



Published bi-monthly by the France and Colonies Group  
Address all communications to Dr. A. J. C. Vaurie, 5 E. 53 St., New York, N. Y.

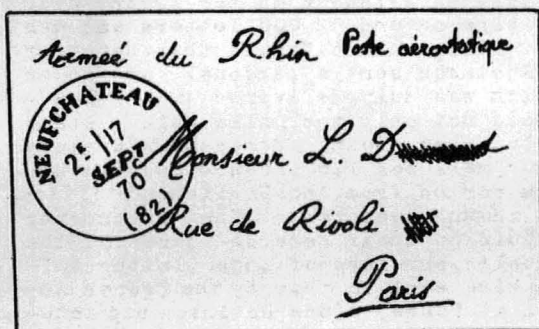
\* \* \*

## "LES PAPILLONS DE METZ"

### The First Air Mail Post Office

By E. F. HURT

Member No. 63, F. & C. G.



Probably every collector of France (and also every specialist of Airmails) is interested in the Balloon letters sent out during the Siege of Metz in 1870, even though he may not be the fortunate possessor of one of these rarities.

A good many accounts have been written here and there in regard to this postal service and the circumstances which brought it about and Yvert's Catalogue of France gives some interesting details about it. But it seems to me that it would be worth while bringing together as one

whole the information known so as to make as complete a story as possible.

The Franco-Prussian war went badly for the French armies right from the start. The French army of the Rhine under Marechal Bazaine was defeated at Saint Privat, August 18, 1870, and took refuge in Metz. When efforts at breaking out failed they became besieged in a city badly prepared to withstand a siege. Communications with the outside were completely interrupted and this led to the idea of using balloons. Credit for this idea belongs to an Englishman, George T. Robinson, who was in Metz as war correspondent for the Manchester Guardian. Mr. Robinson wished to get out or, failing that, to communicate both with his paper and his family in England.

This idea met at first with official opposition, but Mr. Robinson was finally authorized to manufacture suitable balloons. It is interesting to note in passing that Metz was the home of the great French aeronaut Pilatre de Rozier. Difficulties of a material order existed also, such as availability of a lifting gas and suitable material for the making of the balloons. Robinson wanted paper balloons for letter carrying, an alternative use of cotton was put forward by a Captain Schultz and it was decided to give both methods a trial.

The first balloon built was of paper, some 39 inches in diameter, and this was sent up on Sept. 4th, but fell almost immediately, the envelope having been accidentally damaged during the drying process. No letters had been loaded in this balloon though it had had some copies of the local paper, the "Independant de la Moselle," as ballast.

A second balloon was made of white paper of double thickness and coated with varnish and this was looked on with such favour that an official order was drawn up and published, giving notice of its forthcoming departure. This read:

"Ordre de la Place de Metz, aux troupes du Camp retranche. Sept. 14, 1870.

Message carrying balloons, will be sent up from Metz, each morning as from Sept. 15th. So that the first balloon shall carry as many letters as possible it is essential that these be written on very thin paper of a size of 10 X 5 centimetres; they will be sent unsealed and without envelopes to the

(Continued on next page)



Headquarters of G.O.C., at the Place de Metz, to be dispatched as opportunity occurs and balloons are constructed."

This order was signed by General Henry.

A special office was opened for this "poste aerostatique," the first Airmail Post Office in the world, at the offices of the Divisional General, where also the above notice was posted and, additionally, under the letter box the following instructions: - "Those wishing to make use of the air post must use for their correspondence pelure paper (pelure d'oignon) writing the address on one side and these must not exceed 10 x 5 centimetres. Any letters not fulfilling these conditions, as also those containing information other than of a personal nature, will be rejected. A regulation sized letter sheet is displayed on the letter box."

All letters handed in were censored by the agents of the "Trésorerie et des Postes" at the office mentioned. No information other than the existence, state of health of the writer, or personal wishes were allowed to pass. No postage was payable and no postal or censor markings were applied before the letters were sent.

A large mail was naturally received and these "butterflies" (papillons), as they later became called, were done up in bundles of 100 or so which were then tied into larger packages containing five or six such bundles, each of which was wrapped in rubberised linen, well tied and sealed with the official seal. On each package the following notice was affixed:

"Will the finder of this packet please deliver same to the nearest post office or hand it to the Mayor of the nearest Commune, asking at the same time for a receipt, in exchange for which a sum of 100 francs will be given as a reward. Metz..... Divisional General F. Coffinieres."

The packets made up as above were handed to Robinson and his helpers and were then firmly fastened into a small basket under the net of the balloon about to leave.

The first balloon, containing over 5,000 letters, weighing only some 800 grammes, was sent up early in the afternoon of Sept. 16 from the Gas Works of Metz and was picked up the same evening in a wood between Pargny-sous-Mureau and Villouxel, 10 kilometres west of Neufchâteau in the Vosges - 100 kilometres from Metz. The mail was handed to the Mayor of Pargny and taken by him to the post office at Neufchâteau. All this first lot of mail sent from Neufchâteau was stamped with the date stamp of that office before being forwarded on (see illustration). This fact is exceptional as the majority of all such papillons de Metz were not post-marked before despatch after being picked up.

Robinson and his associates now decided to increase the carrying capacity of the balloons and to this end increased the diameter to five metres and built the envelopes of double paper treated with collodion which, after being rendered waterproof with boiled linseed oil mixed with glycerine, was dried and then re-covered with muslin affixed with glue.

The second balloon was sent up on Saturday, Sept. 17th, about 4 p.m. and carried some 25,000 letters, weighing 4½ kilos.

Meanwhile Capt. Schultz had been allowed to proceed with his idea and had constructed a balloon of cotton cloth. This was sent up, well filled with gas, on Sept. 20th, with a load of 45,000 letters (weighing about 8 kilos), but, after reaching an estimated height of 4,500 metres, it suddenly collapsed over Nargny in the outer Prussian lines and was captured by the

enemy. The cost of a cotton covered balloon was estimated at 800 francs-four times that of the paper balloons-and took much longer to make, so that after this failure Robinson's type only was used.

Balloons were sent up on Sept. 21, 22 and 23 and all arrived safely on friendly soil, as was later reported in the "Indépendant de la Moselle" of Oct. 16, 1870. The Balloon sent up on the 21st fell near Fresnes-en-Woevre (Meuse), 40 kilometres from Metz, and a few of the letters sent forward from that post office were stamped with the date stamp of Woevre. Although a number of "papillons" which were obviously carried by this balloon are known, so few bear the date stamp that it is generally supposed that the postmaster can only have stamped the top one in each bundle.

The balloon of Sept. 28th carried 17,000 papillons and, in addition, two carrier pigeons, but was captured by the Germans, who sent across a message of thanks for "two very tender pigeons."

Another balloon released on the 29th also carried two pigeons and 32,000 letters and was picked up at Lille on Oct. 3rd. In this batch of letters Mr. Robinson sent a personal one in an envelope which was duly delivered to its address and bore not only the Lille date stamp of Oct. 4th but also, being addressed to England, a postage due mark for 1.50 francs and another similar mark for 6d. from the English post office.

The well known newspaper, "The Manchester Guardian," hold in their records parts of the paper and muslin envelope of this latter balloon, which were sent to them by the French Administration at Tours, since Robinson had actually written a number of messages to various friends on the balloon itself.

According to the Metz newspaper no balloons were sent up on the 19th and 20th of Sept., due in the main to weather conditions.

A balloon released on Sept. 30th fell in the German lines.

The last official balloon was released on Oct. 3rd. It is, however, generally thought that a private balloon was clandestinely sent out on Sept. 23rd or 24th since letters from Metz, enclosed in envelopes, are known from a balloon which was picked up at Sainte-Pezenne, near Niort, on Oct. 25th.

This latter was a small balloon and the letters were redispached from Niort bearing the date stamp of that post office of Oct. 26th.

It appears that Marshal Bazaine forbade any further balloons to be sent up after Oct. 3rd. Robinson escaped after the capitulation of Metz. In his memoirs he estimates that he dispatched by balloon at least 150,000 air letters, yet how few survive today! Probably at least 50,000 of these letters reached their destination.

Mention of the non-official balloon above also makes it necessary to state that even before Robinson's first balloon was released and before he received official recognition and sole authorisation to manufacture them, several small paper balloons had been sent up by two doctors attached to the military hospital, M. Jeannel and Dr. Ward. The former was Chief Medical Officer to the Garde Imperiale, the latter the representative of the International Aid Society of London. These balloons were sent up to carry messages from the sick and wounded. They were of small size and only carried some 200 grammes of letters, but none seem to have survived. The first of these was released on Sept. 8th. How many were sent is not known but Robin-



(Continued from p.18)

We have reached another milestone - the successful conclusion of our second year - and I hope to be forgiven if I steal a few lines for a very important announcement. Whether we can continue depends entirely on YOU - It is easy to approach resident members personally but for those of you who are out of town members, this is the only way we can reach you. We need not only prompt payment of dues we also need new members. Please do not treat this as a routine appeal, this is a grave warning. We have lost and are losing an increasing number of members who are called to the Forces and our costs are continually mounting. If you know a friend who you think is interested in the field we cover, approach him, show him the "Philatelist" and ask him to send us his name and dollar. Please do not merely send us his name and a line asking us to write him and send him a sample copy because you think he "might" be interested. We no longer have the time nor enough sample copies to do this.



We have always tried to give you helpful articles and as you will notice the "Philatelist" is now including a supplement. These supplements speak for themselves and are due entirely to the generosity of our own John R. McGee, No. 20. They will come to you for many numbers and, in order to foster the exchange of numerals, we will print in our next number the list and addresses of those of you who will drop us a line saying they are interested in participating in such exchange.

So...if you wish us to continue, - you have been warned - send in your dues promptly - and get us at least one member each.

Thank you..... Vaurie

Dues: from all members #1 to 136 inclusive - residents \$2.00, non-residents \$1.00. . . . .

NEW MEMBERS Welcome to our new members: -

141-WHITEBOURGH, J.-68 W. Washington St., Chicago,  
142-DREYFUS, G.-Congers, N. Y. Ill.  
143-ROSS, J. G.-Rm. 37, 68 W. Washington St., Chicago, Ill.

son received the sole right of dispatch on Sept. 14th, so that probably only a few were sent by the two doctors.

Some of the letters sent by Robinson's balloons were delivered enclosed in official envelopes by the French Postal Service and others in plain commercial envelopes. The first were franked envelopes (official service) and the latter, usually emanating from small country offices at place of destination, had a manuscript marking "Poste aerostatique" or "Depeche aerostatique" with, sometimes, the addition of "Armee du Rhin." (See illustration). No charge was made to the recipient for delivery and some, though not all, bear the "P.P." (Port Paye) mark.

Although with the exception of the instances already mentioned none of these papillons bear the mark of the re-forwarding office near which they were found, one sees some with the arrival date stamp. Without some official marking it is impossible to identify or guarantee the genuineness of purported "Papillons de Metz" but with postal markings they are very rare as also are the official envelopes in which some of them were delivered.

The information I have given is put together from various sources such as Yvert's Catalogue and the writings of many, including Mr. M.W.E. Hughes, M. Chaintrier, etc.

## NEW CALEDONIA

1860 - There are many forgeries of Triquerat's famous stamp. We must admit that the crudeness of the original invited them ... and they came...by the dozen. It is unfortunately impossible to describe them but one should remember that the originals have no margins and the paper is thick and soft and slightly yellow. This will help to reject many forgeries that have been made by photography and others that are on thin and/or white paper. About nine-tenths of those on the market in this country are forgeries.

1876 - Triangular and circular handstamps (see F. & Col. Philatelist, Vol. I, No. 2, Burgess's article). Dangerous forgeries exist. The original triangular handstamp has a break in the lower border under the "LE" of "CALEDONIE."

1881-86 - Surcharges - For the 1886, first check if the 1fr. Dubois is not itself a forgery (see General Issues). The original surcharge being typographed, it is deeply pressed into the paper, and not so in the forgeries. The most dangerous forgery is that on the 1fr. Sage type, as the same composition was used as that on the 1fr. Dubois, itself a cheap stamp. Use the latter for comparison and better still -- since we are dealing with an extremely rare, expensive stamp -- have it expertized. All the surcharges have been forged by Fournier.

1891-92 - Framed surcharges - all forged by Fournier including varieties. The double overprint of only the numeral "10" is an outright bogus variety, the shade of the ink of the additional "10" is quite different. The fact that some of these varieties went through the mails means nothing.

1892 - Surcharge N L L E CALEDONIE - for the overprints on the Dubois type first see if the stamp itself is not a forgery (see General Issues). The whole set has been forged by Fournier on originals and on the Dubois forgeries, but the Fournier overprint has only one dash instead of two under the "L L E" and a break in the curve of the "D". The Fournier cancellations are: double circle, a) 24½ mm, division for "levees," NOUVELLE CALEDONIE 2E/26 FEVR 92 NOUMEA; b) 22½ mm, inner circle interrupted, NOUVELLE CALEDONIE 2E/3 SEPT 92 NOUMEA; c) 21½ mm, no division for "levees," N L L E CALEDONIE 19 MAI 92 NOUMEA, all cancellations in blue or black.

1892-93 - Ornamented N C E surcharges - all forged by Fournier - the 10c on 1 fr. Sage type should be expertized; for those on the Dubois type see if the stamp itself is not a forgery (see General Issues). All the inverted varieties were profusely reprinted later on by postal officials in Noumea, with the original handstamp. They should not be collected except on covers with dates of 1892 (Dec.) or early in 1893 (Feb.)

1892-1904-12 - Groupe type - the whole set has been forged by Fournier (see Gen'l. Issues).

1902 - Most of the "errors" 5 on 2c and 15 on 2c are forgeries; these are on the second shade (1901) of the 2c, violet-brown on pale yellow, the genuine errors are on the 1892 shade, lilac-brown on dark yellow.

1903 - Jubilee issue - the whole set has been forged on originals as well as the Fournier forgeries. The same applies to the postage dues. The forged overprints are quite distinct

(Continued on next page)

## KNOW YOUR FORGERIES . . .

when compared, as they are cruder with somewhat larger letters.

1915-17 - Red Cross - The varieties have been forged, especially the double overprint-expertize.

1918 - The small 5c overprint has been forged in slightly varying size and spacing and shade of ink. The original inverted overprint variety exists only in brownish red.

1894-99 - Postage Dues surcharged T in a triangle - very numerous false surcharges on originals as well as on Fournier forgeries. For forgeries of Jubilee set see above.

1932 - Air Mail - 1st liaison. - Dangerous forgeries exist - expertization absolutely necessary.

## MOROCCO

There are a great many false surcharges of the stamps and of the varieties and all should be expertized, but a few details will be helpful in calling attention to these forgeries. - Each time the basic French stamp is dear when unused, look at the cancellation, it may be a French cancellation or if the date only appears it may be anterior to the date of the overprint, or the overprint may be on top of the cancellation.

1891-1900 - Surcharged in Centimes and Pesetas on Sage type - Very many forgeries, but almost always they are not sharp, the letters being irregular and slightly blurred at the edges - they are applied as a rule on already cancelled French stamps. The forgery of the 2 pesetas is the most dangerous.

1893 - Issued at Tangier on Postage Dues - First check if the stamp itself is not a forgery (see General Issues). Then check the dates-issued and used only in Tangier the 5th of February and withdrawn the following day. Expertize these highly expensive stamps.

1902-03 - Dangerous forgeries especially of the high values and of the varieties.

1903 - Overprinted P. P. on Postage Dues -- Expertize these very expensive stamps - Very dangerous forgeries - This overprint means Port Paye and being really more a cancellation than a stamp should be collected only on cover dated Tangier October 10, the only day and place it was used! Officially they were never cancelled because the cancellation might have obscured the overprint. Fournier forged this overprint on French dues (without the carmine Morocco overprint!) The Fournier cancellation is: double circle, 25mm, inner circle interrupted TANGIER 5 FEVR 93 MAROC.

1911-17 - Forgeries of the varieties and of the Merson type (for forgeries of latter, - see General Issues).

1914-15 - Red Cross - Many highly dangerous forgeries especially of the varieties and of the Oudja overprint. Expertize.

1918-24 - "Tanger" overprint - The varieties without overprint of the 25c have been faked by removing the word Tanger.

1922 - Air post - The cheap 75c green has been dyed to make the expensive 75c blue, the result is more like the shade of the 50c--compare.

1896-1912 - Postage Dues. - Be careful of the expensive stamps and varieties, especially of the varieties of 1912 consisting of two dots under the numeral instead of three - practically all these offered are fakes made by removing one of the dots.

## MOHELI

1906-12 - Groupe type - The whole set was forged by Fournier (see General Issues) and the forged cancellation is: double circle, 22 mm, FOMBONI 4 NOV 09 MOHELI.

## MIDDLE CONGO

1916 - Red Cross - Very dangerous forgeries of the varieties of the double and inverted surcharges. Expertize.

## MAYOTTE

1892-1912 - Groupe type - The whole set was forged by Fournier (see General Issues) and the forged cancellation is: double circle, 21½ mm, inner circle interrupted, DZAOUZDI 2 AOUT 98 MAYOTTE.

## MAURITANIA

1906 - Balay type - see characteristics of forgeries in General Issues.

1915 - Red Cross - Very dangerous forgeries of the variety double surcharge. Expertize.

1906 - Postage Dues - Stamps of 1906 overprinted T in a triangle. (Doubts exist as to the proper status of these stamps.) Very dangerous forgeries, expertize. The overprints with the T not enclosed in a triangle are bogus.

## MARTINIQUE

1886-92 - Various surcharges - As there are many types and numerous varieties, specialization is necessary. All have been forged on originals as well as the forgeries of the Dubois type (see General Issues). Expertize the expensive varieties on the originals. Fournier made a complete set and used the forged cancellation: double circle, 24½ mm, inner circle interrupted ST PIERRE 1<sup>e</sup>/11 JUIN 92 MARTINIQUE.

1892-1906-12 - Groupe type - The whole set has been forged by Fournier (see General Issues) and the forged cancellation is: same type as above, 23½ mm, FORT DE FRANCE 6 MAI 94 MARTINIQUE.

1903-04 - Parcel Post and Provisionals - All have been forged and the forgery of the parcel post is especially dangerous. First check if the postage due and the Groupe type basic stamps are not themselves forgeries, then have the others expertized.

1915 - Red Cross (15 Mai) - Even though this is a cheap stamp, the overprint has been forged, usually on used stamps. If the date of the cancellation is visible check if it is not anterior to 1915.

All following issues - There exist forgeries of all the rare and expensive varieties -- especially the 1924 provisionals - Expertization is necessary.

1887 - Postage Dues - This set catalogued by Scott is entirely unofficial and is not recognized by Yvert. They may be collected only as curiosities, not as stamps.

(To be continued)

- for a new lease on life -

**SEND**

- dues promptly  
- a new member  
- material for publication