

SARAWAK – WW2 CENSORED MAIL

Sarawak introduced censorship of mail at the start of September 1939. Local censors, overseen by the Chief Censor in Singapore, began operation immediately at the three ports of entry and despatch of mail – Kuching and Miri together with Labuan which although part of the Straits Settlements was the port at which mail to and from Singapore trans-shipped with the 5th Division of Sarawak and also Brunei.

Given the small population of mostly European, Chinese and Malays who used the postal service it might at first sight seem surprising that there were three censor offices. However, the north-west coast of Sarawak is about 1000 kms long. In 1939 no long distance road network existed. All regular transport along the coast including all mail services were by ship. Hence, even “airmail” was carried once or twice a week on a two or three day voyage directly between Singapore and each of these three ports rather than via the General Post Office in Kuching. Other than local mail, post was then carried either along the coast by small steamers and along the rivers on small boats into the interior.

The Japanese invasion in late 1941 ended the British censorship of mail throughout Sarawak and Labuan. Only Kuching and Miri in Sarawak were defended. Despite some stubborn resistance they were rapidly captured – see the display relating to 2/15 Punjab regiment. No resistance was offered in North Borneo, Brunei and Labuan.

This part of the display illustrates

- how the routing of mail evolved as the war developed in Europe and the Far East
- postal rates changed
- markings applied by the different censors
- resealing labels

Here are two early covers one outward and one inward. The outward cover was posted on 4th September in Kuching to Sri Lanka and was opened and resealed using a large resealing strip. The inward cover was posted in Crookwell, NSW, Australia on 19th August 1939 but was amongst the first covers censored in Singapore reaching Kuching on 11th September and Simanggang on 12th September.



This cover was sent by Walter Jonklaas, a rubber planter and well known cricketer, who worked for the Sarawak Government. He was interned at Btu Lintang Camp and died on 23rd February 1945 from the effects of the severe malnutrition in the camp.



This cover is addressed to the Rev Arthur Stonton who arrived in 1928. He was interned with other European clergy in Batu Lintang and after liberation resumed his work for a year before taking leave. He later became Archdeacon of Kuching and was awarded an OBE.

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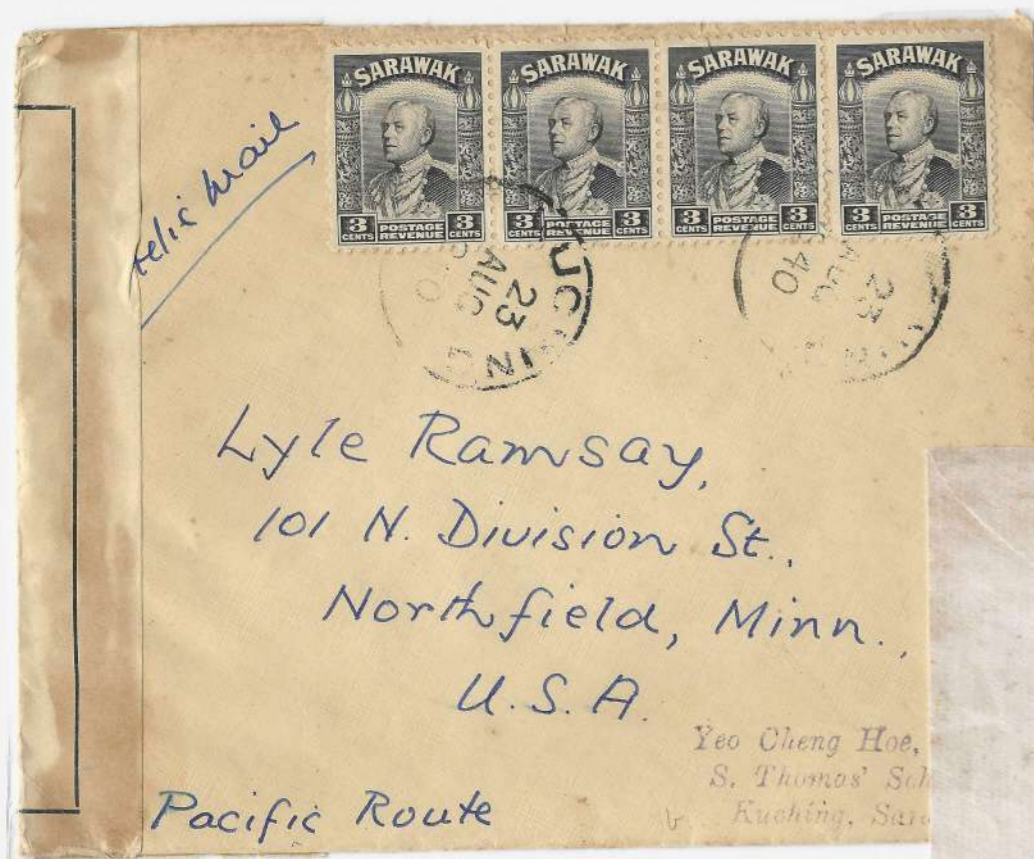
The outbreak of war in Europe initially had little impact on life in Sarawak. However, one immediate impact was the immediate suspension of the very popular Empire Air Mail Scheme which conveyed letters of up to ½oz by air from Singapore to the UK for just 6c. From September 4th 1939 the airmail rate rose to 55c. Mail continued to be flown between London and Singapore via the Mediterranean until Italy entered the war following the collapse of France in June 1940. After that mail was sent by air to Alexandria and then on to Durban and then forwarded to the UK by sea. An airmail service was offered at a premium rate across the Pacific and Atlantic by air with an option of air rather than rail across the USA.



Airmail cover from Miri on 20th June 1940 postage rate 55c. This would have travelled by the Horseshoe Route via air to Durban and then by sea to UK.



Airmail cover from Miri on 23rd May 1940 to USA marked and franked 60c for airmail to Europe and seamail thereafter. Note the red bars applied in London cancelling the airmail etiquette.



Seamail cover to USA from Kuching on 23rd August 1940 to USA inscribed "Pacific Route" by sender. Resealed by a small Censor label. Note the 1c Malaya Patriotic Fund label attached to reverse.



Airmail cover from Miri on 27th May 1941 to London. and paid \$1.90. It was flown by BOAG from Singapore to Hong Kong, Pan-Am Clipper trans-Pacific to USA and BOAC trans-Atlantic to Lisbon and then KLM (for BOAC) to UK.



SARAWAK – WW2 CENSORED MAIL - MAIL FROM KUCHING

Censorship of mail throughout Borneo was under the control of the Chief Censor in Singapore. The north-west coast of Sarawak is 1000 kms long with three main centres – Kuching the seat of government on the far south east, Miri the original oilfields about 800 kms from Kuching along the coast and the island of Labuan, then part of the Straits Settlements and hence having its own post office. Labuan, about 200 kms from Miri, was served by many ships with regular links to Singapore and Hong Kong. Labuan acted as a hub for mail from Sarawak’s most northerly Fifth Division together with the most western parts of North Borneo as well as mail to/from Labuan. As tensions rose about Japanese infiltration much of the mail passing through Singapore was subject to further checks as illustrated below.

From September 1939 to December 1941 Kuching used two locally made different boxed chops. Sarawak censors used two types of sealing label – large and small.



Unusual Printed Paper cover franked just 2c – probably a Christmas card -posted in Kuching on 7th Oct 1940 with large boxed “Passed by Censor” chop. Typical seamount times to UK were reported as 6-8 weeks.

Unique “Passed by Customs Censor” on cover to New Zealand posted on 16th Sept 1941. Also has the small “Passed by Censor” chop introduced in 1941

Cover to Scotland from Alexander Gibson, Harbourmaster at Kuching. Unopened locally, opened in Singapore and resealed. Alexander Gibson was killed on active service in 1942 having joined the Royal Australian Navy.

Chinese Red Band commercial cover posted in Kuching on 20th Oct 1941 to Hong Kong Central Business District. Inspected twice - in Kuching and Singapore.

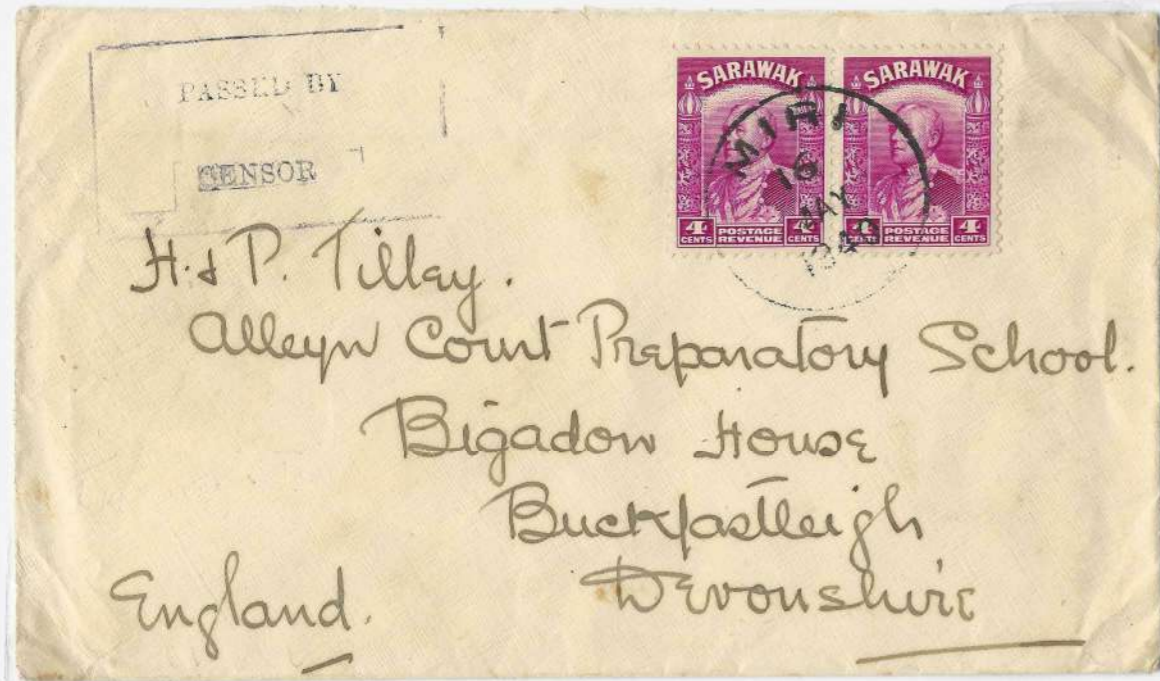


Commemorative cover for the Sarawak Centenary of Brooke rule in September 1941. KNILM flew a special flight to Singapore. Inspected twice - in Kuching and Singapore.



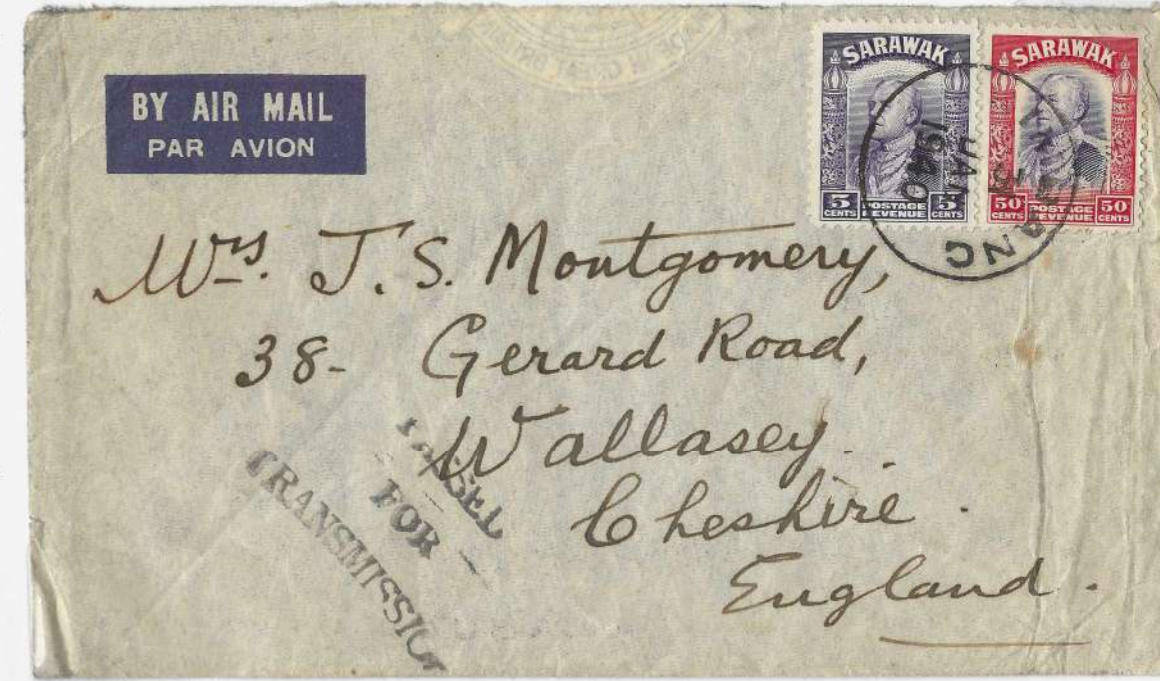
SARAWAK – WW2 CENSORED MAIL - MAIL FROM MIRI and LABUAN

The other two censor offices handling mail from Sarawak were at Miri and on Labuan Island which was part of the Straits Settlements. Miri was the location of the original oilfield in Sarawak and by the start of WW2 Sarawak was the second largest oil producer in the Far East after Burma. It was therefore a key target for the Japanese. A second oilfield and major refinery had been built at Lutong close to the independent state of Brunei. This area was served by shipping using the natural harbour on Labuan Island. Hence all mail to and from the whole area passed through Labuan.



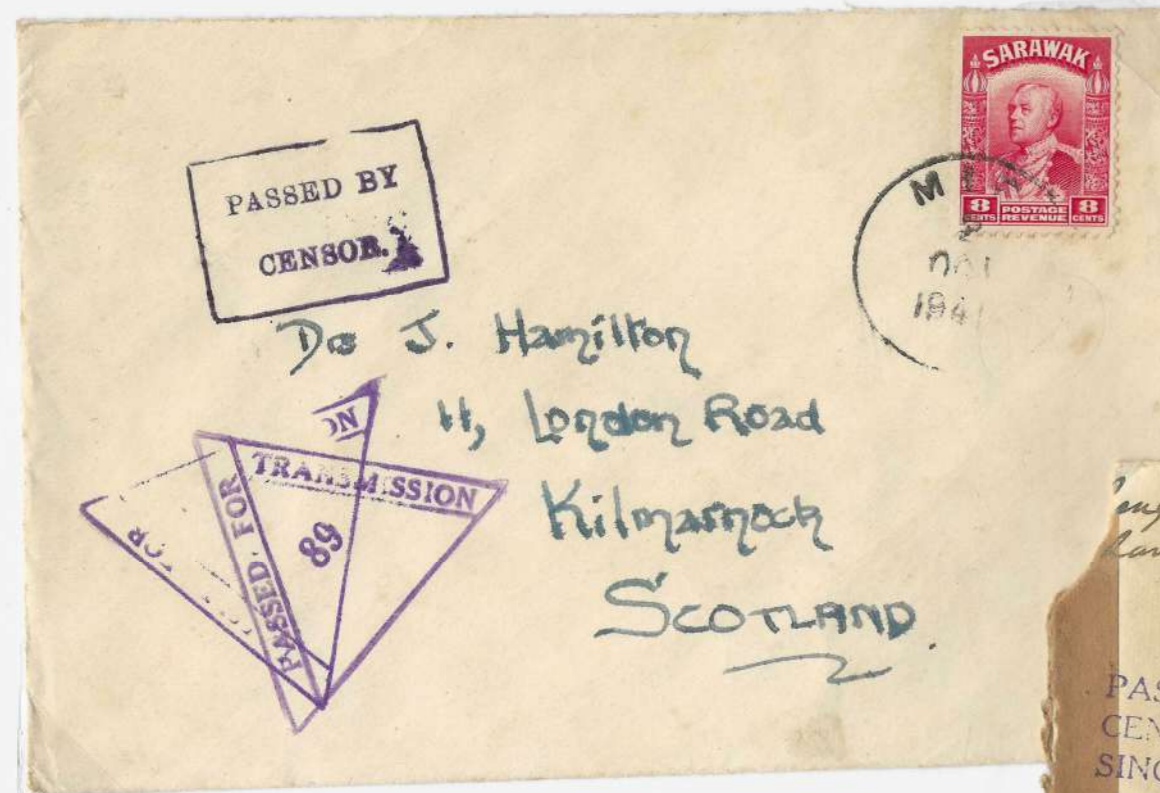
Seamail letter from Miri to the UK posted on 16 May 1940. It forms part of a correspondence to the letter writer's children at a prep school evacuated from Essex to Devon. It bears the first (large) Miri censor mark

Airmail cover from Limbang to England in the 5th Division at the 55c rate. It was posted on 31st Jan 1940 and reached Labuan on 1st Feb. It has the Labuan "Passed for Transmission" chop. The writer, a rubber planter, was interned but survived and returned to Sarawak.



Seamail cover from Miri to Scotland dated 2nd Oct 1941. It bears a strike by the second Miri chop and also a "Passed for Transmission 89" chop (ie passed without opening) reflecting the growing tension by late 1941.

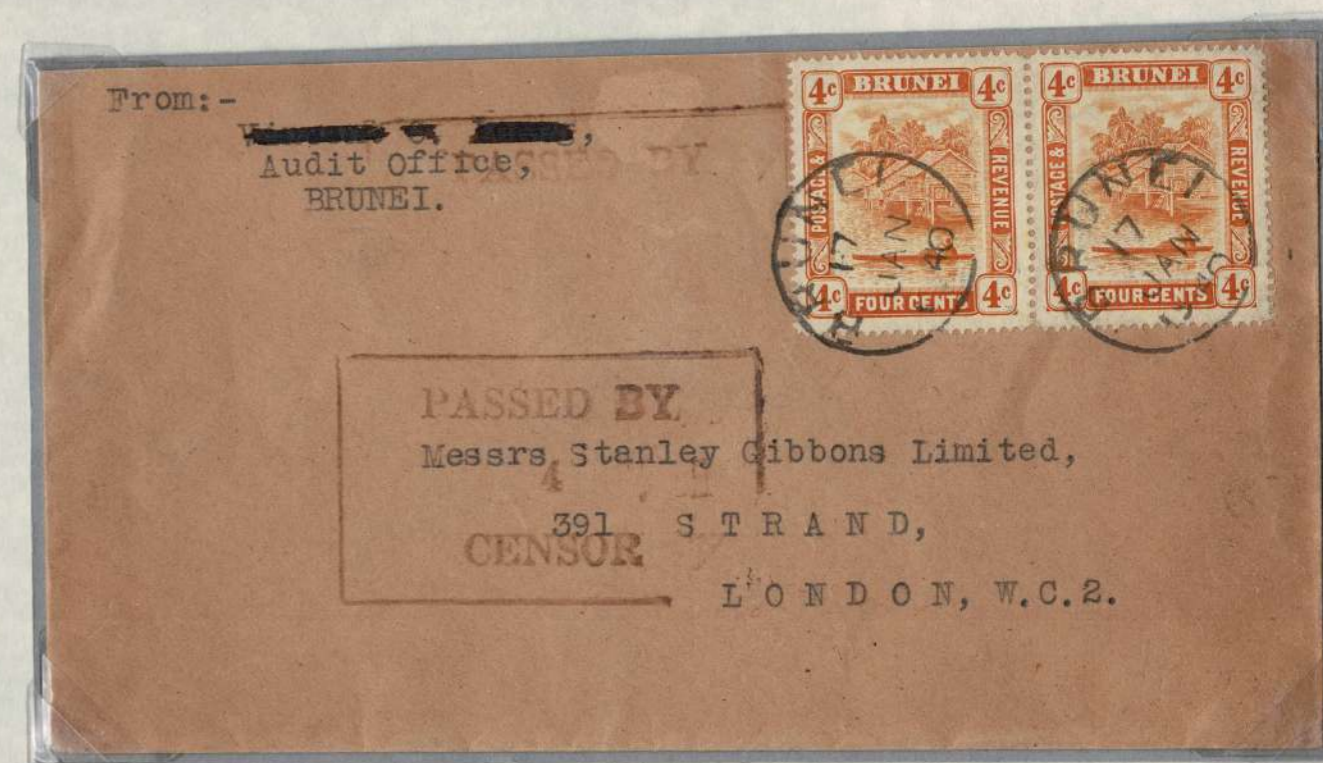
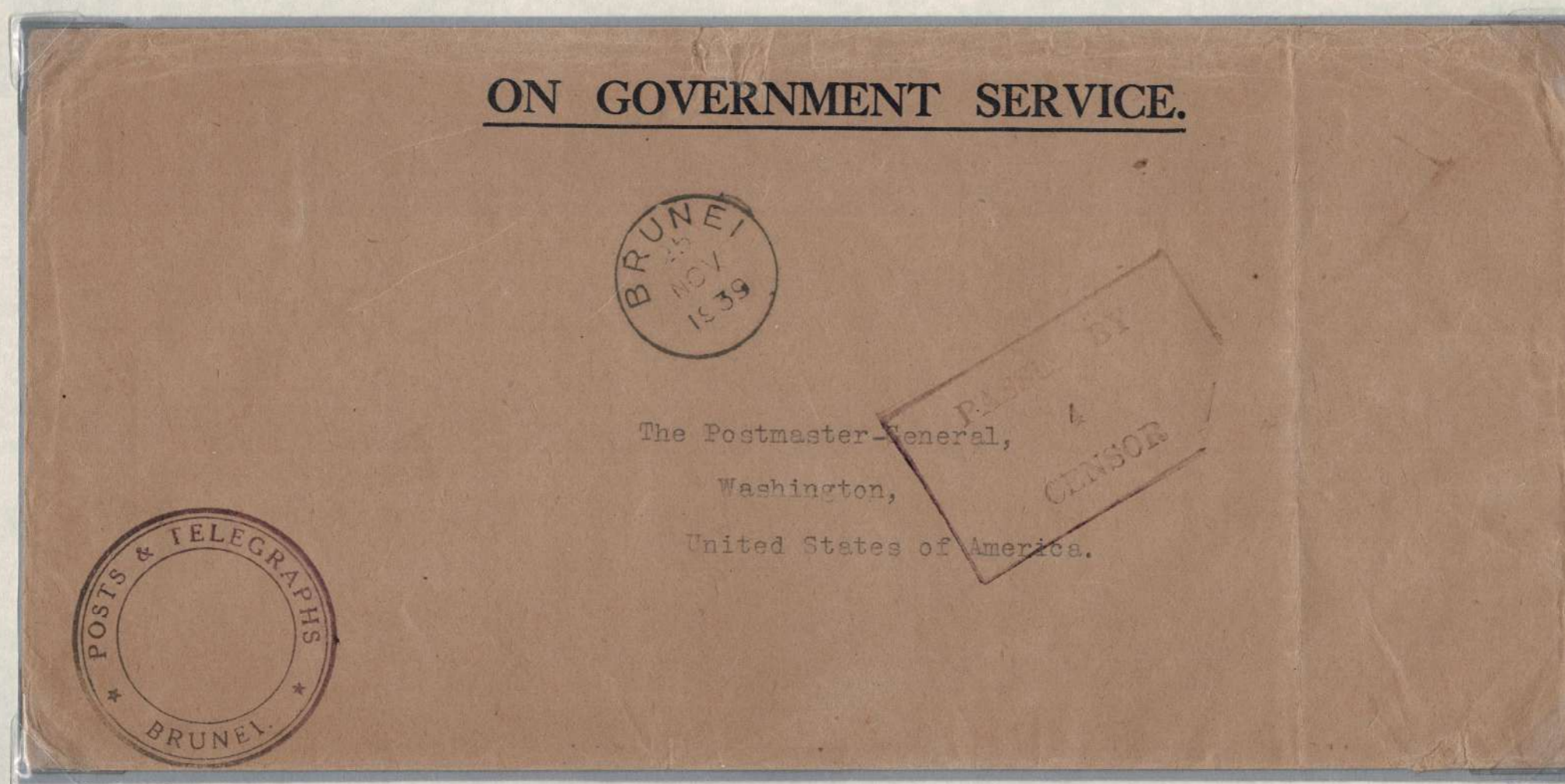
Seamail letter to England with a Miri return address, posted in Belait in Brunei on 20th March 1941. It would have been forwarded via Labuan to Singapore where it received a Singapore "Passed for Transmission 5" chop.



Seamail over from the small town of Lawas in the 5th Division from a Chinese writer to California, USA. The letter was posted on 28th May 1940, passed through Labuan on May 29th and was forwarded to Singapore for censoring where it was opened and resealed with brown tape. It is likely that it was sent from Singapore to Hong Kong and across the Pacific. It arrived in California on 2nd Aug 1940.



Brunei did not have a censor station and the first place Brunei mail met a censor was at Labuan where a 'Passed by Censor 4' was applied. The bottom right corner of the rubber cachet was cut off to differentiate it from the Singapore cachet. Censorship was introduced in Singapore on the 1st September 1939.



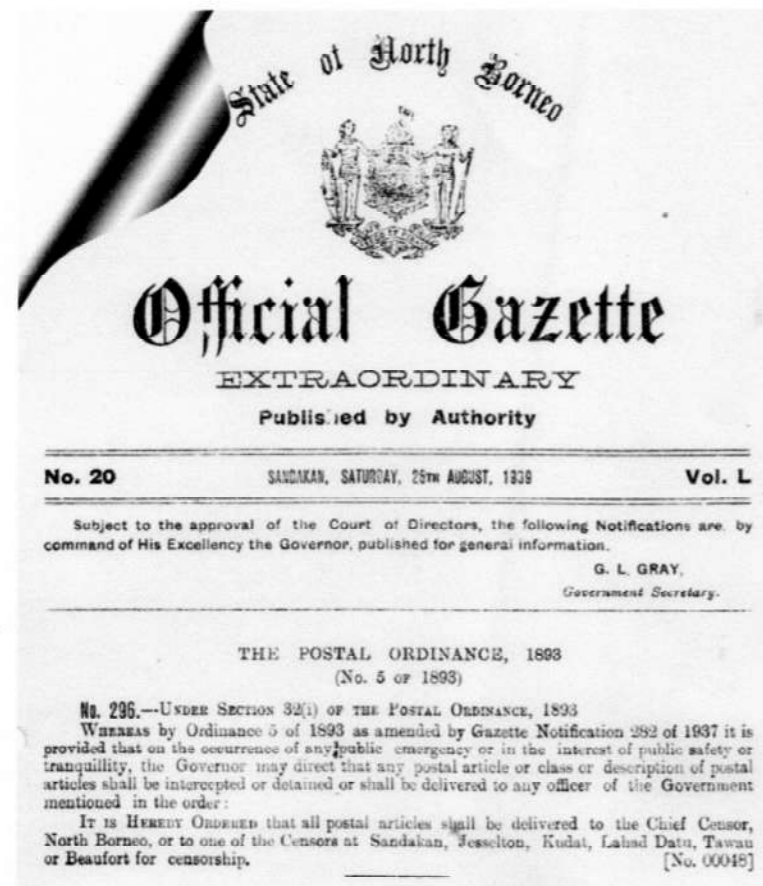
An official envelope with the 'Posts & Telegraphs, Brunei' cachet posted in Brunei on the 25th November 1939 and a Labuan 'Passed by Censor 4' cachet in transit. Addressed to the Postmaster General, Washington, being an official letter, it had no postage paid.

Posted in Brunei on the 27th December 1939 addressed to Bristol with the correct 8 cents postage and receiving the 'Labuan Censor 4' in transit.

Posted in Brunei on the 17th January 1940 with the correct postage paid and receiving the 'Labuan Censor 4' in transit

CIVIL CENSORSHIP OF NORTH BORNEO MAIL 1939-1941

Civil censorship in North Borneo likely commenced on 1st September 1939, aligning with the British Empire's censorship operations. In 1939, North Borneo had seven post offices: Sandakan, Jesselton, Kudat, Lahad Datu, Tawau, Beaufort and Tenom. Postal censorship undoubtedly occurred in these post offices. With the exception of Beaufort and Tenom, each town had multiple censors, each assigned unique identification numbers ranging from 1 to 34.

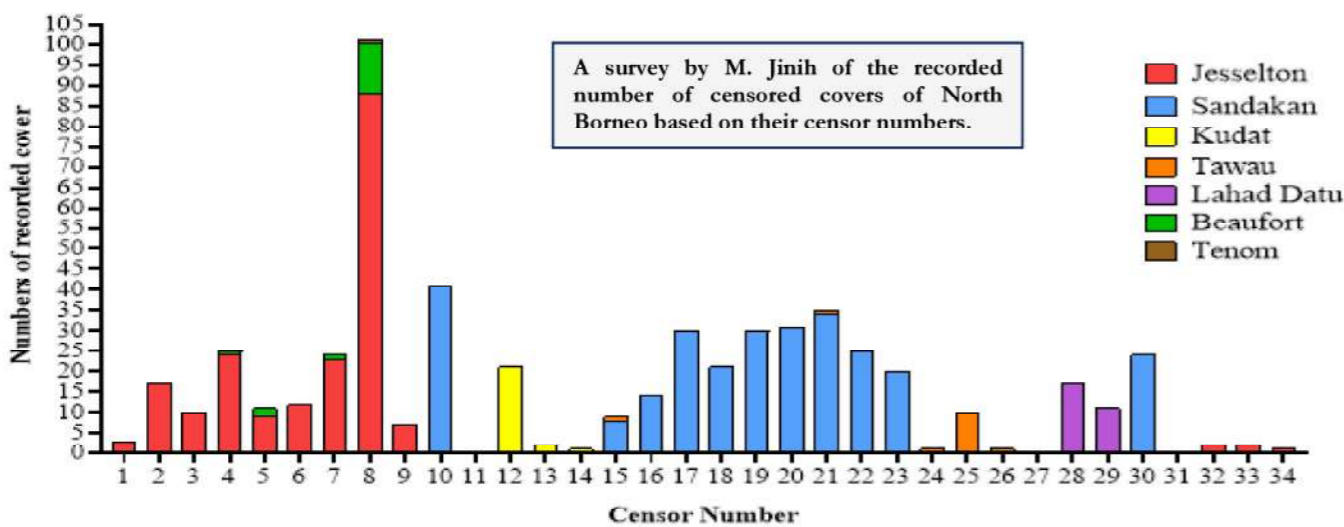


← Copy of official notification on North Borneo postal censorship appeared in the North Borneo Herald on 26th August 1939 (JH).

An official notice issued on 25th August 1939 stated that all postal items were to be submitted for censorship either to the Chief Censor of North Borneo, or to designated censors in Sandakan, Jesselton, Kudat, Lahad Datu, Tawau, or Beaufort.

Notably, Tenom was excluded from this list, suggesting its mail was likely inspected in Jesselton. Despite Beaufort's inclusion, surviving examples of censored mail from the town indicate that censorship was actually conducted in Jesselton, the larger administrative hub in the West Coast of North Borneo.

Sandakan and Jesselton were the primary censorship stations in North Borneo, handling approximately 89% of the total mail censorship. These stations also functioned as referral centres for censorship involving foreign languages.



Bibliography

- Morenweiser, K. (2000). *British Empire Civil Censorship Devices World War II – British Asia*. The Civil Censorship Study Group.
 - Jinih, M. (2024). Civil Censorship of North Borneo mail 1939-1941. *The Sarawak Journal*, 77(4), 93-101.
- JH=from Jon Higgin's collection.

CIVIL CENSORSHIP OF NORTH BORNEO MAIL 1939-1941

Latest un-censored cover from North Borneo



30 AUG 1939 An airmail cover from Jesselton to Holland. Not censored in North Borneo but opened and resealed (GB EM17) on transit through the UK (JH).

Earliest recorded censored cover from North Borneo



1 SEP 1939 Paquebot unsealed cover from Straits Settlements (? Singapore) to the USA. The stamp cancelled 5 bars in oval (similar to Proud K6 of Sandakan) 'LATE LETTER' (Proud I4). Applied with rectangular censor type 1A number 16 in violet while on reverse is Sandakan c.d.s. dated 1 SEP 1939 (JH).

Full Label

Full labels were rarely used and had been replaced by bisected labels by early 1940.



17 OCT 1939 Cover from Jesselton to Macao. Opened and resealed with full label (Type 1). On reverse is a Macau arrival mark 30-X-39.18.30.

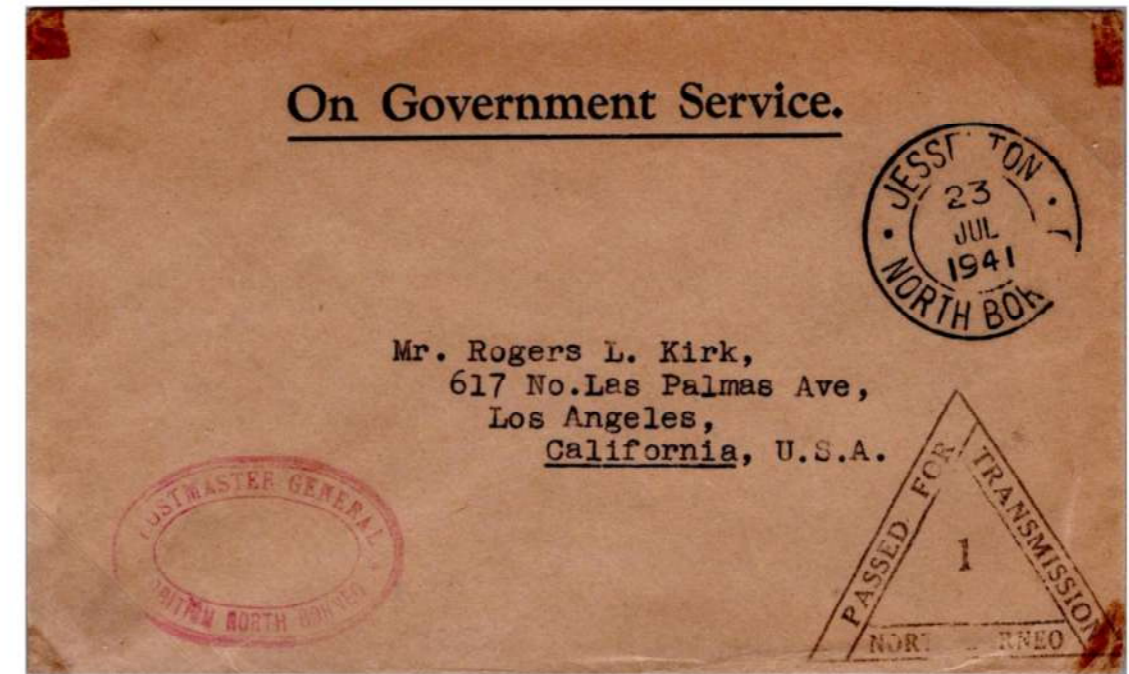
Censorship in Beaufort
Likely occurred in Jesselton.



25 NOV 1941 Cover from Beaufort to Singapore. Bears Jesselton's Censor number 8, suggesting that no censors operated in Beaufort and mail originating from this town was sent to Jesselton for inspection.

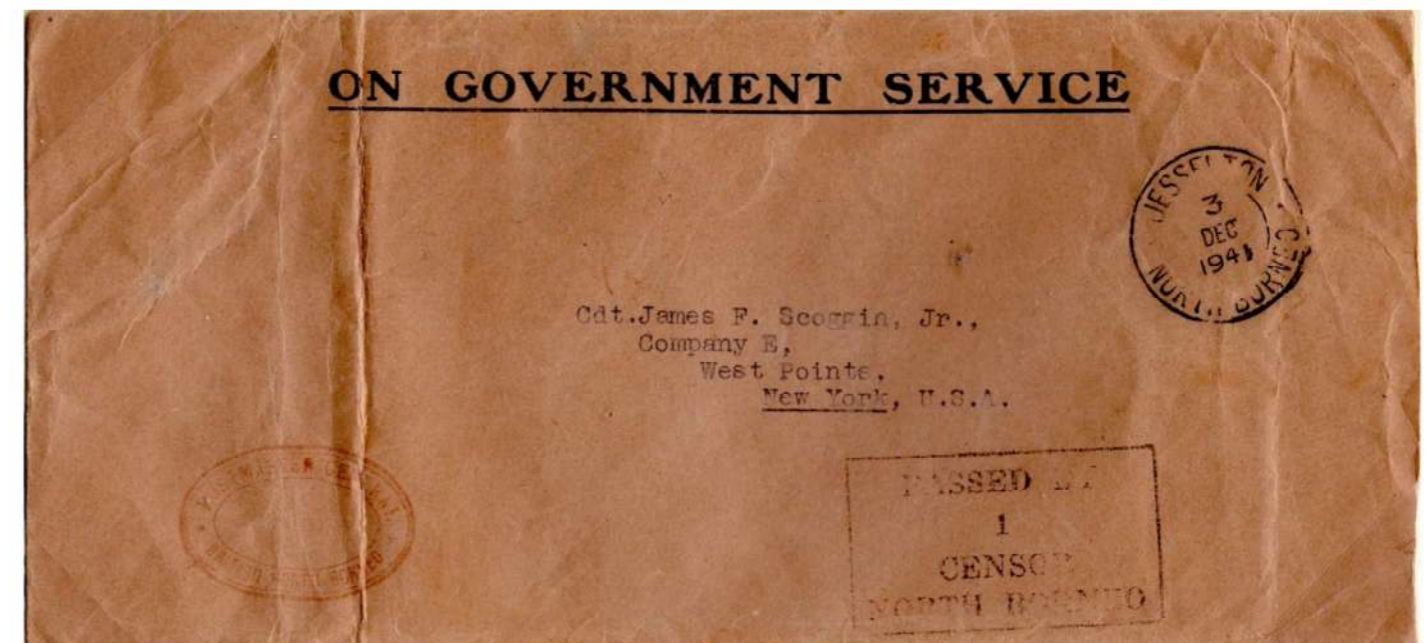
Censorship on PMG correspondence

Censor number 1 is reserved only for official PMG's correspondence.



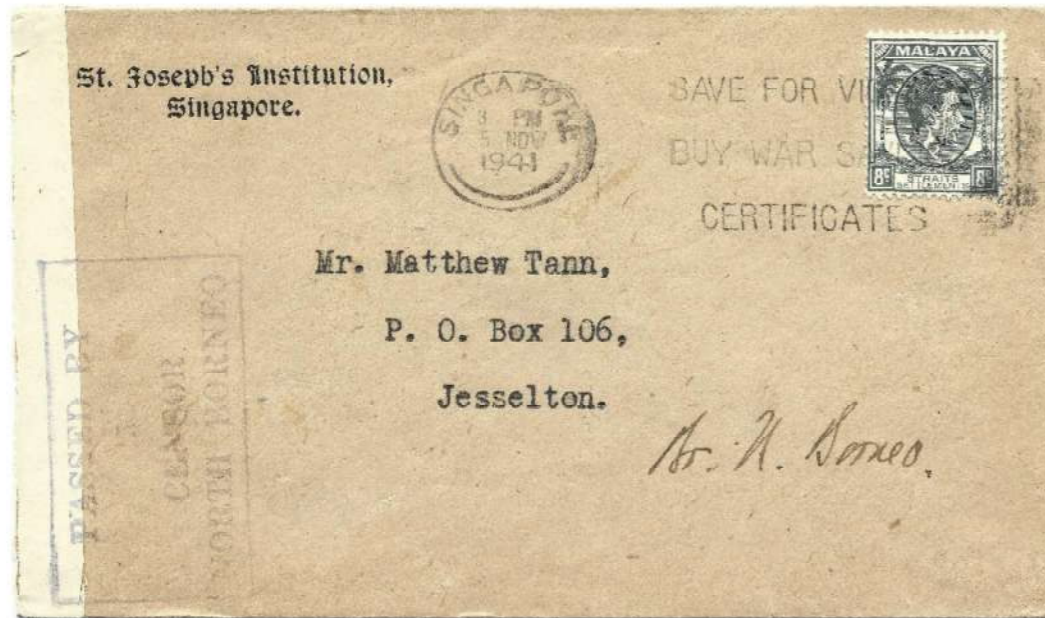
23 JUL 1941 On Government Service (OGS) cover from Jesselton to the USA with the Postmaster General (PMG)'s cachet in red on bottom left. Triangular type 2A censor number 1 in black (JH).

Late posting prior to the Japanese invasion.



3 DEC 1941 OGS cover from Jesselton to the USA, bearing the PMG's cachet in red. On reverse received Feb 16, 1942. Bears the rectangular censor type 1A number 1 in black. One of only three recorded censor covers number 1 (JH).

Censorship on incoming mail.



5 NOV 1941 Cover from Singapore to Jesselton bearing censor number 5. This cover had no censor markings from Singapore, prompting its inspection on arrival in Jesselton. Incoming mail is rare.

Censorship on postcards.



24 APR 1941 Picture postcard from Sandakan to USA showing two Dyak men. Bears triangular censor marking type 2A in red number 17. Postcard censorship is rare.



Replacement censor handstamp.



17 FEB 1941 OGS cover from Sandakan to Australia, bearing triangular censor type 2B in red-black ink, number 21. Fine strike of 'Office of the Director of Agriculture Sandakan' in red. After several months of extensive use, replacement rubber handstamps (types 1B and 2B) were produced and used in Sandakan.

Naval correspondence.



28 AUG 1941 Correspondence from Commander J.A. Murphy, a US Naval Observer, believed to have been sent by the American Intelligence Service (Keith, 1946). Bears triangular censor type 2A, number 20. Not inspected.

The triangular "PASSED FOR TRANSMISSION" with a number were applied in Singapore, the examples below being Nos 5, 6, and 107.



Posted in Belait on the 21st May 1941 addressed to Glasgow, receiving the triangular "PASSED FOR TRANSMISSION 6" censor mark in Singapore. the correct postage of 8 cents for the

Posted in Belait on the 11th September 1941 addressed to London receiving the "PASSED FOR TRANSMISSION 107" in Singapore, the correct postage of 8 cents for the all up Empire air mail rate was paid and the stamp was cancelled

Posted in Belait on the 14th August 1941 addressed to Sourabaya in Java and redirected to Batavia. The correct foreign air mail postage of 15 cents was paid and It received the triangular "PASSED FOR TRANSMISSION 5" IN Singapore and was opened and resealed in Java with censor tape tied by "CENSUUR 41" on the reverse and a red censor mark was also applied to the front. The stamps