

# United States Bases in Jamaica During the 1939-45 War

By THOMAS FOSTER

THE fall of France in 1940 exposed the whole of the European Atlantic coastline to the Axis forces and, with the increasing hostility of the Spanish regime and the refusal of the French Vichy and West African authorities to co-operate with the British Government, American opinion became very worried about the possibility of a seaborne invasion into the *Caribbean* and a subsequent threat to their communications through the Panama Canal.

German economic penetration into the Americas had already become alarming and any occupation by them of the Azores, French Guiana, Guadeloupe or Martinique would have presented a menace that could not have been ignored, especially as an overworked Royal Navy, disastrously short of escort vessels as a result of losses incurred during the Norwegian campaign and the withdrawal from France, was stretched to its utmost capacity in resisting the growing German U-boat threat in the North Atlantic.

In order to prevent such an occurrence, urgent negotiations took place between the British and American Chiefs of Staff during the early summer of 1940. The British, desperate for additional escorts, and the Americans, determined to keep out of the conflict and yet wishing to preclude any possible danger to the Caribbean area, set about seeing what could be done.

The legal wrangles continued throughout that long, hot summer and resulted in the first meeting of the American Republics and Canada to consider the problem, during which it became obvious that any scheme planned would have to cover an area stretching southwards from Canada to Brazil, the Canadian and American military authorities by this time having become alarmed by the suggestion of an impending invasion of Canada through Greenland.

It was not until September 3rd, 1940, that agreement was reached whereby, in exchange for 50 '1914-18' vintage destroyers, the British Government would lease for 99 years to the U.S. Government various tracts of land which would enable that government to create a series of military bases throughout the British Crown territories in the Caribbean and North Atlantic. These bases were to be established in Antigua, Bahamas, Bermuda, British Guiana, Jamaica, Newfoundland, St. Lucia and Trinidad. Shortly afterwards, further agreement ensured the building of bases in Barbados and in the Cayman Islands, but neither of the latter formed part of the 'Destroyers for Bases' deal included in the agreement signed on March 27th, 1941.

On that date, a letter from President Roosevelt to the U.S. Congress, outlined briefly the terms reached:—

"On September 3, 1940, I transmitted for the information of the Congress, notes exchanged between the British Ambassador at Washington and the Secretary of State on the preceding day, under which this Government acquired the right to lease naval and air bases in Newfoundland, and in the islands of Bermuda, the Bahamas, Jamaica, St. Lucia, Trinidad and Antigua and in British Guiana.

I now transmit for the information of the Congress, a copy of an agreement for the use and operation of these bases, which was signed in London on March 27, 1941, together with the notes exchanged in connection therewith. These bases are for American defense against attack, and their construction is consistent with such defense. International developments since my message to Congress of September 3, last, have emphasised the value to the Western Hemisphere of these outposts of security."

Article XVI of the agreement gave the Americans the right to establish their own military post offices in the bases concerned and use them exclusively for their own forces and American

civilians employed therein. The offices would not be used by the local civilian population and all mail posted at them had to be franked with the stamps of the U.S.A. and handled throughout by their postal authorities. The article read as follows:—

"The United States shall have the right to establish United States Post Offices in the leased areas for the exclusive use of the United States forces and civilian personnel (including contractors and their employees), who are nationals of the United States and employed in connection with the construction, maintenance, operation or defense of the bases, and the families of such persons, for domestic use between United States Post Offices in leased areas and between such Post Offices and other United States Post Offices and Post Offices in the Panama Canal Zone and the Philippine Islands."

Another note (also dated March 27th, 1941) from the British Foreign Secretary to the U.S. Ambassador in London regarding this article dealt with the censorship of U.S. mail passing through the bases and read as follows:—

"I have the honour to inform your Excellency that my Government has agreed to the following understanding in respect of Article XVI of the Agreement signed this day between our respective Governments concerning the lease of bases.

I. Mails passing between the United States Post Office shall not be subject to censorship except by the United States.

II. In connection with the establishment of any United States Post Offices in a leased area, the United States will arrange administratively for such time as Great Britain may be at war, for the examination of all non-official incoming or outgoing mail destined for or originating in a leased area.

III. The use of these Post Offices will be strictly limited to persons entitled under Article XVI to use them and any mail deposited in such a Post Office which may be found by the United States examiners to be from a person not entitled to use them, will, if required, be made available to the authorities of the territory for examination.

IV. Should the United States be at war and Great Britain be neutral, the British Government will ensure that a similar procedure is adopted, with respect to incoming or outgoing mail destined for or originating in the territories in which leased areas are located, to safeguard the interests of the United States in those leased areas.

V. The United States and British authorities will collaborate to prevent their respective mails, in the leased areas or in the territories in which they are located, being used prejudicially to the security of the other.

VI. There will be no examination of official mail of either Government by the other under any conditions.

If your Excellency's Government agrees to this understanding, I would suggest that the present note and your reply to that effect be regarded as placing it on record."

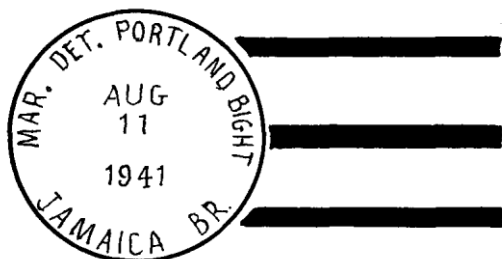
These, then, were the preliminaries necessary to legalise the establishment of foreign post offices on British soil. As a result, all three branches of the U.S. Armed Services serving in Jamaica used the postal markings under discussion. Two bases were prepared in the island and in order to present the full picture it is necessary to study their separate development.

**The U.S. Naval Facility at Portland Bight in  
St. Catherine Parish**

About a fortnight before the lease-lend agreement was formally signed, a detachment of United States Marines—which never exceeded a total strength of 70 men—was installed as a security guard at the site chosen for the Naval Air Station at Portland Bight. This location was about three miles south of the small township of Old Harbour and adjoined the bay of the same name.

U.S. Marine postal records reveal that an office was opened at this base on March 15th, 1941, and discontinued on March 15th, 1943, when most of the Marines were transferred to other stations on the east coast of the United States, the remainder continuing to be stationed in the Marine barracks. It has not proved possible to identify the Marine postal unit that was employed here.

Until July 17th, 1941, when the office received its date-stamp, mail from the Marines stationed there was taken either to New York or Panama for cancellation. U.S. Public Law 507, 77th Congress of March 27th, 1942, had not yet been passed and free postage was not, therefore, available to military personnel using the office, so that the three states of the date-stamp used are only known struck on letters franked with adhesive stamps, or the equivalent postal stationery.



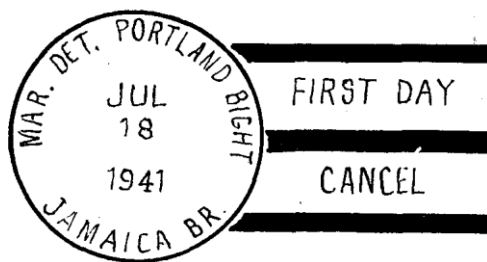
**M-USM1a**

**Type M-USM1.** A single-lined circle with three obliterating bars extending from its right-hand side, the wording at the top of the circle reading MAR. DET. PORTLAND BIGHT and, at the bottom, JAMAICA BR. The date-plugs were placed in the centre in three lines—month, day and year—and between the bars at the side were the words FIRST DAY/CANCEL in two lines.

This state of the date-stamp was used for cancelling official first day covers from the post office on July 18th, 1941, and each of the covers was hand-struck in blue or blue-green ink with a number, usually (but not always) in the top left corner, the highest recorded number being 1276. The covers used were generally of the sort known as patriotic, printed in various designs and bearing inscriptions such as FRUITS OF FREEDOM/A FREE AMERICA together with a cornucopia and the Star Spangled Banner, all in glorious technicolour!<sup>1</sup>

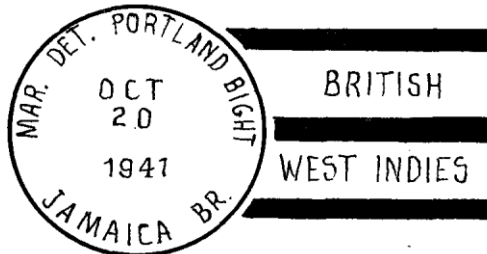
Most patriotic covers seen are philatelic items and genuine letters were usually enclosed in plain envelopes, endorsed by the sender with his name, rank and postal unit number. Mail could be sent airmail if required, the service rate being 6 cents, and this rate remained unaltered after the introduction of free postage for servicemen. Official mail was generally sent unstamped. I have never seen any cover struck with this postmark bearing a censor marking, although they may exist, possibly initialled in manuscript.

<sup>1</sup> These patriotic envelopes were sold by Gimbels, the America's Stamp Center on 33rd St. and Broadway, New York, Y.N., at \$1 per set of 120 envelopes, in 12 different designs.



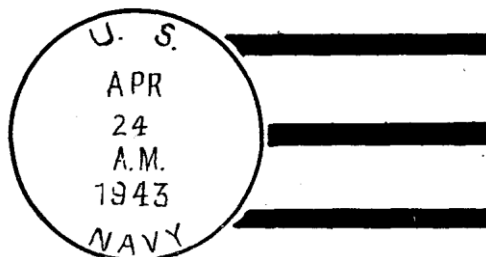
**M-USM1**

**Type M-USM1a.** The permanent state of M-USMI, without the words between the obliterating bars. It was in general use from July 19th, 1941, until early 1943 and, once again, is commonly found on most of the patriotic covers.



**M-USM1b**

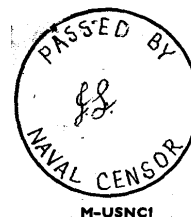
**Type M-USM1b.** A state of M-USMI carrying the wording BRITISH WEST INDIES between the obliterating bars and used only for a short time from about October 1st to 20th, 1941. For security reasons, it was astounding that its use was ever approved and this view was apparently taken by the authorities and could have been the reason for its short life. Covers postmarked with it are often 'patriotic' or carry hand-struck patriotic cachets in various colours, one of the latter comprising the U.S. Marine Corps crest and the geographical location of the unit!



**M-USN1**

Responsibility for the security of the air base was assumed by the U.S. Navy shortly after the Marine landing but, according to U.S. Naval Post Office records, no naval post office was assigned to Jamaica until February 20th, 1943, when N.P.O. 10938 was posted to the Naval Auxiliary Air Facility at Portland Bight, where it remained employed until September 1st, 1944. According to U.S. Naval Department procedure, mail originating from American naval personnel in Jamaica would have been postmarked with the security cancellation, type **M-USN1**, this being the normal practice at all naval shore establishments. This date-stamp was a Fleet Post Office marking and the same records state that U.S. Fleet Post Office 42 was assigned, to, and located at, the base from August 15th, 1942, until June 1st, 1947, during which time the marking would have been applied and used.

I have only seen one letter bearing this marking, struck in black ink, and it is from a 'Cpl. A. Sinclair, U.S.M.C./ Marine Barracks, N.A.S./Navy Number 42/c.o. Fleet Post Office/New York, N.Y.'. The cover, which is non-philatelic, is also hand-stamped with the naval censor marking, type **M-USNC1** (in blue ink), which was probably applied at the same F.P.O.



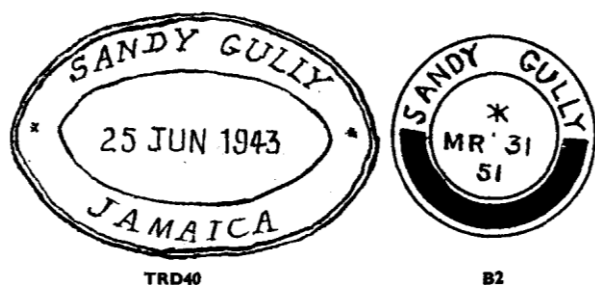
**M-USNC1**

Fleet Post Offices were responsible for the distribution of mail originating in, or destined for, the area in which they operated; receiving from, and distributing to, the various N.P.O.s established throughout that region, or located on board U.S. naval units serving at sea in that area. These N.P.O.s probably never used a date-stamp of their own during war-time conditions and I have never seen or recorded any marking that could be said to have come from N.P.O. 10938.

U.S. naval personnel shore based in Jamaica never exceeded 500 men and, upon disestablishment, these were assigned to other ships and stations.

#### U.S. Base at Vernham Field and Fort Simonds in Clarendon Parish

Meanwhile, American civilian contractors working under the supervision of U.S. Army Engineers, had been constructing a large base in Clarendon Parish, which was later designated Vernham Field. This installation, named in honour of Lieutenant Remington De B. Vernham (an American air ace shot in combat in 1918), was located near Fort Simonds about five miles south of the village of Four Paths. Work started on the project on July 1st, 1941, and was almost completed by August 26th, 1942.



Due to the large influx of Jamaican workers on the site and the terms of Article XVI of the agreement, it was found necessary to open a Jamaican Post Office nearby, and this was called Sandy Gully, opening on July 7th, 1942, and named after a nearby location, itself one of the small seasonal tributaries of the Milk River. This office used two date-stamps, the first being **TRD40** struck in purple ink, with a latest known date of October 28th, 1943, and type **B2**, with an earliest known date of April 24th, 1945, and used until the office closed.

The first U.S. Army personnel, operating under the code name 'Force Tuna', arrived in Jamaica on November 21st, 1941. The nucleus was formed by 311 men of the 89th Infantry, together with their auxiliary service echelons, and the garrison was steadily built up until, in March 1943, it reached a total of 1,292 men. A general reduction in strength then followed, but preparations for the forthcoming air offensive against Japan had brought the strength to 1,438 by March 1945.

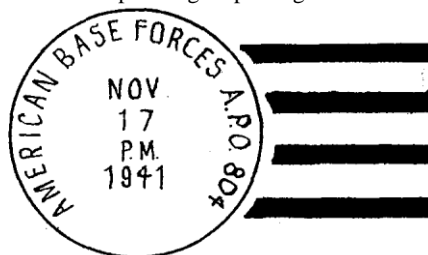
The change-round by the Allies from the defensive to the offensive is aptly illustrated by the use of this base, which now began operating important air training schedules and programmes. The Antilles Department, which comprised the Caribbean Area, had been selected as the proving ground for the giant B29 bombers, and Vernham Field was to be one of the main bases for the working up of these aircraft. One further result of this decision, which was to become most important in post-war years, was the provision of an emergency strip at Montego Bay.

Specialised infantry training was also being undertaken at the base, and for a time the island was the scene of intense military activity, as infantry patrols attempted to find their way about the countryside without being located or observed by the local population or constabulary. In this training, the American Army was assisted and taught by British and Canadian instructors. Many of these U.S. infantry units later served with General 'Vinegar Joe' Stillwell's forces in Northern Burma.

With the opening of the new base, a permanent U.S. Army Field Post Office was established there, and three distinct types of date-stamp, one having three states, were employed there.

#### U.S. Army Post Office 804.

This unit began operating here on November 17th, 1941, and used only one date-stamp during its posting.

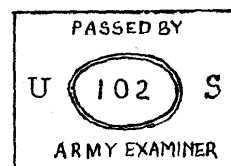


**M-USAI**

**M-USAI** followed the usual format and had the inscription 'AMERICAN BASE FORCES A.P.O. 804' with the date-plugs in the centre reading—month, day, 'A.M.' or 'P.M.' and year. It was used from November 17th, 1941, until May 5th, 1942, and last day commemoration covers are known.

It is only found struck on letters bearing adhesive issues but, during its life, patriotic envelopes and cachets were used less frequently, and most, if not all, letters carry U.S. Army Censor markings.

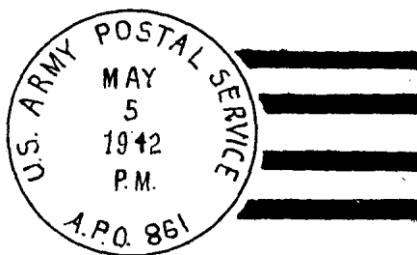
The censor marking usually employed and applied at the base was M-USAC1 numbered '102' and struck in black ink. This hand-stamp is initialled by the officer concerned and often carries the word JAMAICA stamped below it in small sans-serif capitals. Other covers seen with this censor marking have a large, 80 x 23½ mm. hand-stamp struck across it in red ink, reading in four lines 'Charles M. Baer, Captain, Signal Corps,/Chief Military Censor, War Department,/U.S. Engineers, Jamaica District,/CENSORED' in a mixture of upper and lower case type and block capitals. I have allocated the type number M-USAC2 to this (unillustrated) hand-stamp and would appreciate the loan of a clear example in order to construct a drawing.



**M-USAC1**

Later in the war, this same A.P.O. 804 date-stamp was used at Amiens in France and San Francisco in California.

**U.S. Army Post Office 861.** On May 5th, 1942, this unit took over the postal duties at the base and was located at Fort Simonds until December 6th, 1949. It used two different date-stamps during its stay in the island, one of them having three states.



**M-USAI2**

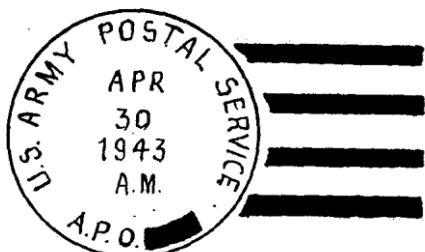
**M-USAI2** had the same basic format as before but was inscribed U.S. ARMY POSTAL SERVICE around the top and 'A.P.O. 861' at the bottom, with the date-plugs in the centre reading—month, day, year and 'A.M.' or 'P.M.'

It can be found struck on letters franked with adhesives or on servicemen's free franks, the latter for the first time, and was used from May 5th, 1942, to March 1943. By then, the use of patriotic cachets and envelopes had almost ceased, but plain covers bearing this date-stamp exist carrying a typewritten inscription FIRST DAY COVER although it is doubtful whether these had official status. Mail at this time was still censored, being hand-struck with M-USAC1, or more simply bearing the initials of the censoring officer.

Reports state that another dater as 'A' exists, used circa 1942 by this unit but I have never seen or recorded a copy and would appreciate the sight of any example.

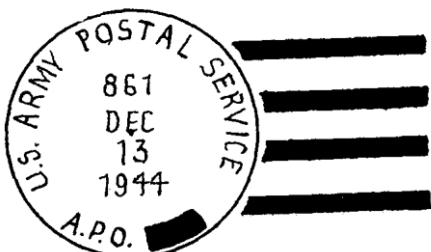


"A"



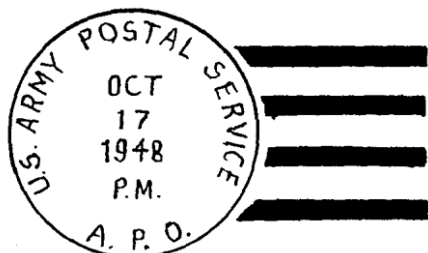
M-USA 2a

M-USA2a was simply a state of M-USA2 with the number '861' at the bottom deleted and replaced by what appears to be a short bar, the date-plugs in the centre being normal. Examples of this state appear between April 3rd and 30th, 1943, and it would seem to have been an attempt at security, a feature that becomes more puzzling when it is observed that most letters of this period carry the name and rank of the writer together with the inscription 'A.P.O. 861 Postmaster, N.Y.' at the top right of the obverse. These same letters also have the censor marking M-USAC1 struck in red ink and numbered '117'.



M-USA 2b

M-USA2b was the final state used between December 13th, 1944, and about mid-1948. It resembles M-USA2a but the number '861' now appears in the centre of the date-stamp, the plugs reading-861, month, day and year. This mark is usually found cancelling free franked envelopes and, often, no censor hand-stamp was employed, except for the examining officer's initials in the bottom left corner.

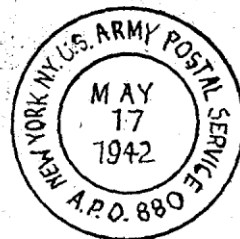


M-USA 3

M-USA3 was a new date-stamp resembling M-USA2 in format and lettering but with the abbreviation 'A.P.O.' centrally placed at the bottom and extending further around the circle because of the use of larger type. The number '861' does not appear at all and the marking is known used from October 11th, 1948, until the office closed on December 6th, 1949. Letters

bearing this postmark were no longer censored as the world was now at peace!

Military mail posted at the base was at first handled through to its overseas destination via the New York Postmaster, but from about January 1944 this duty was taken over by the Postmaster at Miami, Florida. U.S. A.P.O. markings of units attached to those post offices in America can often be seen used as receiving and despatching date-stamps on registered mail to and from the base. They exist in many forms similar to those illustrated as 'B' and 'C', but form no part of this study.



"B"



"C"

Despite the carefully planned details of the agreement, exceptions to the rule do occur and outgoing mail from American service personnel in the island can be found posted at Jamaica post offices with Jamaican postal issues, usually during late 1941 and early 1942. From March 1st, 1942, the stated regulations were very strictly enforced and any mail not complying with them was censored by the British postal and military censors.

\* \* \*

With the conclusion of hostilities in 1945 and the subsequent closing of the naval facility at Portland Bight, the Army air base came under the control of the Caribbean Air Command and it was not long before the American Government began relinquishing certain of their leasing rights and divesting themselves of many of the established bases, including both locations in Jamaica.

The emergency landing strip at Montego Bay was handed over to the Jamaica Government and immediately turned into a civil airport, being first operated as such when a DC-3 of Pan American Airways landed there in February 1947. Nowadays, it is one of the largest and busiest international airports in the world.

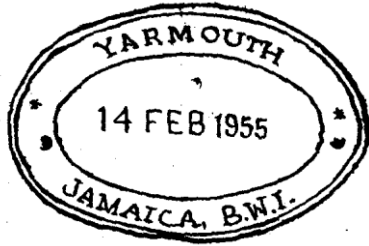
The Vernham Field and Fort Simonds installations were finally passed over to the Jamaica Government on January 2nd, 1950, the local authorities having already purchased most of the remaining stores, buildings, light railways and runways. The take-over was the subject of a pleasing little ceremony enacted on December 30th, 1949, when the local press reported as follows:—

From our correspondent, Kingston, Ja., December 1950. Brigadier Bean of the United States Caribbean Air Command, on Wednesday, handed over the Vernham Field base here to Sir John Huggins, Governor of Jamaica. General Bean remarked that it was a happy occasion because it indicated that they had forged a world peace. He hoped that the base would never be used again for war purposes. The ceremony concluded with the lowering of the Stars and Stripes and the hoisting of the Union Flag.

Vernham Field was almost immediately dismantled and returned to cultivation and now forms part of the West India Sugar Corporation's sugar plantations at Parnassus and New Yarmouth, who made the best use of the light railway system laid down.

Finally, with the withdrawal of the Americans and the subsequent dispersal of local labour, business at the Sandy Gully post office rapidly declined and with effect from November 16th, 1954, the office was closed and a downgraded postal agency named Yarmouth, called after the nearby plantation and

located on the road from May Pen to Milk River Rest, was opened on the same day using TRD54 struck in purple ink.



TRD54

#### Acknowledgments and Bibliography

References exist mainly in the form of working notes on the more general subject of U.S. Bases in the Caribbean and are to be found in various issues of *Stamp Collecting*, *Philatelic Magazine*, *British Caribbean Philatelic Study Group Journal*, *Jamaica Philatelist*, *British West Indies Study Circle Bulletin*, the various American Armed Services Records quoted and my own collection and files. This article could not have been compiled without the help of many interested specialist collectors, amongst whom the contributions made by Col. F. F. Seifert, U.S.A.F., Dr. R. H. Blackburn and Messrs. L. A. Courtney, Robert J. Devaux, R. H. Lant, Clinton L. von Pohle, V. N. F. Surtees and Robert Topaz have been outstanding.