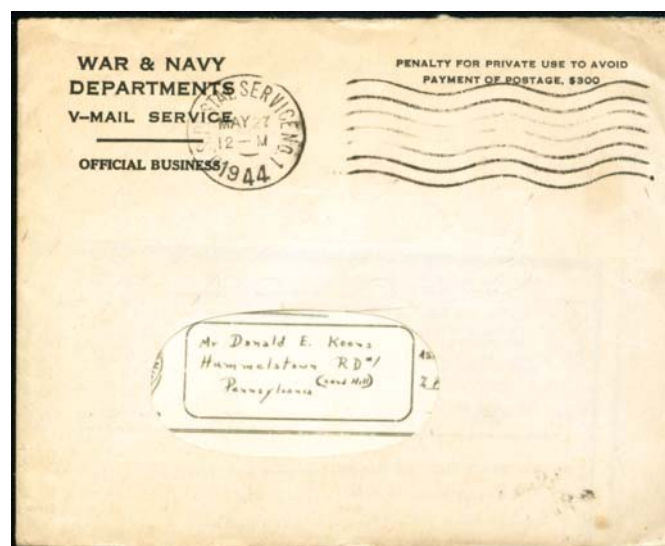
Soviet military planners had resisted the proposal for several reasons. Strategic bombing was not included in their military program; they planned to win the war on the ground, employing combat aircraft tactically in support of infantry, armor, and naval operations. The American Lend-Lease program had refused Soviet requests for four-engine planes, but U.S. military commanders wanted bases for their own crews to operate long-range heavy bombers to, from, and over Soviet territory. Now that the Red Army had routed the Wehrmacht and had begun to drive the Germans out of their country, were the Americans trying to find a way to claim a share of credit and glory for victories on the Eastern front?

Maurice Matloff wrote in *Strategic Planning for Coalition Warfare 1943-1944*:

Although the War Department was disinclined to build up a Soviet bomber force, it was not averse to impressing the Russians with the efficiency and technical ability of the U.S. bomber forces. . . . Such an operation would serve to demonstrate the solidarity of the three partners and would help to break ground for the later use of Siberian bases in the war against Japan.

Stalin agreed to FDR's request "in principle." But instead of allowing the U.S. to use six bases, as the air staff's plan proposed, the U.S.S.R. agreed to provide only three, and delayed implementation of the shuttle program by imposing rigid travel and documentation requirements on the forces assigned to them. The airfields were located in the Kiev area of Ukraine. Construction began when the first Americans arrived in late April and early May 1944.

Poltava was selected as the headquarters base for the Eastern Command of the United States Strategic Air Forces in Europe and as the main landing field for long-range bombers. A second base at Mirgorod also accommodated the strategic bombers, while their fighter escorts were serviced and rearmed at a Piryatin airfield. Army post offices were established April 7 — APO 798 (New York) at Poltava, APO 798 Unit 1 at Mirgorod, and APO 798 Unit 2 at Piryatin. (I have yet to record an actual cover from APO 798-1 or 798-2.)



POSTAL SERVICE NO. 1

PRINT THE COMPLETE ADDRESS IN PLAIN BLOCK LETTERS IN THE PANEL BELOW, AND YOUR RETURN ADDRESS IN THE PANEL ABOVE. USE TYPEWRITER, DARK INK OR PENCIL. WRITE PLAINLY. VERY SMALL WRITING IS NOT SUITABLE.

Mr Donald E. Koons  
Hummelstown RD #1  
Pennsylvania (and H11)

Sgt C. E. Frantz  
13093356 Det 5  
SENDERS NAME  
ASC, USSTAF APO 778  
SENDERS ADDRESS  
Z P/4 NY, NY  
13 May 44  
DATE

CENSORS STAMP

Hija Don,  
I received your Easter card yesterday (rather late huh!) well there are many reasons why it took so long to find me & guess. Thanks for remembering. I had a letter from Jerry too say Allright was in A.G. what branch of service is Lloyd in?  
As for Easter I was in ... really had a good time. I'm now doing some moving some & last week you. I also visited the ...  
I received a box of Candy from my Bro Mark yesterday & due to the hot weather you should have seen that candy I don't know how many pieces was in the box when he sent it but when I got it it was only one big, sticky, grossy, mess. But it sure taste good & we're getting rid of it fast.  
My current address — Sgt Chet E. Frantz 13093356  
Det 5 ASC, USSTAF  
APO 778 Z P/4 NY, NY  
It's about time for Chet and the fellows are washing up so I'd better join them. So tell I love you for you. Bye for you.  
Chet

V-MAIL

This V-mail letter was sent by S/Sgt. Chester E. Frantz, a clerk for the airfield construction squadron at Poltava, on May 13, 1944, to a friend at Hummelstown, Pennsylvania. An Air Transport Command flight carried the original form to Tehran for microfilming, dated there May 18. The microfilm was flown to New York (U.S. POSTAL SERVICE NO. 1 in the postmark) on a (Pan American Airways contract) Cannonball route or (ATC military transport) Fireball route flight, processed, and posted May 27 to its destination, remarkably quick transit time from a location that could barely accommodate transport aircraft at the time it was written.

Portions of Frantz's message that disclosed locations were deleted by an Army base censor, but the history of this mission suggests what he might have written. The Americans had traveled by ship to the Middle East, by truck to the North of Iran, and by train on a group visa from Tabriz, Iranian Azerbaijan, to Moscow. They had spent several days there being vetted, processed, and documented by Russian authorities. Among the sites he might have visited in the Russian capital was the Bolshoi Ballet. Japanese diplomats, concerned that the U.S.S.R. might be violating its neutrality status with respect to Japan, complained to the Soviet foreign ministry that they had observed uniformed American soldiers in Bolshoi seats that were reserved for U.S. embassy

personnel. Meanwhile building materials, vehicles, and mission supplies were brought by ship to Murmansk and from there by train to Ukraine.

On the 1996 Forte-Helbock rarity scale from 1 (common) to 10 (rare) in *A Price Guide to A.P.O. Cancels of the Second World War*, APO 798 rated 9. On their demand scale from 1 (low) to 5 (high) it rated 4. Their valuation system assigned a premium to V-mail. All in all, this letter was an excellent acquisition in all three respects. (The Forte-Helbock demand scale ought to be reliable, though some of it reflects persistent requests for covers from small outposts on remote Pacific paradise islands that experienced no combat. But users should approach their rarity scale with caution and a dose of skepticism. Some APOs for which covers have never been reported inexplicably have Forte-Helbock ratings below 10.)

Unfortunately philatelic references make it nearly impossible for collectors of World War II military postal history to grasp the significance of covers from this APO location. Both Forte-Helbock and the Military Postal History Society's *Numbered Army & Air Force Post Office Locations, Volume 1, BPOs, PRSs, & Regular APOS 1941-1964* [7th edition] by Russ Carter locate APO 798 at "Erivan, Ukraine," which is how covers are described by sellers. Yerevan, as the name of that city is usually transliterated, is in Armenia, not Ukraine. To the best of my knowledge no American troops set foot there during the war; it was best known as the setting for wry Soviet political jokes attributed to Radio Yerevan, such as this one: "Dear Radio Yerevan: When we achieve true communism, will we still have money?" "Dear listener: No, none of that, either."

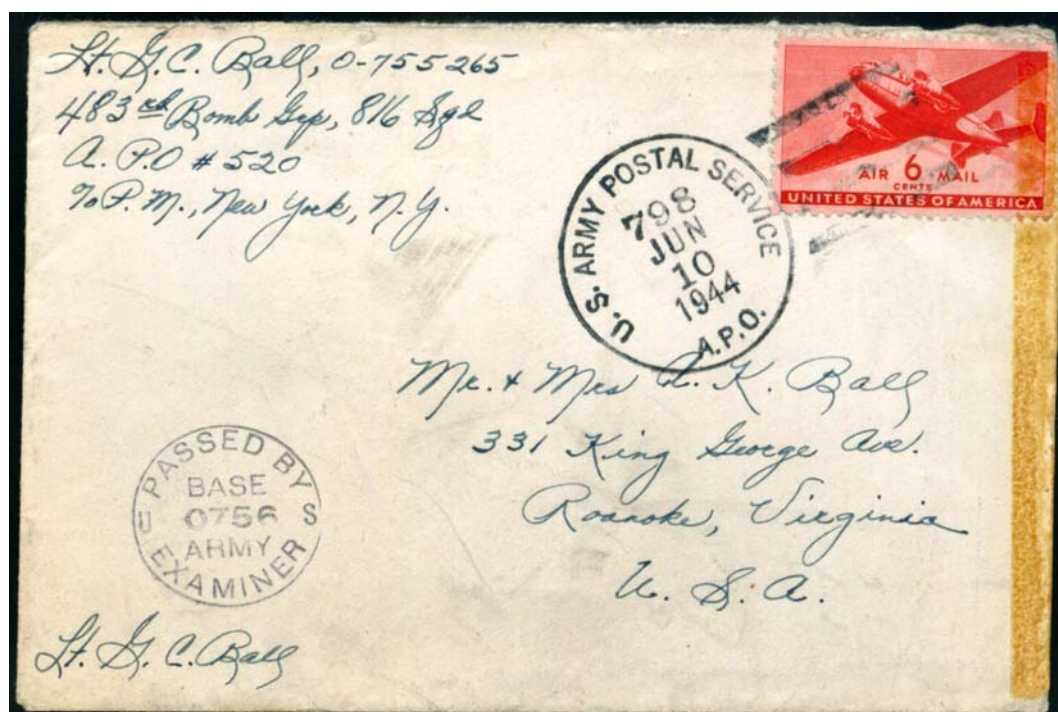
The incorrect location for APO 798 in hobby references leads me to conclude that the strong demand reported by Forte and Helbock is driven by collectors who want covers from as many locations as possible, not by postal historians in search of covers as mementoes of their specific historical context and the routes they traveled. If I'm right about that, APO 798 covers, when they are properly understood, might become more important and more desirable than their 1996 ratings suggested.

The sender of the V-mail, Chester E. Frantz, died in 1996.





Red Army women assigned to Poltava in April and May 1944 laid steel mat for the runway that would accommodate American shuttle bombers.



Operation Frantic was the code name of the shuttle bombing program. The first mission was dubbed *Frantic Joe*. This June 10, 1944, cover from APO 798 (in the postmark) at Poltava to

Roanoke, Virginia, embodies the inaugural shuttle mission as perfectly as one could hope to find. The sender's APO 520 return address, assigned to the Fifteenth Air Force, was located at Cerignola, Italy. Bomb Squadrons 815, 816, 817, 840 of the 483rd Bombardment Group were based at nearby Sterparone Airfield. Capt. Garden Clarkson Ball was the co-pilot of a four-engine B-17G Flying Fortress long-range bomber in Squadron 816; the cover is addressed to his parents.

On the morning of June 2, 130 Flying Fortress bombers and 64 P-51 Mustang fighters of the 15th Air Force, including Ball's squadron, took off from bases in Italy, bombed a railway center at Debreczen, Hungary, and continued eastward with the loss of one bomber in combat. They landed at Poltava in the early afternoon. As members of the first shuttle mission, crews of these aircraft were greeted on arrival by a large crowd of American and Soviet dignitaries headed by U.S. Ambassador Averill Harriman and Soviet Maj. Gen. Alexei R. Perminov.

On the morning of June 6, the day that Allied forces landed on the beaches of Normandy, 104 B-17s and 42 P-51s from Poltava, Mirgorod, and Piryatin bombed a German aircraft factory at Mielec, Poland. They shot down eight enemy planes, and returned to the bases in Ukraine with the loss of two fighters.

Ball mailed his letter at Poltava on June 10. The next day the entire mission force returned to their bases in Italy. They bombed Focsani Airfield in Romania along the way, and lost one B-17. The June 11 flight completed *Frantic Joe*. Ball's Flying Fortress arrived safely at Sterparone Airfield.

The American high command deemed the first shuttle mission a success, and released a motion picture to publicize it: <http://historyinpieces.com/research/video/mission-moscow> (A less accurate film, circulated within the Army to stimulate troop morale, barely disguised the mission's code name by calling it "Operation Titanic": <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vVD7D7ID2pg> )

Ball's next assignment, not a shuttle mission, was a July 15 bombing raid over Memmingen, Germany. When his Flying Fortress was shot down by German fighters he bailed out near Kempten and was captured July 18. He was probably attempting to escape from Bavaria into Liechtenstein, about 75 miles away. From then until the German surrender Ball was a prisoner of war. Captain had evidently been his brevet rank in the summer of 1944; in POW records he was listed as a second lieutenant. Ball died in 2006.

After the euphoria of the first mission's success had passed, relations deteriorated between the Americans at Poltava and their hosts. Part of the cause was the inevitable clash of cultures and miscues across the language barrier. Americans blamed Stalinist rigidity and bureaucracy, but should have acknowledged that at least part of the Soviets' annoyance was a consequence of boorish behavior by some of the GIs.

One mechanic taught a friendly, gullible Russian woman at the mess hall that "Say, do you want to f\*\*\*?" was a standard American greeting. Word reached Perminov after she happily addressed her newly learned English salutation to an American officer. During the investigation that

ensued, infuriated Russian enlisted men took revenge on the prankster. Later the woman smacked another GI who asked her for a fork.

Women at Poltava who welcomed the American crews were Russian and Ukrainian soldiers. Some were decorated combat veterans, but our airmen treated them as prospective concubines. Before leaving Italy, one fighter squadron commander removed ammunition from the right wing-guns of his P-51 Mustang and loaded the space with boxes of condoms and prophylactic kits for the men in his unit.

Especially in light of the appalling atrocities that the Soviet people had endured in Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, and the Baltic states during the Nazi invasion and occupation, these attitudes toward our Allies were shockingly insensitive. In 1941 the Red Army had suffered its worst disaster on the very ground that hosted these American units in 1944 (the Battle of Kiev, which ended with the loss of 43 divisions). Only one building was left standing when the Americans arrived, which became Eastern Command headquarters. Otherwise the base was surrounded by ruins. Not surprisingly, Soviet commanders put an end to fraternization after it became clear that some lecherous Yanks were incorrigible.

The second shuttle mission, *Frantic II*, was assigned to the Eighth Air Force, which sent 20 combat wings of heavy bombers and 23 fighter groups — 163 Flying Fortresses and 70 Mustangs — over Germany on June 21 from bases in the United Kingdom to bomb a synthetic oil plant at Ruhland and aircraft factories and marshaling yards on the outskirts of Berlin (some dropped propaganda leaflets instead of bombs).

One B-17 and one P-51 were shot down; the rest of the *Frantic II* aircraft reached the U.S.S.R., but seven B-17s made emergency landings at Red Air Force bases not designated for American use. Worse, a German pilot flying a four-engine Heinkel He-177 heavy bomber from a base at Minsk followed the main American force all the way to Poltava, photographed the base and aircraft on the ground, and returned to his base unmolested.

That night, catastrophe struck as the Luftwaffe returned in force with their fleet of heavy bombers and fighter escorts. By the time they departed, 47 Flying Fortresses, 15 Mustangs, two C-47 twin-engine Douglas Skytrain transports, and one Lockheed P-38 Lightning reconnaissance plane were destroyed, more than twenty other aircraft were crippled but repairable, enough steel mat landing strip had been damaged that the field could not be used for four days, and 450,000 gallons of fuel were lost along with communications equipment, ground vehicles, and large quantities of bombs and ammunition. One American and 25 Russians were killed. The Germans returned to Mirgorod the following night. American pilots flew their planes away from the danger, but more fuel and munitions were lost.



**On the night of June 21-22 a massive Luftwaffe bomber force attacked the American base at Poltava, leaving 47 B-17 Flying Fortresses of the Eighth Air Force destroyed and 20 others crippled.**

Military historian Maj. Albert Lepawsky, the U.S. commandant at Poltava, put the best gloss on the successful German attack on Poltava with this cryptic allusion to it in his propaganda article “Blue Stars and Red Stars” in the August 1944 issue of *Air Force* magazine:

We began also to realize better the need for recognizing our Allied planes. Not that our pilots had made the mistake of firing on friendly aircraft. But in their anxiety to avoid such an occurrence, they had missed several kills in combat.

The American command actually blamed Soviet incompetence for the failure to defend against the German attack, not American flight crews’ carelessness in leading a German spy plane to their base and American fighter pilots’ failure to shoot it down. Postwar histories by American authors repeat that excuse — “The AAF in Russia” by John E. Fagg in *The Army Air Forces in World War II*, Volume 3, edited by Wesley Frank Craven and James Lea Cate; *The Poltava Affair, A Russian Warning: An American Tragedy* by Glenn B. Infield; and *Beyond the Call: The True Story of One World War II Pilot’s Covert Mission to Rescue POWs on the Eastern Front* by Lee Trimble with Jeremy Dronfield. But two more recent books by the British military historian Antony Beevor provide context that our writers omitted — *Stalingrad* (to get a sense of the savagery the Soviet Union had witnessed less than 350 miles east of the airfields that hosted American airmen, and the Red Army’s superhuman, stubborn resistance that halted, threw back, and crushed the German army) and *The Fall of Berlin* (to learn about the even greater offensive Red Army operations that were under way across Eastern Europe while American airmen were flying *Operation Frantic* missions and chafing at Soviet restrictions on their flights).

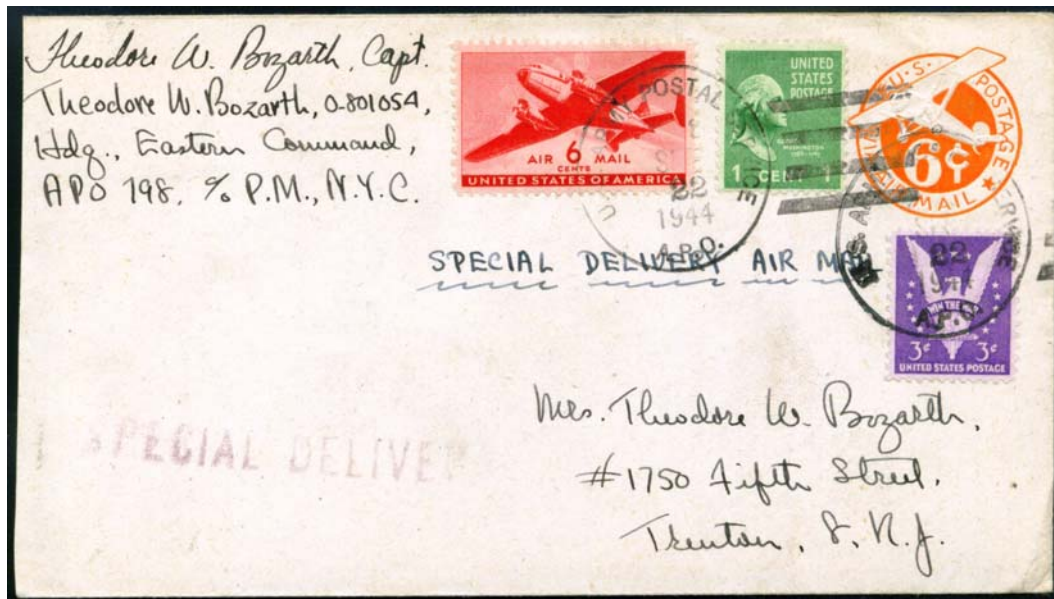
Stalin and his commanders were not sharing their plans with Allied leaders. They knew that Churchill was maneuvering to control as much of Europe as possible after the war, and were in a rush to capture as much territory as they could occupy first. (For example, Churchill had opposed *Operation Dragoon*, the invasion of Southern France, pressing FDR instead to invade the Balkans so the Red Army would not occupy them. Roosevelt refused; he accepted Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower’s advice that the United States should just win the European war as quickly as possible so resources could be redeployed to the Pacific war against Japan.)



While U.S. Air Force commanders were selecting targets in Eastern Europe for shuttle missions to bomb, Soviet commanders were deploying four million troops along a line from the Baltic Coast to the Black Sea in preparation for their race to Berlin. Units and equipment that had defended rear bases such as Poltava had been moved forward in anticipation. Gen. Konstantin Rossokovsky, commander of the First Belarussian Front, must have regarded the Luftwaffe's attack on Poltava as a providential diversion, drawing Germany's most potent force in his sector away from his massed armor on the very eve of *Operation Bagration* (June 22 to August 19), which ended with the destruction of an entire German army group — the most calamitous defeat experienced by German armed forces during the war — and the liberation of Belarus, western Russia, eastern Poland, and part of Romania. Stalin could not have lost any sleep over the American losses while he was pressing his generals to capture Berlin before Allied armies on the Western Front could get there.

On June 26, Eighth Air Force aircraft that had survived the German attack departed the three Ukrainian bases for home. They bombed a synthetic oil plant at Drohobycz, Poland, and landed on Fifteenth Air Force fields in Italy. There they participated in joint missions with the Fifteenth on July 2 and 3 before returning July 5 to their bases in England, completing *Frantic II*.

Shuttle missions were suspended for a month after the nasty surprise of June 21-22. The third (July 22-26) and fourth (August 4-6) *Frantic* missions, flown by Fifteenth Air Force bomb groups based in Italy, employed P-38 Lightning bombers against targets at Buzau, Ploesti, Focsani, and Bucharest, Romania, and Mielec, Poland. The fifth (August 6-13) and sixth (September 11-17) *Frantic* missions, flown by Eighth Air Force bomb groups from England, flew B-17 Flying Fortresses again, bombing targets at Gdynia and Trzebinia, Poland; Toulouse, France; Chemnitz, Germany; and Diósgyor, Hungary. The seventh and final September 18-23 *Frantic* mission, also assigned to the Eighth Air Force, air-dropped arms and supplies to the Polish Home Army during the Warsaw uprising on the eastbound run, and bombed the marshaling yard at Szolnok, Hungary, on the return flight from Poltava, flying without bombs on the last leg from Italy to England. By this date the Ukrainian bases were so far behind the battlefield as to be anachronistic.



Capt. Theodore W. Bozarth of the Eastern Command headquarters staff mailed this September 22, 1944, air mail special delivery cover to his wife at Trenton, New Jersey, while the last shuttle bombers were on their way back to Britain after the Warsaw air drop, a serendipitous bookend opposite the cover from the original *Frantic Joe* shuttle mission. The Trenton backstamp date is October 21. Forte and Helbock add a premium for special delivery usage, but as air mail postal history this cover is uniquely tantalizing.

Unlike the V-mail and the previous cover, this one probably was not carried by ATC to Tehran. By September 1944 a more direct route had opened, which is not widely known even among World War II air mail postal historians.

According to “Expansion to the East” by John D. Carter in *The Army Air Forces in World War II*, Volume 7, edited by Craven and Cate:

From Cairo an infrequent shuttle service had been operating into Adana, Turkey, since early 1944 for the convenience of the American Ambassador and his staff. In order to give a civilian appearance to the flights, ATC went in disguised as the “American Transport Company,” and the few ATC officers and men stationed at Adana wore civilian clothes. When the German threat to Turkey was removed, the command was permitted to throw off the disguise and to extend its flights to Ankara, Istanbul, and for a time to Poltava, in Russia [*sic*], via the Turkish bases.

In *Turkey's Declaration of War on Germany at the End of World War II*, Sina Akşin provided the chronology:

As the final German defeat became imminent, Turkey made certain moves in support of the Allies. June 6, 1944 was the date of the Normandy landing. On May 26, Turkey had decided to end strategic chrome exports to Germany. On June 15, 1944, Numan Menemencioglu, the Foreign Minister who was known for his pro-German sympathies, resigned. Again in June, German merchant ships passing through the Straits, which

probably often carried military material or personnel, began to be searched. On August 2, 1944, diplomatic relations with Germany were ended.

I think we can deduce that the ATC route from Cairo had been extended to Istanbul and Poltava by the end of August. By the end of October, only a skeleton crew remained at Poltava, with little need for air transport service, and the bases at Mirgorod and Piyatin had been abandoned. Therefore I estimate that air mail covers to and from Poltava during September 1944 are the best candidates to have flown on this route (and onward by Cannonball or Fireball flights to Miami and New York). Try to find another one!

Bozarth served in the Air Force for 22 years. He was married for 66 years before he died in 2005. His widow died in August of 2015, not long before I bought their cover.

There you have it: three World War II postal history gems, discovered in the rough, now cut and polished, suitable for mounting.

Toward the end of January 1945, Poltava once again caught the attention of military planners. Liberation of the first prisoner-of-war camp where Nazi Germany held captured Americans became the pretext for sending specialists to help liberated POWs get home. Another justification was to rescue crews of aircraft that had been shot down over Germany and had crash landed behind Soviet lines in Poland (and repairing and retrieving the planes). In reality, the Office of Strategic Services used the Poltava base to infiltrate American secret agents into Eastern Europe, establishing lines of communication with nationalist movements that opposed communism, causing clashes and unpleasant incidents with Soviet occupation forces. I have recorded one cover that originated at APO 798 during this later period, actually posted March 5, 1945, at APO 523 (Tehran), not in my collection.

Matloff summarized the significance of the World War II shuttle missions:

Perhaps the greatest value of the FRANTIC project lay in the political experience gained by the American negotiators, military and civilian, in their attempts to sustain the operation. In the face of frequent Soviet opposition, they managed to get approval for seven missions. This in itself was quite a feat, since the Russians had resisted all other efforts to introduce foreign troops on Soviet territory. Why the Russians consented to the shuttle bombing project and allowed it to be set up remains one of the more intriguing questions of Soviet-American wartime relations.

Because Stalin did consent to it, postal historians can collect U.S. covers from the World War II Eastern Front. The challenge is to find them.