

La Débâcle: Postal History of the 1870-71 Franco-Prussian War ***Synopsis by Steven Walske***

Background: This exhibit represents over forty years of research into the military mails of the 1870-71 Franco-Prussian War by the exhibitor, which culminated with his book *Les postes aux armées de la guerre franco-allemande de 1870-71*, published by the French Académie de Philatélie in 2019. It adopts a novel approach to a postal history exhibit, starting with the framework of the war's chronology, and using covers from both sides to illustrate every stage of the conflict. The history provides the narrative, while postal artifacts serve to illustrate and bring the narrative to life. This exhibit covers the entire war, from the July 1870 declaration of war to the 1871 Paris Commune and ensuing 1871-73 German post-war occupation.

Philatelic Significance: The display includes all of the known significant rarities of the war's military mails. Due to the short duration (6 months) of the war, many of the fieldpost markings are rare and difficult to acquire – the exhibitor has spent forty years tracking them down. Of particular note are spectacular Siege of Metz balloon mail, Paris military-related balloon mail (much rarer than their civilian cousins), franked fieldpost covers (both sides offered free franks on military mail, so franked mail is very rare), and rare Paris Commune fieldpost mail. Ten particularly notable items in the exhibit are:

- 1) Registered letter with Armée du Rhin B^{au} AK postmark and ARAK cancels on 20c and 40c French stamps – fewer than five franked covers are known from the imperial phase
- 2) letter carried by unmanned balloon out of the siege of Metz to Paris via Forbach, and then carried by line-crosser out of the siege of Paris
- 3) Metz balloon letter captured by the Germans and forwarded by diplomatic courier into besieged Paris
- 4) letter written on the surface of a Metz balloon that was cut out and forwarded to London
- 5) Only known letter from the siege of Verdun
- 6) Paris balloon letter with the only known Ministère de la Guerre cachet - carried on the first balloon (“Neptune”) to leave Paris
- 7) Paris balloon letter with “Merlin de Douai” cachet and blue Aérostiers cachet
- 8) the only known 18th Corps fieldpost postmark used on a franked letter
- 9) One of two known Paris balloon letters sent to New Caledonia. Naval concession rate.
- 10) May 1871 letter to the Federal army during Paris Commune with a quadrisect of the Bordeaux Issue 80c stamp



Further Information: The exhibitor's 2019 book (in French) provides comprehensive information on this subject, and the exhibit itself can be viewed at:

<https://www.rfrajola.com/SWWest/SWWest.htm>