

Smokes for the Troops: British and Canadian Tobacco Funds in WWI

Purpose: This one-frame social philately exhibit illustrates the sending of cigarettes and tobacco (“smokes”) by British and Canadian tobacco funds to men fighting overseas in World War I, through study of the reply postcards sent back from the front.

Scope: The story focuses on smokes provided to soldiers of the British and Canadian Expeditionary Forces while On Active Service at the various fronts during and shortly after the war. It also touches on smokes provided to soldiers of the Belgian army, sailors in the Royal navies, and prisoners of war. Soldiers at camp in Britain are outside the scope of the exhibit.

Importance: Tobacco funds played an important role in providing comfort for the troops during WWI. The smokes sent overseas represented a piece of home and were a reminder to the men that they were not forgotten by the people they were fighting for.

Sending smokes to the troops was considered patriotic and a way for people at home to contribute to the war effort.

Each parcel of smokes included a reply postcard addressed to the donor; these messages of thanks sent back from the front provided a tangible connection to the men fighting overseas and were key to encouraging donations.

This exhibit tells a complete story of the smokes provided to the troops by WWI British and Canadian tobacco funds. It would be very difficult if not impossible to duplicate due to the scarcity of the material. It is the only known exhibit of this material.

Treatment:

The reply cards are not presented chronologically or by type: this exhibit is not meant to be a detailed study of card types and printings. Rather, cards have been selected to advance the story and illustrate the historical text describing the various funds and their reach.

Examples of the variability in postal treatment of reply cards are included and described.



For clarity and ease of viewing, the historical text is distinguished from philatelic text using different font styles and colours, as outlined on the Title Page. British military postal information is presented in a 2×2 grid beside each reply card. For easy reference, a list of military abbreviations and a table of dates of the security phases are provided on the Title Page.

Original research and personal study: Despite the wide reach of the British and Canadian tobacco funds that were established in WWI, there is very little official documentation regarding the operation of these funds, how fund numbers were allocated, or the printing of the reply cards.

The reach and impact of the WWI tobacco funds have been illuminated by the exhibitor’s in-depth analysis of the cartoons, printed text, written messages and military postal aspects of reply cards, including the sending field post offices, use during security phases where applicable, censors, soldiers and their units, and destinations.

The over-arching story has been pieced together through careful study of the collected material combined with research in WWI personnel records and nominal rolls, war diaries, military postal history databases and newspaper archives.

Rarity and condition: WWI reply postcards sent back to donors are scarce. Census information is indicated where available and is based on the exhibitor’s 10+ year collection, online auction sites and a WWI/WWII tobacco fund database compiled over 50+ years by a British collector.

Examples of reply cards from all seven known Canadian newspaper tobacco funds are included; aspects of these cards provide interesting insights into the provision of smokes to Canadian troops. The exhibit does not include cards from all the numerous British tobacco funds: the purpose of the exhibit is not to present a complete inventory of reply card types, but rather to use representative examples to illustrate the story.

The exhibit includes the following items that are the **only recorded examples** (boxed in **red**):

- reply cards from the *Calgary Herald* (p4) and *Toronto Telegram* (p5) newspaper funds

- Over-Seas Club reply card, “Makers of the Empire” series without preprinted address, with portrait of General Wolfe (p7)
- a complete Belgian Soldiers’ Tobacco Fund collection booklet (p8)
- a reply card mailed to the Falkland Islands (p9)
- an extraordinary reply card mailed to the Federated Malay States from a British Field Post Office in North Russia during the Allied intervention, with a message *written by a Serbian soldier* (p12, see reference 2)

In addition, the exhibit includes the following notable items:

- one of two recorded reply cards (both in the exhibitor’s collection) with a **1¢ stamp** added on entry to Canada (short rate period ending 14 April 1915 after implementation of this practice on 8 October 1914) (p2)
- a card sent from a Canadian Casualty Clearing Station (p7, discovered by integrating research of the written message, FPO and censor mark; see reference 3)
- 3 cards from sailors (p10), which are much scarcer than cards from soldiers

All items are in the best possible condition considering their overall scarcity, age (106+ years) and the wartime circumstances under which reply cards were written and carried.

Presentation: The exhibit is presented on 12 square pages (11×11 in.), 3 to a row. The subheading at the top right of each page summarizes the story line presented on that page.

References (download: https://bit.ly/Smokes_refs)

1. Jean Wang, “Tobacco Funds in World War I – A Canadian Perspective”, *The Canadian Philatelist* May/June 2025;76(3):116-123.
2. Jean Wang, “WWI Tobacco Cards – An Extraordinary Use from North Russia”, *Military Postal History Society Journal* April 2025;63(2):19-20.
3. Jean Wang, “Smokes for the Wounded”, *Philatelic Specialists Society Newsletter*, February 2025, p13-14.
4. Jean Wang, “Over-Seas Club Tobacco Fund in WWI”, *Philatelic Specialists Society Newsletter*, August 2024, p20-21.

Smokes for the Troops: British and Canadian Tobacco Funds in World War I

Purpose: This social philately exhibit illustrates the sending of cigarettes and tobacco ("smokes") by British and Canadian charitable funds to men fighting overseas in World War I.

In World War I, decades before the health dangers of smoking were recognized, newspapers and other organizations set up funds to send smokes to men fighting overseas.

Providing smokes for the troops was viewed as patriotic, a means for people at home to contribute to the war effort.

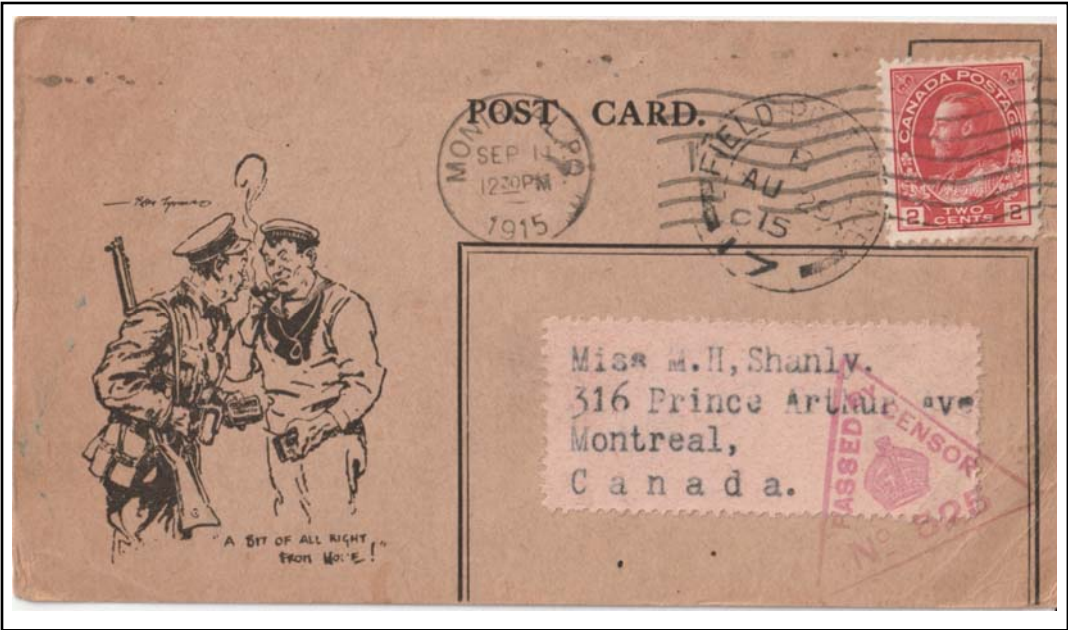
The postcards returned from the front were a tangible connection to the men fighting overseas; these messages of thanks stimulated further donations.

Cigarettes and tobacco bought by donations were sent to the front with the aid of military authorities and allowed to enter duty-free.

For soldiers, smoking relieved stress and boredom and boosted morale; smoking was considered essential to their well-being and effectiveness.



A donation of 1/- (25¢) typically provided 50 cigarettes and ¼ lb tobacco (a 3/- value), some matches and a reply postcard addressed to the donor.



The social history: The reach and impact of the tobacco funds are illuminated by analysis of the cartoons, printed text, written messages and military postal aspects of reply cards, including the sending field post offices, censors, soldiers' units and destinations (donor addresses).

The postal history: The postal treatment of soldiers' mail is described. Highlights include reply cards mailed to uncommon destinations and several items that are the only recorded example.

Post Office	Soldier
FPO 17, 17.Bde, 6.Div, WF-Belgium (Ypres)	Sgt C Birch, A Coy, 3.Rifle Bde
CM3 525, 3.Rifle Bde, 17.Bde, 6.Div	Montreal, Canada
Censor	Donor

Stamp added by Canadian exchange office in Montreal, 1¢ postcard rate plus 1¢ War Tax (rate effective 15 April 1915, see bottom of p2).

"A bit of all right from home!" On the back: "It gives the boys a good heart to know, that not only the people at home in England think of us, but our friends in our Empire beyond the seas."

Historical text
Philatelic text
"Transcribed text"

Auxiliary text
Copies sized for legibility

Items that are the **only recorded example** are boxed in red

Plan of the exhibit

1. British newspaper tobacco funds
2. Canadian newspaper tobacco funds
3. Over-Seas Club tobacco funds
4. No one was forgotten
5. Epilogue: After the war

Census numbers are based on multiple sources including online auction sites and a 50+ year collector database.

Military abbreviations: **Amm**, Ammunition; **APO**, Army Post Office; **Batt**, Battery; **Bn**, Battalion; **Bde**, Brigade; **BEF**, British Expeditionary Force; **Capt**, Captain; **CASC**, Canadian Army Service Corps; **Cav**, Cavalry; **CCS**, Casualty Clearing Station; **Cdn**, Canadian; **CFA**, Canadian Field Artillery; **CM(n)**, Censor mark type n; **CMR**, Canadian Mounted Rifles; **Coy**, Company; **Div**, Division; **FPO**, Field Post Office; **HQ**, Headquarters; **KOYLI**, King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry; **Lt**, Lieutenant; **Maj**, Major; **OAS**, On Active Service; **PL**, Platoon; **POW**, Prisoner of war; **Pte**, Private; **QMS**, Quarter Master Sergeant; **RE**, Royal Engineers; **Regt**, Regiment; **RFA**, Royal Field Artillery; **RGA**, Royal Garrison Artillery; **RWF**, Royal Welsh Fusiliers; **Sgt**, Sergeant; **SP**, Security Phase; **Spr**, Sapper; **WF**, Western Front.

As a counter-intelligence measure, FPOs exchanged date stamps at regular intervals (security phases).

SP I	18.6.16 – 30.9.16	SP IV	1.7.17 – 31.1.18
SP II	1.10.16 – 31.1.17	SP V	1.2.18 – 31.7.18
SP III	1.2.17 – 30.6.17	SP VI	1.8.18 – 1.2.19