

V-Mail

On June 15, 1942, the Post Office Department officially inaugurated V-Mail service in which letters to and from members of the Armed Forces overseas were microfilmed for transporting, then printed out for the recipient. The name was derived from the "V for Victory" symbol used during World War II.

Developed and operated in cooperation with the War and Navy Departments, V-Mail reduced the weight and bulk of military mail, creating more space for other, vital military cargo and providing safer, faster mail service for the military overseas.

A combination letter and envelope on distinctive stationery, V-Mail received preferential sorting and transportation. V-Mail included space for a message on one side and instructions for sending the letter on the reverse. Correspondents had to write in dark ink or dark pencil in designated space on the sheets, then fold and seal the envelope and apply postage or an indicia. Originally enclosures were forbidden, but, later, pictures of infants less than a year old or born after the serviceman had left to serve overseas were allowed.



Letters were opened by machines at the V-Mail stations, then filmed mechanically at a rate of 2,000 to 2,500 an hour. Roughly 1,600 letters would fit on one roll, reducing them to approximately three percent of their original weight and volume. For example, 150,000 unmicrofilmed V-Mail letters weighed 1,500 pounds and filled 22 mail sacks. When microfilmed, they weighed 45 pounds and filled one mail sack — a great space saver on crowded transports.

Military authorities censored the letters and decided if they would be filmed or sent in their original form, depending on the distance to be traveled, mail volume, and available space.

Microfilmed V-Mail later was reproduced at the V-Mail facility of destination onto four- by five-inch photographs, then forwarded to the addressee in specially designed War-Navy Department V-Mail penalty envelopes. Film was not destroyed until authorities were sure that letters had reached their destination. If not, the mail was reprinted and re-sent. This process was used at V-Mail stations both in the United States and overseas.

The Post Office Department separated mail by respective Army and Navy Units and delivered it to the V-Mail stations, which were under military jurisdiction. V-Mail stations were established in New York City on June 22, 1942; in San Francisco on July 10, 1942; in Chicago on November 22, 1943; and in various locations overseas.

Members of the Armed Forces overseas could send personal letters, including V-Mail, for free under an Act of Congress of March 27, 1942. Servicemen and women only had to write "Free" in the upper right corner of the envelope, and write their name, rank or rating, and military branch with their return address in the upper left corner. Civilians could send a V-Mail letter by surface mail for three cents and by airmail for six cents to the domestic V-Mail stations. On March 26, 1944, the airmail rate was raised to eight cents.

More than a billion V-Mail letters were delivered between June 1942 and November 1, 1945, when V-Mail service ended. Afterwards, postal customers could use V-Mail stationery until supplies of the sheets ran out in March 1946.