

The James Barnett Force 'C' Correspondence

Gray Scrimgeour

In October 1941, Japan was threatening war, and Hong Kong was facing a major threat. To strengthen the defenses of Hong Kong, Canada sent a contingent designated Force 'C'. Force 'C' was composed of about 1,975 soldiers from two battalions – the Royal Rifles of Canada and the Winnipeg Grenadiers – along with a Headquarters and support brigade. These troops arrived in Vancouver on October 27 and immediately boarded two steamships that took them to Hong Kong, where they arrived on November 16¹⁻⁴.

When the invasion came on December 8 (Hong Kong time; it was December 7 in Pearl Harbor), the defense of Hong Kong against a superior Japanese invasion force proved to be an impossible task. Allied forces fought bravely to defend Hong Kong but were forced to surrender on December 25. The survivors then suffered for three and a half years as Prisoners of War (POWs). About 550 Canadians did not return to Canada; they were casualties of the fighting in December 1941 or of the severe conditions the POWs suffered.

In this article, I describe the surviving correspondence written by Honourary Captain James Barnett, the Church of England Chaplain to the Royal Rifles of Canada battalion. This material was discovered in Quebec. A record of its content should be preserved. In late summer 2010, an alert buyer found a single envelope at a Montreal art and antique auction. The cover had been consigned by a picker who had purchased the unclaimed contents of a storage rental space. The intrepid auction

buyer purchased more material in the fall of 2010 from at least eight subsequent sales, some as far away as Saint-Hyacinthe. Another purchaser owns a few items from this accumulation.

Because so many letters (not just covers) are in the accumulation, there are new details about the mail service – or lack of it – and about the travel home for some of the liberated POWs of Force 'C'.

The correspondence consists of material sent to his wife by Capt. Barnett. The accumulation contains 17 letters (most without their envelopes) written before or on December 5, 8 POW envelopes, 10 POW cards, and mail and telegrams sent after the end of the war. I will outline each of these groups of correspondence after introducing James Barnett.

James Barnett

Honourary Captain James Barnett (born March 29, 1906; died November 18, 1984), the chaplain of the Royal Rifles in Hong Kong,

was born in Stockport, Cheshire, England⁵. In 1929, he was ordained as deacon after graduating from Bishop's University. He served as curate in All Saint's, Winnipeg, then was ordered priest in Quebec City. He spent four years serving the Labrador Coast Mission, then was assistant to the Dean of the Cathedral in Quebec City. There he met Betty Stephens, who became his wife. He served in the parish of Maple Grove, Megantic from 1937 until 1940, when he joined the Canadian Army. He served in Newfoundland with the Royal Rifles before going to Hong Kong with Force 'C' as chaplain. In Hong Kong, Barnett became a POW, and survived the internment. After the war, he returned to Canada via Manila, Philippines Islands and San Francisco. Repatriated after 44 months as a POW, Barnett (often called "Father Jim") became a District Chaplain in Quebec and continued in the Army until 1960. In 1946, he testified at the War Crimes Trials in Tokyo. After he retired from the Army, Barnett served in Sorel and Ottawa. He was predeceased by his wife Betty.

While interned in Hong Kong, Barnett's duties included daily services (with communion wine brewed from raisins and wafers made from rice), visiting the camp hospital, and comforting the sick and troubled. Before internment, he lived in barracks. He was at St. Stephen's College on December 24, 1941. The college, which had been converted into a hospital, had been shelled despite its Red Cross flag⁶. Many wounded soldiers had been brought there (there were about 100 patients). The hospital's staff included 3 medical officers, a nursing sister, 10 nurses, and 3 medical orderlies. Early on December 25, while Barnett was delivering communion, Japanese troops entered the hospital and bayoneted defenceless wounded sol-

diers in their beds. Two doctors who tried to stop the killing were shot. Barnett and about 90 other men were spared. The next day, Barnett was told to cremate all the dead. He was not allowed to make a list of them.

There were three chaplains with Force 'C': Rev. James Barnett, Rev. Uriah Laite from Vancouver (Winnipeg Grenadiers, United Church), and Father Francis Joseph Deloughery from Pembroke, Ontario (Canadian Chaplains Service, Roman Catholic). All had the rank of Honourary Captain. Laite's and Deloughery's reports of their activities⁷ provides many details of the life of the POWs in their camps and of the repatriation trip. For much of the time they were interned, Barnett and Laite shared efforts in communion and preaching services, as well as lived in the same hut.

Barnett went to Tokyo in 1946 to testify at the International Military Tribunal for the Far East. The Melbourne *Argus* (December 19, 1946) reported on Barnett's testimony as follows:

"The Japanese marked the fall of Hong Kong by killing hospital patients and raping British nurses, Captain James Barnett, Canadian chaplain, told the War Crimes Tribunal yesterday.

Japanese soldiers first bayoneted all patients who could not get out of bed, he added. Later he found 180 bodies, some of which had been mutilated by cutting off ears, noses, and tongues. Four nurses told him that they had been raped repeatedly. He had found the bodies of three other nurses.

Captain Barnett said Major Charles Boxer and the British commander of the hospital were publicly beaten on October 25, 1942, because British prisoners had cheered when the Americans first bombed Hong Kong."

Letters Sent from Hong Kong in 1941

In the correspondence, there are 17 numbered letters written by Barnett to his wife between November 17 (the day after Force 'C' arrived in Hong Kong) and December 5, 1941. He wrote in a small hand to conserve paper. All these letters were sent by air mail. As an experiment, he says he sent two letters by sea mail; neither of them is in the accumulation. The content of the letters gives an indication of how little correspondence arrived from Canada for Force 'C'.

Barnett wrote that initially there was no censoring of his mail. He was unable to tell his wife his location, but he had sent her a cable, which should have had the place of origin in it. In his second letter (November 18), he says that one officer (Lt. Ian Breakey) had received a telegram from home. Barnett describes his location as 'China' and says it is hot and humid.

In his third letter (November 20) Barnett mentions Hong Kong for the first time. He writes that he will send all letters by air mail—four sheets of paper make up a ½-ounce letter with postage of \$3.50HK. He expected to get mail from Canada only every six weeks unless his wife were to write him c/o General Delivery, Hong Kong. However, she should send most of her letters by the regular channel: Royal Rifles of Canada, C Force, Cdn. Army Overseas.

In Letter No. 5 (November 22) James writes that he had just received a cable from his wife. Troops had come to him to have him censor letters for them and to tell them how to mail Christmas presents home. Censorship became a regular duty for him.

In No. 8 (November 25) Barnett wrote "I was wondering my dear if you would send

a couple of special letters by Air Mail. You could address The Rev. James Barnett, Hong Kong Hotel, Hong Kong, China. I will pick them up there... I was talking to the Postal Corps Sergeant this morning and he told me that he had made some enquiries at the post office & that they had told him that they expected a mail in this week." [No mail ever came to 'C' Force by the regular service from Ottawa. As described in the accompanying article⁸, all mail addressed to Force 'C' bearing the address advised by the government—Royal Rifles of Canada, C Force, Canadian Army Overseas—was held in Ottawa and then returned to its senders in early 1942.]

In his November 27 letter (No. 10) Barnett says that Bill Clark got a cable from his wife saying she was sending air mail letters c/o Mr. David Drummond, Canadian Pacific Steamships, Hong Kong. "Goodness knows what arrangements the Canadian Govt. has made for sending our mail", he wrote. He had received another cable from his wife.

In Letters No. 13 and 14 (November 30 and December 1, sent together; by this time, Barnett was including two attached letters in each envelope) Barnett says the Clipper [PANAM plane] arrived yesterday. James was going to the hotel next day to see if he had any mail. Letter No. 14 (December 1) was attached to No. 13. There was no mail for the Forces in the ship that came over the weekend. [The weekend was November 29 and November 30. Neither the ship nor its ports of origin or destination have been identified.]

In his penultimate letter (December 4) Barnett remarks that a colleague named Cecil had a letter from Canada waiting for him at the downtown Hong Kong Post Office—his second. It had been mailed November 7 and reached the post office on November 21. [I do not know of any mail of this type in the hands of collectors.]

At least two of Barnett's covers were detained by the Japanese and not dispatched until after the war was over. The two detained covers are dated December 2 and December 7 (Figure 1). Letter No. 13 (November 30) and No. 14 (December 1) are eight pages together; they were in the detained cover postmarked at Hong Kong on December 2. Letter No. 15 was written in the afternoon or evening of December 2. Letter No. 16 was not found. Letters No. 17 (December 4) and No. 18 (December 5) were mailed in the December 7 detained envelope. The recorded Hong Kong postmark dates on detained covers range from November 29 to December 11⁹.

The last air mail across the Pacific from Hong Kong left on November 30 and arrived at San Francisco on 4 December. In his diary, Rev. Uriah Laite wrote, "Dec. 9th. The last plane of China National Airways came to

Hong Kong and returned." The date of the last eastbound steamship mail is not known. The ship that was in Hong Kong on November 29–30 (see Barnett's letter No. 14) could have departed either eastbound (trans-Pacific) or westbound.

[I have a civilian unsealed letter (paid 8¢) dated November 26 received in Toronto on January 2, 1942 and a Force 'C' cover dated November 28 paid at the surface rate (20¢) delivered to Quebec. In order to reach Canada without being detained, both possibly were dispatched by air mail. This suggests that the Hong Kong postal clerks tried to send as much mail by air in the November 30 Clipper flight as they could. Perhaps the same was done with the westbound China National Airways plane.]



Figure 1.
Air mail cover mailed in Hong Kong on December 7, 1941 by Capt. Barnett. This cover did not leave Hong Kong until September 1945. Note the boxed postmark reading
DETAINED IN HONG KONG
BY JAPANESE
FROM DECEMBER 1941 TO SEPTEMBER 1945

The Camps

There were five POW camps in Hong Kong. At various times, the surviving members of Force 'C' were housed in three of them [Ref. 9, pp. 21 & 22]. Royal Rifles of Canada survivors were marched to North Camp (*Camp H*) on December 29, 1941, and the survivors of the Winnipeg Grenadiers joined them on January 23, 1942. North Point Camp closed September 26, 1942 and all the remaining Canadian POWs remaining in Hong Kong were moved to Shamshuipo.

Shamshuipo (*Camp S*) was the main camp. The Winnipeg Grenadiers were there from December 30, 1941 for less than a month. Then they went to North Point Camp. As noted above, in September 1942 all the Canadians were moved to Shamshuipo. This was the only camp operating near the end of the war. Rev. Laite⁷ says that his group of Grenadiers moved back to Shamshuipo on September 26, 1942.

Bowen Road Hospital—the former military hospital—was designated Camp A. It operated as a hospital until March 1945, when remaining patients were transferred to Shamshuipo Hospital. Capt. Laite mentions that Capt. Barnett was in hospital there with dysentery in the summer and fall of 1942—until January 23, 1943 when he was “greatly improved”⁷. The Senior Medical Officer of the hospital wrote that by December 1943 slightly over half the patients were Canadians; they were attended by a “Church of England chaplain”, i.e., Rev. Barnett¹⁰. Laite wrote that Barnett was back to the hospital on March 17, 1945 with diarrhea, for about two weeks⁷.

The camp name sometimes was printed in the return address of POW mail by the sender. Because many letters or cards are undated, knowledge of the camp can help date a document. As listed below, Barnett's letters and

cards were sent from Camp H (June 1942), Camp S (including summer 1943), Camp A (by December 1943, possibly to March 1945), and Camp S again (possibly from March 1945 until liberation).

POW Letters and Cards

Sending of the first letters and cards from POWs in Hong Kong was permitted in early June 1942 [Ref. 9, Chapter 3]. Messages were hand-printed (or rarely, typed) on standard stationery or cards. Mailing of letters with envelopes was forbidden on October 31, 1943; cards then became the only type of stationery for POW mail. Figure 2 is an example of a letter and its accompanying POW cover, and Figure 3 shows a POW card sent by Barnett. The letter is undated and the card was written on September 28, 1944. The envelopes and cards in the Barnett correspondence are listed below in an order as close to chronological as I can make it. Most—but not all—have the camp identified. All but one envelope contains its letter.

List of POW Letters

June 12, 1942	Camp H	
Undated: 1942	Camp A	(See Figure 2)
Prob. Dec 1942	Camp A	Received at Quebec Aug 1, 1944.

Message: “November 30th was a day of rejoicing.” †
Winter 1943

Message: “We had a good Christmas”
Late 1943 Camp S

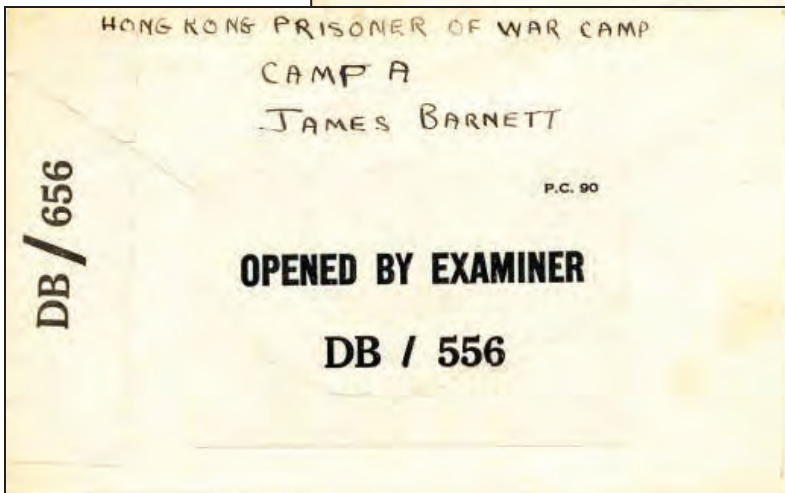
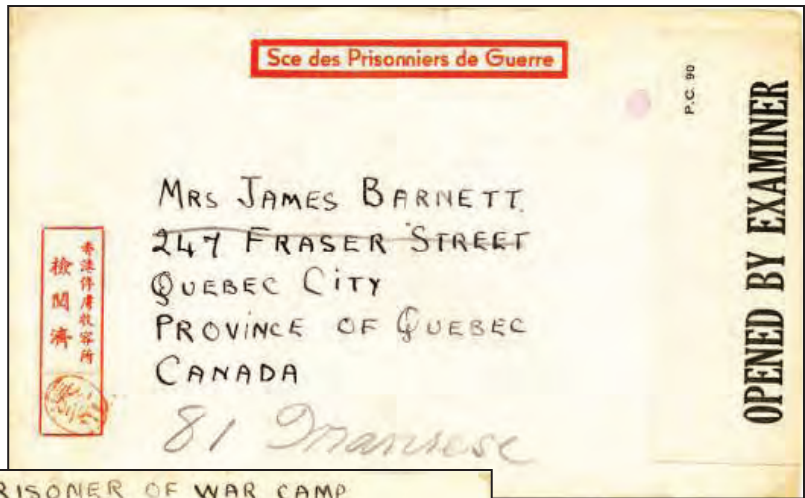
Message: “Have a good Christmas”
Autumn 1943 Camp S

Message: Anne is “not quite five” *
Aug 31, 1945 Post-war; not postmarked or censored

† This letter could have been sent in December 1943, during the period when only POW cards were authorized.

* “I often wonder whether Anne will be going to school even though she is not quite five.” Barnett's daughter Anne was born in November 1938; therefore this letter was written in autumn 1943—before October 31, when letters were forbidden.

Figure 2.
 POW cover and its enclosed letter (opposite page) sent to his wife by Capt. James Barnett. This letter is undated but was written before October 31, 1943; letters were forbidden after that date. Only POW cards could then be sent. Barnett's return



address is Camp A (Bowen Road Hospital). Barnett was in this hospital for about six months, until January 1943. The letter was censored in Hong Kong by Hasegawa (his large oval mark is at the bottom of the left box of the cover). In Ottawa, the letter was censored by both DB/556 and DB/656.

The POW envelopes were preprinted in red with “Sce des Prisonniers de Guerre” (Prisoner of War Post) at the top. A Japanese box at the left translates as “Censored”. A box at the right, when translated, reads “Hong Kong Prisoner of War Camp”.

List of POW Cards

Sep 28, 1944	(See Figure 3)
Nov 20, 1944	To daughter, not wife; reached Canada the following summer.
Dec 20, 1944	
Jan or Feb 1945	Camp S
Undated	Camp S
Undated	Camp S
Undated	
Undated	Camp S
Undated	Camp S
Undated	Camp S
	Received at Quebec September 13, 1945

MY DARLING BETTS,

HOW ARE MY SWEETHEARTS? HOW I
WOULD LOVE TO TAKE YOU IN MY ARMS AND GIVE
YOU A BIG KISS AND FILL YOUR ARMS WITH
RED ROSES ON OUR ANNIVERSARY. HOW WONDERFUL
IS OUR LIFE TOGETHER. I FEEL VERY CLOSE TO YOU
AT COMMUNION SERVICE AND MY SPECIAL PRAYER
THERE IS THAT I SHALL SOON BE HOME WITH YOU.

TELL ANNE THAT DADDY IS ALWAYS
THINKING ABOUT HER AND SENDS HER A BIG HUG
AND KISS

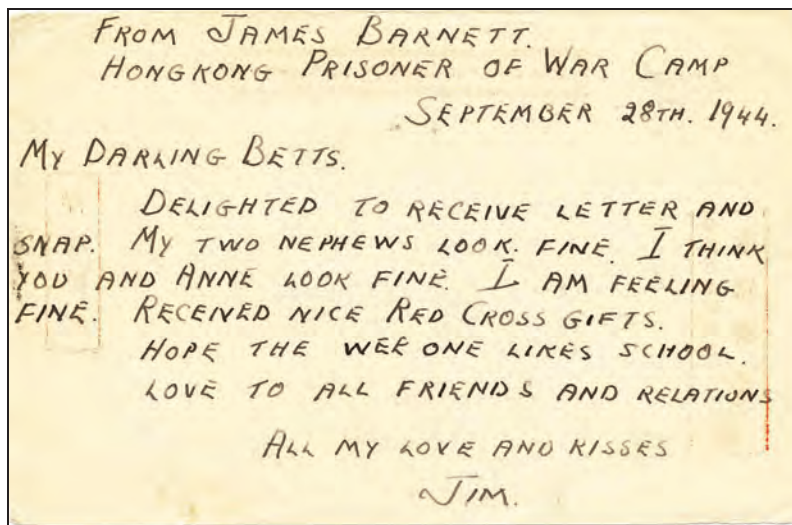
I AM VERY WELL AND IN GOOD
SPIRITS AND KEPT BUSY

ALL MY LOVE AND KISSES DARLING,

JIM

JAMES BARNETT.

Figure 3.
POW card written by James Barnett to his wife on September 28, 1944. The card is Tett's Type 3. It bears no postmarks. The message was censored by Sekizawa (see the oval seal at the lower left). Note the brevity of the messages of both this card and the letter in Figure 2.



The printing of the POW cards was similar to that of the envelopes. Tett [Ref. 9, p. 75] has differentiated three types of cards based on the “*Scé des Prisonniers de Guerre*” printings; his Type 1 is most common. The Barnett correspondence has six Type 1 cards, and two each of Types 2 and 3. The card shown in Figure 3 is Type 3 (heavy, short lettering).

The June 12, 1942 letter was in the first batch of mail allowed out of the POW camps. It left Hong Kong on June 30 in the steamer *Asama Maru* and was carried to Lourenço Marques, Mozambique, where it was transferred to the *Gripsholm*, which arrived in New York on August 25, 1942. Most or all of the remaining letters and cards sent by Barnett went via Japan to Pusan and Manchuria, then west by the Trans-Siberian Railway to Novosibirsk; a branch of the railway and a road took mail eventually to the Caspian Sea, from where it went to Ankara and Cairo. From July 1942, there was air service between Teheran and London, so POW mail then went by air mail for the Canada–Teheran leg of the long

trip. Any Canadian civil censorship of these letters and cards was performed in Ottawa.

Postwar (Liberation) Correspondence

Although hostilities ceased on August 14, 1945, the Hong Kong POWs were officially informed only on August 16 [Ref. 9, Chapter 12]. The Japanese controlled the Post Office until August 28; on September 5 the Hong Kong and Kowloon offices were reopened by the British. Because no Hong Kong stamps were available until September 28, all civilian mail passed postage-free until then. During repatriation, the mail of former POWs was postage-free if it was marked that it was written by a liberated POW.

Barnett's first post-war letter was written on August 31, 1945. The POW envelope (Figure 4) is not dated, it was not censored, and no postage was paid. He wrote that the last letter from his wife had been written on April 28, 1944 and was received in March

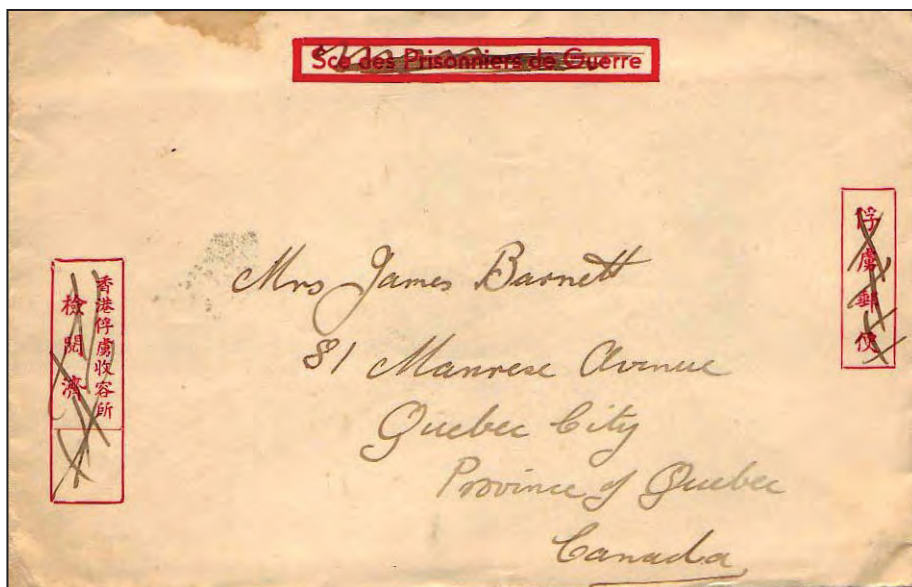


Figure 4. POW letter sent post-war from Hong Kong by Capt. Barnett. Note that he had crossed out the printed notes on the envelope.

1945. He first heard of peace on August 11th and it was confirmed on the 17th. The relieving force had arrived on August 30th—a large fleet. He had been on board the *HMCS Prince Robert* the previous evening. He wrote, “I have no idea when we will be mobilized.”

A telegram to Mrs. Barnett from the Director of Records, Ottawa dated September 7-8, 1945 says that an unconfirmed report has been received that Honorary Captain James Barnett is safe in Allied hands. This was followed up with a September 9 telegram from the Director of Records, Ottawa saying “now reported safe with the Allies”.

On September 8, Barnett wrote a British Air Mail Letter Card to his wife saying that he would be boarding the *H.M.T.S. Empress of Australia* the next day. His destination was unknown—possibly Vancouver. This air let-

ter bears a strike of the provisional octagonal handstamp reading HONG KONG / 1945 / POSTAGE FREE (see Ellison, Ref. 4, p. 57).

On September 10, Barnett was on board the *Empress of Australia*, in Hong Kong harbour. The ship waited until September 11 for the arrival of passengers from Stanley Internment Camp. Barnett wrote that his air letter (a British air letter form supplied on board; Figure 5) would possibly be flown ahead. It bears a 6¢ US air mail stamp, cancelled at Manila by a U.S. ARMY POSTAL SERVICE / 23 (Base A.P.O. 23) postmark dated September 18, 1945. Ellison [Ref. 4, p. 58] had an air letter from a liberated Canadian POW also written on board the *Empress of Australia* and postmarked September 18 but by the APO 22 duplex (U.S. 22nd Army Base Post Office) at Fort McKinley, Manila.



Figure 5.
British Air Mail Letter Card written by Barnett on board the *Empress of Australia* on September 10, 1945. The card was franked with a 6¢ US stamp. Postage was required because the letter was not marked "Liberated POW".

Barnett arrived at Manila on September 13. He was taken to a repatriation camp a few miles outside Manila that was operated by the Australian Reception Group, who were responsible for accommodating liberated British and Commonwealth POWs¹¹.

On September 14, in Manila, Barnett wrote a British Air Mail Letter Card to his wife (Figure 6). His first comments are, "How grand it was to receive your letters. I found them on my cot in my tent when I arrived here last night." The letter card bears two

Figure 6.
Air Mail Letter Card written on 14 September by Barnett to his wife. It is endorsed "Liberated P.W. / Canada" and postmarked on 15 September by AUST ARMY P.O. 243. and on 19 September by No. 2 AUST BASE P.O. / F. It also bears a two-line *PASSED FREE / OF POSTAGE* handstamp. This cover possibly was missorted so that it transited Sydney, Australia on its way to Canada.

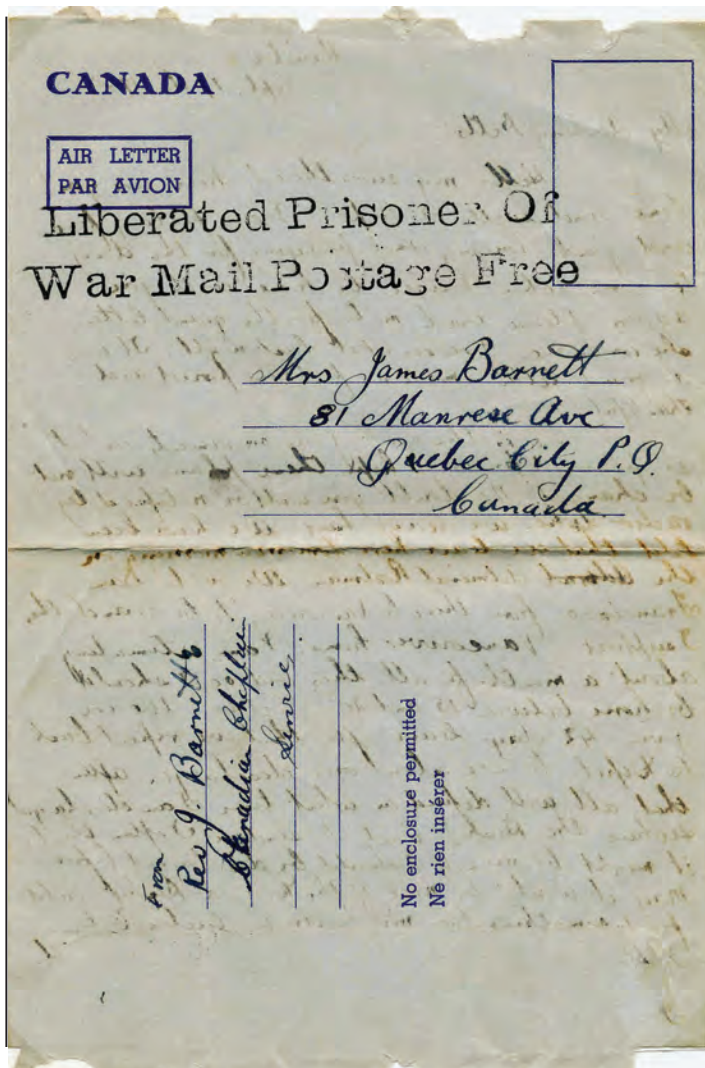


Figure 7.
Canada Air Letter written by
James Barnett on September 17, 1945
at Manila. It bears the serified, two-line
“Liberated Prisoner Of / War Mail
Postage Free” handstamp.

date stamps: AUST. ARMY
P.O. 243 (September 15, No. 2
POW Reception Camp, Manila)
and No. 2 AUST BASE P.O. /
E.(September 19). There is also
a two-line PASSED FREE / OF
POSTAGE handstamp and “Lib-
erated P.W. Canada” was written
at the upper left. A somewhat
similar Air Mail Letter Card to
Australia from AUST. ARMY
P.O. 243 (written September 26)
is shown by Larkin¹². Barnett’s
letter was dispatched to Canada
via Australia. Australian Army
Post Office 243 was located at
an Australian camp just outside
Manila; the No. 2 Australian
Base Post Office was located in
Sydney, Australia.

Barnett wrote a long message
to his wife on September 15 in a
British Air Mail Letter Card. It
was sent paid with a U.S. 6¢ air
mail stamp postmarked Septem-
ber 18 at U.S. APO 22.

On September 17, Barnett wrote a Can-
ada Air Letter (Figure 7) to his wife to say
that he had received a letter from his mother
the previous night. He hoped to be home
in mid October, and he would have 42 days
of leave before reporting back to the depot



for discharge. This Air Letter bears no dated
postmark; it has a serified, two-line “Lib-
erated Prisoner Of / War Mail Postage Free”
handstamp.

There are four more Canada Air Letters
from Manila in the correspondence. They
lack originating datestamps and all have

sans serif, three-line LIBERATED / PRISONER OF WAR MAIL / POSTAGE FREE marks (see Figure 8 for an example). On September 20, James wrote that he was still in Manila because he had not been lucky in the draw—twice. He commented that the former POWs could get anything they wanted to eat, drink, wear, or smoke free.

Barnett wrote on September 21 that he had been at the rest camp for eight days. “As a rule they do not like to keep people here any longer than a week & so any day now we should be on our way home.”

In his September 22 Canada Air Letter (Figure 8), Barnett wrote that he was on the O.C. draft to leave the next day. He had been put on a list to go from Manila to San Francisco by plane but flights for Canadians were cancelled. He was glad to be coming home by boat. This letter reached Ottawa on October 3.

On September 24, Barnett wrote the last of the Canadian Air Letters. It has a date stamp reading OCT 12 1945, probably ap-

plied in Canada. The ship he was to travel in (the *U.S.S. Joseph T. Dickman*) had its sailing postponed indefinitely. Also, a week previously, one of the officers of the repatriation team forgot to submit the official list of Canadians to go and they lost their chance. James was 1 of 12 Canadians left. He sent a telegram home on September 24 that said “Hope to be home middle of October”.

The air letters that Barnett wrote (aside from that written on September 14 routed through Australia) were probably carried to California by U.S. military carriers, then forwarded to Ottawa by commercial air service. It is also possible that some of them were carried to Canada by planes of RAF Ferry Command.

Finally, on October 7, James was able to write that he was on board the troop transport *U.S.S. Joseph T. Dickman* [formerly the *S.S. President Roosevelt* of the United States Line] and ready to leave Manila for Pearl Harbor. The *Dickman* took four days to reach Pearl Harbor on October 9, where the

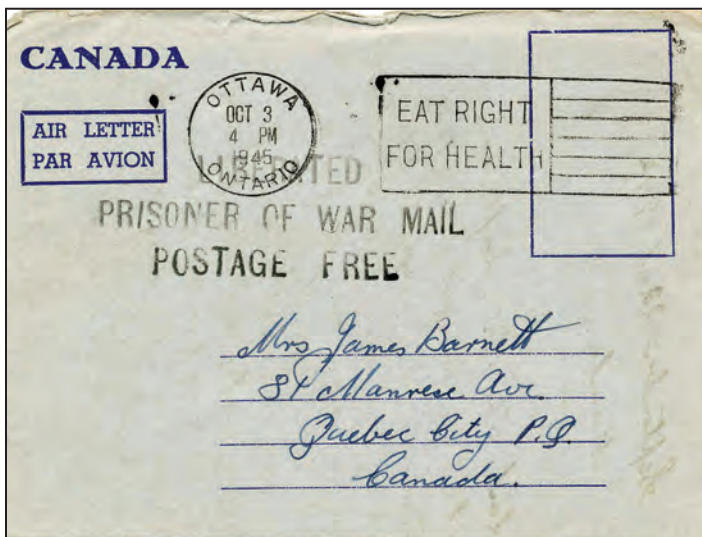


Figure 8.
Canada Air Letter written by
Capt. Barnett on September 22, 1945.
Note the LIBERATED / PRISONER OF
WAR MAIL / POSTAGE FREE
three line sans-serif handstamp.
Courtesy of Gene Labiuk.

ship refueled and took on more passengers. From Pearl Harbor, Barnett sent a telegram (undated) with the message "Am Pearl Harbor Grand reception Hope home about two weeks..." The *Dickman* reached San Francisco on October 16. Barnett's October 7 letter was sent in an air mail envelope with 8¢ US postage tied by a U.S. NAVY duplex postmark dated AM / 15 October / 1945 [probably applied on board the *Dickman*].

On October 18, the *Vancouver Sun* carried a San Francisco report that all liberated Canadians from the Far East would soon be in North America. Three steamships bringing them were scheduled to arrive at San Fran-

cisco soon: *U.S.S. General R.L. Howze* (October 15), *U.S.S. Joseph T. Dickman* (October 16) and *U.S.S. Catron* (October 19). This article must have meant all Canadians coming home via San Francisco because liberated POWs arrived in the *H.M.C.S. Prince Robert* at Esquimalt on October 20, the carrier *H.M.S. Glory* at Victoria on October 27, and the transport *U.S.S. Perida* at Esquimalt on November 3.

The extensive Barnett correspondence provides a number of new records related to a postal history topic that already has been carefully documented. In particular, the communications Barnett sent during his lib-

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eration process demonstrate the complexity of Operation Magic Carpet—the repatriation of liberated POWs.

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