

Returning mail addressed to killed or missing soldiers in the German *Feldpost* system, 1939 – 1945

Synopsis of exhibit

Purpose and scope

This exhibit is a military postal/social historical study on how the German postal system, especially *Feldpost*, dealt with undeliverable mail addressed to soldiers who were killed, deceased, or missing. Presented in a more technical and structured manner, it has the following objectives:

- Document and present the usage (time, unit, and location) and varieties of the relevant markings;
- Where possible, connect the usage to the relevant official postal bulletin(s) and any circumstances “behind the scenes” to present the evolvement in the usages and/or practices; and
- Where possible, present the researched fate of the killed/missing soldier, and how that connects back to the applied marking and/or specific wording.

Time period is from 1939 to 1945, with relevant documentation or items from earlier periods and post-WWII included, wherever possible, to present a relatively more complete research process and context.

This exhibit has previously been presented at the following shows:

- GASS 2025, same title, awarded a Gold (85/100) and special award for research.
- PIPEX 2024, with a slightly different title, awarded a Large Vermeil (83/100).

The audience, especially the Jury, is noted of the following:

- For a better understanding into this exhibit, it is strongly recommended to have a good knowledge on the geography and battles of WWII, especially those on the Eastern Front, as well as the Exhibitor’s articles which include more details on the research (bolded for emphasis in the References).
- **The Exhibitor acknowledges that this exhibit, is by appearance, going in the direction away from pure “philatelic” matters. However, he believes it is a necessary and appropriate measure. German *Feldpost* in WWII includes a significant historical component (both in proportions and importance), which requires extensive academic research, and consequently, must be presented in a more academic/technical fashion. The “philatelic” aspect in its strictest sense, in the Exhibitor’s perspective, has become out-of-fashion for this area, especially if supporting historical evidence is absent.**
- **Disclaimer:** This exhibit is solely intended for research and education on historical events occurred during the era of National Socialism in Germany (1933-1945), compliant to *StGB [German Criminal Code] §86, §86a*. The Exhibitor does not convey political or propagandistic messages through this exhibit, nor condone the atrocities committed.

Historical Background

During WWII, the predominant method of communication between the frontline soldiers and their loved ones back home was through letters. It was an important link for morale at home and at the front. For Germany, they were processed in part by *Feldpost* – the field post system. Frontline units were assigned with a unique five-digit number (*Feldpostnummer* – FPN) for secrecy, which could change over the course of the war. Letters sent from the homeland to the frontlines (“*heimat – front*”) were first processed by the *Reichspost* (civilian postal system), then transferred to *Feldpost* and eventually routed to the *Feldpostamt* (FpA – field post office) in charge of mailings on division/corps/army level. The final processing was done by the designated mail handler within a company-sized unit, usually a non-commissioned officer who was trained and therefore familiar with the procedures.

As a military institution, the *Feldpost* was under Wehrmacht organization, but its operations were dependent on the *Reichspost* as the two inevitably worked closely together. The latter issued official bulletins, *Feldpostamtsblatt*, **which serve as the basis and backbone for all *Feldpost* operations**. They include directives on handling undeliverable mail,

marking “*gefallen*” for killed in action (KIA), “*vermisst*” for missing in action (MIA), and “*verstorben*” for other deceased. This practice originates from *Feldpost* regulations dating back to 1907, setting the precedent for WWI and early WWII.

Interestingly, even the official bulletins are not as consistent as one may expect, because their stipulated practices evolved throughout the war. The first general directive was issued on 31 October 1939, almost 2 months after the war started. The marking “*Gefallen für Grossdeutschland*” [*Fallen for Great Germany*] started to be used, likely based on WWI practice. On 3 March 1941, a directive stipulated the use of “*Nicht Zustellbar*” [*Not deliverable*] for both killed and missing cases. Only on 28 July 1942, more than a year following Operation Barbarossa, did a directive stipulate in detail on the appropriate marking under different scenarios, including the formalization on using “*Gefallen für Grossdeutschland*”. In actual practice, no single format existed as the marking stamps (if not in written or other forms) were not centrally procured, so the units improvised, resulting in many varieties and even some forbidden by the directive in effect.

When the war in Europe ended in 1945 with Germany’s capitulation, the Germans suffered more than 5,000,000 casualties, of which more 2,200,000 dead, and more than 2,800,000 missing or taken prisoner. The flux of casualties in different stages of the war (statistics shown in Appendix A) is also reflected through the occurrence of certain markings, based on empirical observations.

Organization and treatment

The exhibit consists of four chapters in chronological order, based on the timeline of relevant official bulletins issued before and during WWII (i.e. regulatory periods):

- I. The forerunners: from 1907, to WWI, and the improvised uses up to the first directive on 31 October 1939;
- II. Uses after the first directive (Nr. 31/1939) in October 1939;
- III. Uses after the second directive (Nr. 17/1941) in March 1941;
- IV. Uses since the final detailed directive (Nr. 76/1942) in July 1942.

Organization within each section is based on campaigns and battles. For chapter IV, it consists of four sections:

- 1) Battles of Summer 1942 to Summer 1943. The Wehrmacht was still on the offensive.
- 2) The period of retreats and encirclements (especially on the Eastern Front) from Fall 1943 to Summer 1944.
- 3) Full collapse of the frontlines following the Normandy landings and Operation Bagration, summer 1944 to early 1945. This period also coincided with the emergence of major disruptions to *Feldpost* traffic.
- 4) The last days of the war, from March 1945, marked by severe limitations to mail volume and huge territory losses.

The chapters’ organization is constructed upon the Exhibitor’s prior research into the official bulletins (article “*The use of ‘gefallen’ and ‘vermisst’ markings per the Feldpostamtsblätter*” mentioned in the References), which governed the majority of the markings and consequently set certain characteristics of a particular period, with influences from developments in the battlefield. **There has yet to be research evidence that could prove otherwise.**

The four sections in Chapter IV are more on “behind the scenes” changes as no further directive were issued to explicitly stipulate on what markings to apply over cases specific to “*gefallen*” or “*vermisst*”.

Research, Challenges, and Significance

The general research methodology is summarized below, with variations applied to some particular items:

1. Decode the addressee’s FPN with *Die Deutsche Feldpostübersicht*, the *Feldpost* numbers directory.
2. Identify the unit and its location of deployment at the time.
3. Identify the marking, varieties, and/or other postal history elements, then analyze the possible reasons “behind the scenes”. The rarity of a usage or marking will be assessed through its catalogue value if available.
4. Confirm the fate of the killed/missing soldier from **one or more** of the main primary sources below:
 - a. German War Graves Commission (*Volksbund*). War graves database. Denoted [*Volksbund*].
 - b. German Red Cross (*DRK*). List of the Faces of the Missing (*Vermisstenbildliste*). Denoted [*DRK-VBL*].
 - c. *Bundesarchiv*. Index cards of fallen German soldiers, B 563-2. Denoted with index card number(s), for example [*BArch | G-A 079/0646*].

5. Location(s) of unit deployment, depth, last known, burial, or the like, especially if not well-known, and able to be pinpointed or approximated, are embedded as QR codes. Once scanned, they will lead the audience to Google Maps to get a rough geographic sense. Test sample on the right.
6. Connect the fate of the killed/missing soldier with the applied marking, identify any discrepancy, and deduce the most likely reason behind it.



To the Exhibitor's best knowledge, this specific area of the *Feldpost* postal history has never been systematically studied, albeit briefly mentioned in references published decades ago (Fuchs, 1972; Wimmer, 1969). The Exhibitor has published several articles on this topic as a start. **It is sufficient to state, that at this stage, research on the framework and major points on this topic is complete.** Further research, including a detailed census, is still ongoing in order to gain insight on more of the exquisite details.

This lack of prior research also presents an obstacle to quantifying the rarity of usages. Current references, including the *Michel Feldpost Catalogue*, list mostly just markings but not their specific usages, nor combinations with other elements. Historical research into the soldiers' fate is not usually conducted. The exhibitor has confirmed this through conversations with members of *ArGe Deutsche Feldpost 1939-1945 e.V.* in Germany.

The audience should be aware of the uncertainties present in historical studies like this one. Uncertainty is an inherent and essential aspect of historical research, arising from incomplete, inconsistent, or ambiguous historical sources, missing data, and the limitations of human perspective. There are still numerous WWII soldiers whose fates remain unknown or misidentified to this day, because of the aforementioned reasons. **The Exhibitor has elected to use "weasel wording" on most of the deductions or interpretations, unless explicit evidence is available to support them.**

For other *Feldpost* elements documented in the reference material, such as franking, type of mail, special user groups (international mail and/or foreign volunteers), etc., they are assumed to be independent from casualty-related usages. One exception is encirclements, which likely contribute to the change in casualty numbers. Rarity of these elements are based on catalogue values listed in the *Michel Feldpost 1937-1945 Catalogue 5th Edition*.

The vast timeline and expanse of the *Wehrmacht*'s activities in WWII resulted in a wide variety of marking and usages in *Feldpost*, even more so for handling killed or missing cases, presenting quite an intriguing development. The Exhibitor has invested an extensive effort into the research and documentation. Studying the handling of those returned mail, as well as the fate of those casualties, provides a perspective on the war's hefty human cost.

The exhibited items are connected to the killed or missing soldiers that make up the 5,000,000 statistical figure (including POWs taken before the end of hostilities). These were someone's father, son, husband, brother, fiancée, friend, etc. Regardless of their original intent, they have become *de facto* victims of this war. The Exhibitor is leaving interpretations to the audience, but one can imagine this exhibit to be a war cemetery or memorial, intended to serve as an admonishment towards peace.

References (exhaustive, but not guaranteed complete)

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Appendix A. Plotted distribution of German casualties from September 1939 to November 1944.

Data per *Statistisches Jahrbuch für die Bundesrepublik Deutschland 1960* [*West German Statistical Yearbook 1960*]. Key events noted in red.

