Papal States Military Postal History 1815-1870

By Thomas Pratuch (chember5@yahoo.com)

Introduction

Imagine finding military mail from an army that is rarely mentioned in the history books— mail that was barely mentioned, let alone discussed, in philatelic studies on the host country. The only acknowledgement of the mail system was a comment suggesting it might be a suitable topic for research. [1] That was the situation I found when I first encountered a piece of Papal States military mail.

The map in Figure 1 presents the territories of the Papal States as they were in the early 1800s. Bologna, Ancone, and Rome were the administrative centers for their provinces; Rome was also the main center for the Papal States. Umbria's military administrative oversight was split between Marche and Lazio. Its civilian administration was based in Perugia. [2]

← Figure 1. Map of the Papal States circa 1815-1870. The Papal States essentially formed a belt across Italy's mid-region. Note: This file is licensed under the Creative Commons license. All other graphics and images were created by the author.
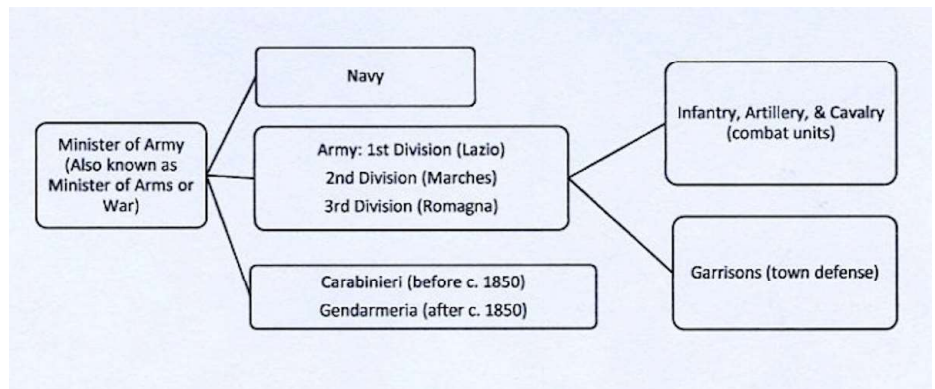

Figure 2. Papal States Military Organization

Background

First, one must dispel certain misconceptions for identifying the military of the Papal States. The term military denotes units of the Army and Navy. It also includes the Carabinieri/Gendarmeria, who functioned as a national police force while part of the military (as they do in Italy to this day). All of these forces reported to the Minister of the Army for the Papal States. Figure 2 shows a graphic of the command structure.

Five other units are often identified as military units in the Papal States but never functioned as such: The Corsican, Civil, Palatine, Noble, and Swiss Guards. For starters, none of them reported to the Minister of the Army. The Corsican Guard, Civil Guard, and Palatine Guard all reported to the city government where they existed. The Noble Guard was a household cavalry in Rome that consisted almost entirely of officers (mostly colonels). Its only known military act occurred when they stood alongside the pope while the Italian forces for unification of Italy fired one cannon shot into an access gate in the wall surrounding Rome. To end the conflict and avoid casualties (other than his butler, who was struck by the shot), the pope then surrendered. The Noble Guard reported directly to the pope (not the Minister of the Army) until disbanded by Pope Paul VI in 1970. The primary function of the famous Swiss Guard has always been guarding the pope. It was never incorporated into the Papal States' military forces. [3]

Challenges to the Collector

The land forces (Army and Carabinieri/Gendarmeria) operated strictly within the Papal States boundaries. The Navy operated more as a Coast Guard. None of the military units were used as an expeditionary force. The

postal system and existing military in the Papal States only overlapped from approximately 1815 to 1870. Prior to 1815, much of the territory and the post were controlled by France and Austria. The Papal States were ultimately taken over by Italy in 1870.

The military, as was typical of the era, relied on military couriers and the increasingly common telegraph system. These left the military with little use for a civilian postal system. [4]

During the early years of the papal post, official handstamp markings were used to indicate the originator, who was usually paying the cost of postage. This assisted in the quick identification of military mail. But as the papal post switched to stamps (c. 1854), it becomes impossible to identify military mail unless there is an enclosed letter with additional information. [5]

Another challenge in working with this mail is the inevitable effect of age on paper and ink. Paper crumbles and ink fades or becomes illegible with time. Finally, covers become separated from their contents, which are often needed to fully identify the correspondents and purpose of the individual piece.

Markings Found on Military Mail

Since not all readers may be familiar with stampless mail of the era and locale, let alone military markings, a brief orientation is provided in Figure 3.

1 – Indicates sending office, which would pay the postage. This franking is sometimes found in the upper right corner.

2 – The *D'Ufficio* indicating official mail was optional; its absence does **not** indicate unofficial mail.

3 – *Servizio Militare*, or an abbreviation such as *SM or SMil,* designated military mail. Military police usually used *Servizio Carabinieri,* or later *Servizio Gendarmeria*. Sometimes *Pontifici* (Pontifical) replaced *Servizio*.
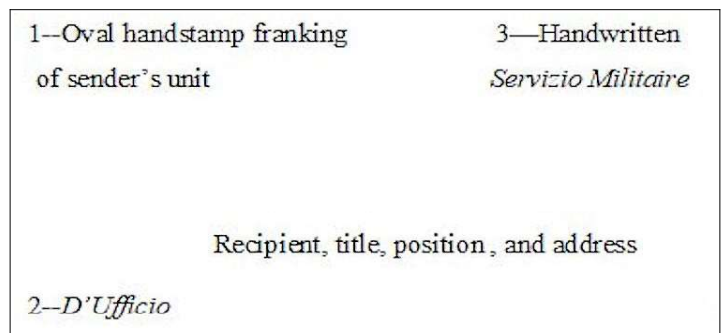

Figure 3. Legend for Military Mail Markings

Common postal markings: All the standard postal markings can be found on military mail, such as PP (partial postage), PD (paid to destination), handwritten numbers for fees paid by recipient, handwritten "X" and "/" (slash) cancels, double circle or linear town marks, and commercial marks.

Postal charges: Papal post rates changed three times during this time period: 1826, 1844, and 1864. The handstamps for the sending office of a cover are sometimes referred to as a cachet. Yet they were not mere graphic imagery. They actually functioned as payment for the first 10 *baj* of any postal fees. [6] The currency changed in 1864 from *baj* to *centesimi*, although the use of the term *baj* or the actual money did not completely disappear. [7]

Discussion of the Military Mail

Figure 2 presented the Papal States military organization, derived through study of its mail. This section of the article will follow that outline.

Starting with the office of the Minister of the Army (Figure 4), the question is likely to be "Why would the Papal States need an army?" The Papal States' forces were small compared to the duchies and kingdoms surrounding them, individually and most certainly collectively. They could not have stopped another kingdom from conquering them if they wanted to. This is where letters still extant in some covers helped. Along with the routine fiscal accountings, personnel reassignments, and status reports, the dominant enclosures were circulars and letters concerning banditry along the borders and in the mountains.
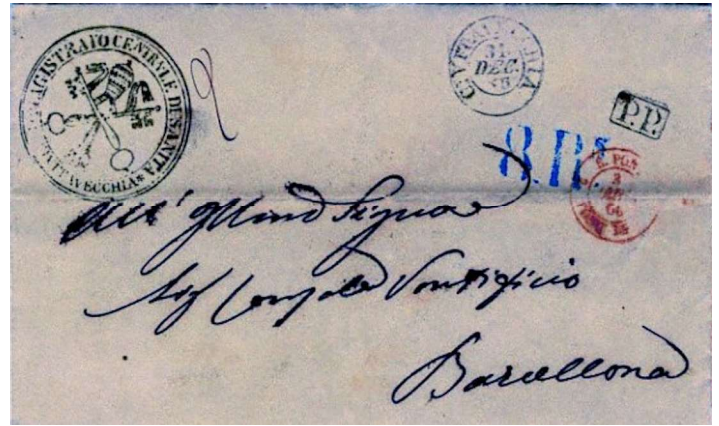
Figure 4. 1856. Minister of Army.

Figure 5. 1865. Naval Mail.

The Papal States navy consisted of a changing number of sailing vessels. The most well-known were the *Immacolata Concezione* (a steam-powered corvette) and the *San Pietro* (a schooner). At various times the navy included a cutter, a felucca, a pinnace, and 12 patrol boats. The Pontifical Navy, the result of combining separate naval administrations, was finally formed under the Minister of the Army in 1856. [8] The cover in Figure 5 resulted from the need to coordinate some naval activities with other nations, such as periodic conflicts with pirates and smugglers.

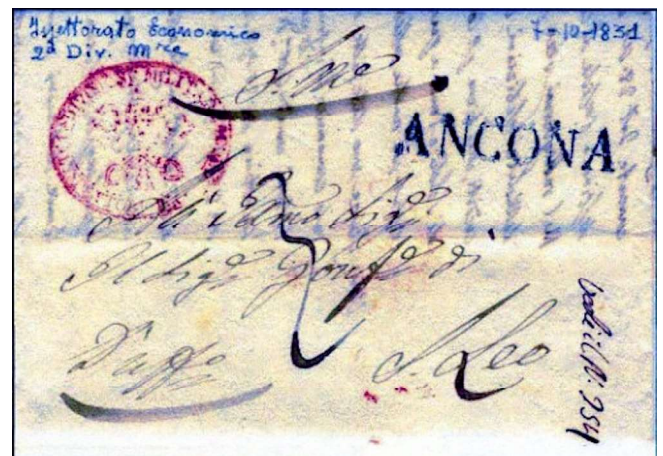*Figure 6. 1860. First Division Headquarters (Rome).*

Figure 7. 1831. Second Division Headquarters (Ancona).

The three divisional headquarters (Figures 6–8) had a relatively short-lived existence. The Third Division existed when Romagna was a member of the Papal States and did not exist when Romagna was not a member. Romagna finally went over to the Italians c. 1859. Second Division also left the Papal States c. 1860. First Division lasted until Lazio and Rome fell to the unification forces in 1870.
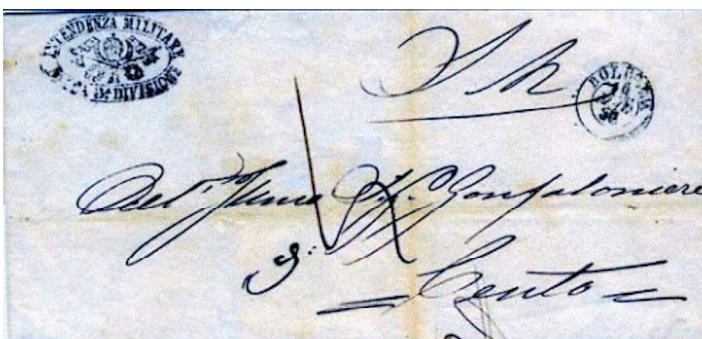

Figure 8. 1856. Third Division Headquarters (Bologna).

As mentioned above, the typical combat action by papal units was against brigands and bandits. This cavalry unit (Figure 9) was patrolling in the mountain region near the border with the Duchies of Modena and Tuscany.

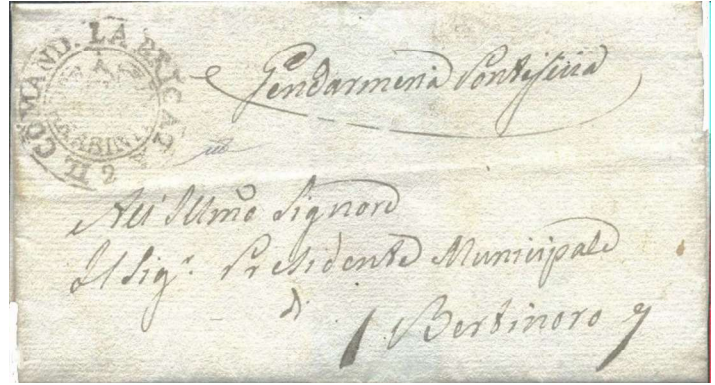Figure 9. 1818. Umbrian Cavalry Unit on Campaign.

Figure 10. 1851. Carabinieri/Gendarmeria.

The Carabinieri had a reputation only slightly better than the Corsican and Civil Guard units, who were considered the worst police units. In an effort to reform the Carabinieri, they were reorganized and had regular training starting in the period between 1859 and 1861. Their designation was changed to Gendarmeria to symbolize these changes. Figure 10 captures a moment in that transition.

Bersaglieri units (Figure 11) were elite infantry in their era. A special form of light infantry, they were trained to move at a special pace that allowed them to move in mountainous terrain faster than regular or even light infantry troops. Their primary combat role was as skirmishers or shock troops with mountain training. Given that this branch of soldiers was only created in 1836 by the nearby Kingdom of Sardinia, the fact that the Papal States had such a unit less than four years later is astonishing. [9]

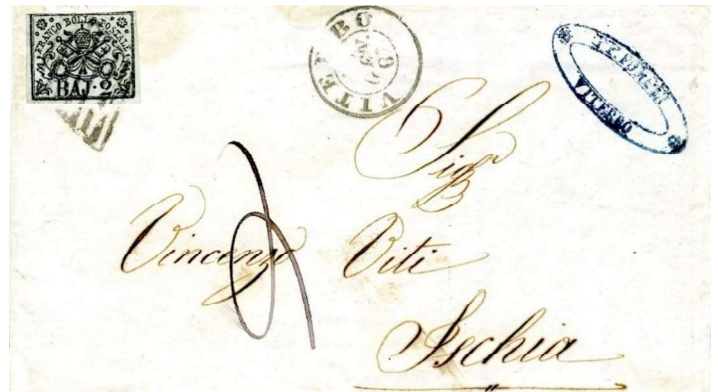Figure 11. 1840. Bersaglieri infantry using
the Pontificia designation.

Figure 12. 1867. From Commander, Viterbo
to Commander, Ischia.

Figure 12 depicts a cover from one commander to another, as demonstrated by the enclosed letter. Viterbo is located 50 miles north of Rome within Lazio. Ischia has five candidate towns; the island off the coast of Naples (164 miles south of Rome) is the one most consistent with the information in the letter. Some have conjectured that

1. This cover reflects a deliberate attempt to mask the identities of sender and recipient, and

2. It could contain coded messages. since the unification wars had been heating up.

My considered responses are:

1. The last name of each officer is present on the exterior of the cover as well as their locations. Since they are each the commander of their respective area they would be known by all as military officers.

2. Who can tell? The letter appears innocuous and is both readable and clear without indicating any other intent or purpose.

Conclusion

Since there was no other source, a private census of Papal States military covers was recorded as I started to examine collections online and in museum philatelic collections. I rarely found military covers outside of online auction/dealer websites.

Table 1 identifies the military office of each military cover found during my research. Where possible, the office's handstamp (or a representative handstamp, if more than one cover was found for a given office) is given along with the year the cover was mailed. Some offices refer to the appropriate full-cover figure. And some offices do not include a handstamp or other reference to an image, as the original cover had deteriorated to the point where a good scan could not be made.

Table 1. PERSONAL CENSUS OF MILITARY MAIL
(as of 1/1/2023)

Military Office	Quantity, comments, and year of mailing for the given handstamp.
Minister of Army	1 – a.k.a. Minister of War, a.k.a. Minister of Arms; in Rome (see Figure 4)
Commissioner of War (Ancona)	5 – Clearly identifiable as from same source. Subordinate command to Minister of War 1818
1st Div. HQ (Lazio)	1 – (See Figure 6)
2nd Div. HQ (Marches)	5 – one marked in red ink, all from same HQ (see Figure 7)
2nd Squadron Umbria/Sennigalla	2 – Both from same unit
1/7 Infantry	1 1840

Military Office	Quantity, comments, and year of mailing &c.
2/1 Infantry	1 1819
2nd Battalion Light Infantry	1 – Not designated as Bersaglieri (see below)
2nd Division, 8th Battalion of the Line (Infantry)	1- Image of insufficient quality to reproduce here.
Light Infantry (Bersaglieri)	6 – Possibly 2 different units (see Figure 11)
Volunteer Infantry (unnumbered)	3 – 2, maybe 3, different units 1841
5th Battalion, Auxiliary Reserve Troop	1- Image of insufficient quality to reproduce here.
Reserve Auxiliary troop (unnumbered)	3 – 2 different units 1836
Artillery	4 – All from same unit in Mont Alto 1846
Commander of the Compagna	2 – Both from same unit. (See Figure 9)

Military Office	Quantity, comments, and year of mailing &c.
Commander Ischia	1 – (See Figure 12)
Carabinieri/Gendarmeria (military police)	21/13 [10] – Multiple units. The marking shown is the only known example of a horse mounted military police unit (squadron) 1822
Border Guards (military police given special duties – not a separate branch)	5 – Multiple units. Military police units providing border control for sanitation (health) restrictions. - Image of insufficient quality to reproduce here.
Garrison	31 – Multiple units distinguished by the town of origin. (Endnote for Carabinieri above also applies to this group.) 1824
Maritime Office/Naval ship	3/1 [11] (See Figure 5)
Total:	112 covers

Unless indicated otherwise, all images and graphics were created by the author from his collection.

In closing, I would like to thank the very helpful staffs of the

- Library of Congress,
- Smithsonian Institution - National Postal Museum,
- Baltimore Philatelic Society,
- Spellman Museum of Stamps and Postal History, and
- American Philatelic Research Library (especially Scott Tiffney).

Any insights I express here were helped by the many fine verbal suggestions and obscure but important reference materials made available to me. It is my sincere hope that someone can use this information to make an even deeper dive into this subject matter.

Notes

1 Pratuch, Thomas. "*Papal States Military Mail and the Philatelic Collector.*" Vatican Notes 65(372), p. 34.

2 My hypothesis is this split for military administration was caused by the spine of mountains running thru Umbria. It would seem easier for the Marche and Lazio regions to handle the portion on their respective sides instead of having a command divided by mountains. The reader is free to disagree.

3   Pratuch, Thomas. "*Papal States Military Mail and the Philatelic Collector.*" Vatican Notes 65(372), pp. 32–33. See also Thomas Pratuch, "*Mail from the Pope's Army.*" American Philatelist 131(8), pp. 776–780.

4   This is evidenced by the fact that I had to review over 20,000 Papal States covers to find 112 military covers. Why such a seemingly disparate ratio? During the Italian wars for unification, it was routine for the armies to seize papers found in Church offices. They were convinced that since the Church's forces were not joining them, they must be plotting against the revolutionaries. When they found nothing, the soldiers were known to use the seized letters to wrap their sandwiches (Gallenga, 1988. "Chapter 1869-70.")

5   Military mail is sometimes addressed to the office; but most often it is addressed to the recipient using honorifics recognizing the social status (nobility) or civilian position, such as Gonfaloniere (mayor), with no reference to military rank.

6   Clemente Fedele and Mario Gallenga. *Per Servizio di Nostro Signore: Strade, Corrieri E Poste Dei Papi Dal Medioevo AL 1870,* Quaderni di Storia Postale 10. Modena, Italy: Mucchi, 1988. This is the only complete study on Papal States mail—but you need to read Italian or have it translated. It has not been published in any other language. The portion of this work relevant to this subject is the second of the two parts of the book. (The book was published as if it were two separate books combined in one binding.) Within that second half, the chapters addressing mail during this period are marked by chapter headings indicating the year or time period.

7   Pratuch, Thomas. "*Postal Reforms of the Papal States: 1800 to 1870.*" Vatican Notes 64(369), pp. 34–37.

8   https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Papal_Navy; accessed 7 December 2023.

9   https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bersaglieri; accessed 7 December 2023.

10 I cannot be certain of each piece's unique status. I may be seeing some that have gone through multiple owners and have their image in more than one location.

11 Greg Pirozzi, "Rare Pontifical States Navy Cover," *Vatican Notes* 65(372), p. 47. This citation is for the only known cover to or from a ship of the Papal navy and can be found in Vatican Notes.

The US $1 Airlift Stamp of 1968

By Ken Lawrence
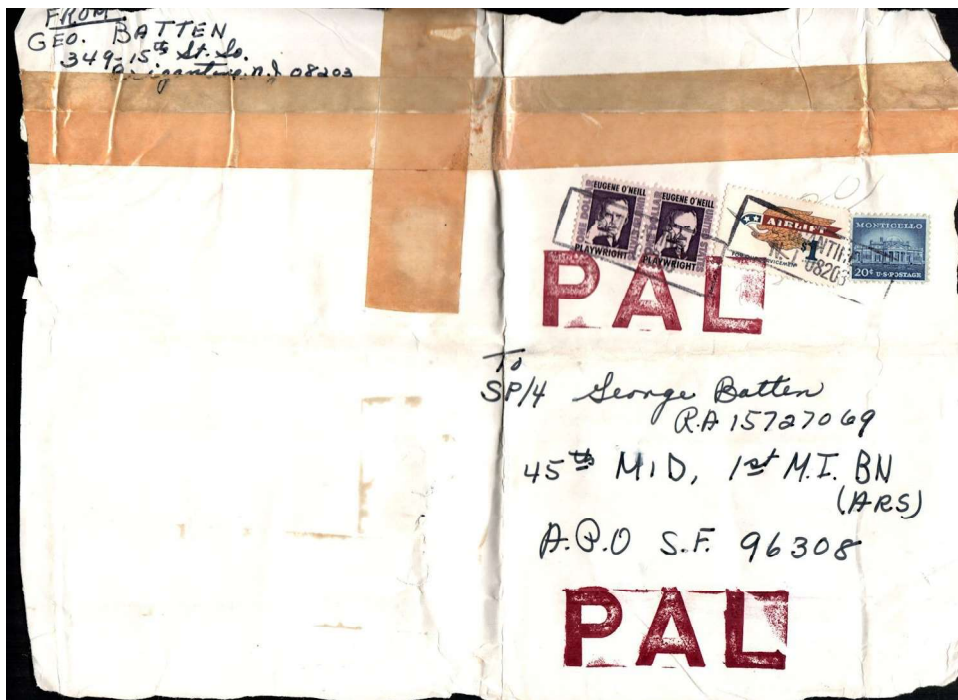
A pair of $1 Eugene O'Neill sheet stamps (Scott 1294) and a single 20¢ Monticello stamp (1047) paid Zone 8 fourth-class postage for this 1968 parcel that weighed up to 9 pounds from Brigantine, N.J., to an American soldier in the 45th Military Intelligence Detachment, 1st Military Intelligence Battalion (Air Reconnaissance Support), at APO 96308 (Phu Bai Airport, Vietnam). A $1 Airlift stamp (1341) paid the parcel airlift fee for air transport overseas on a space-available basis. Image courtesy of the American Philatelic Expertizing Service and the owner, who wishes to be anonymous.