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Collecting Military

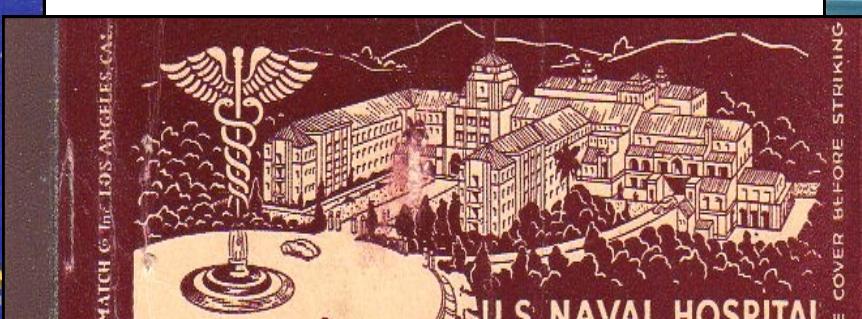
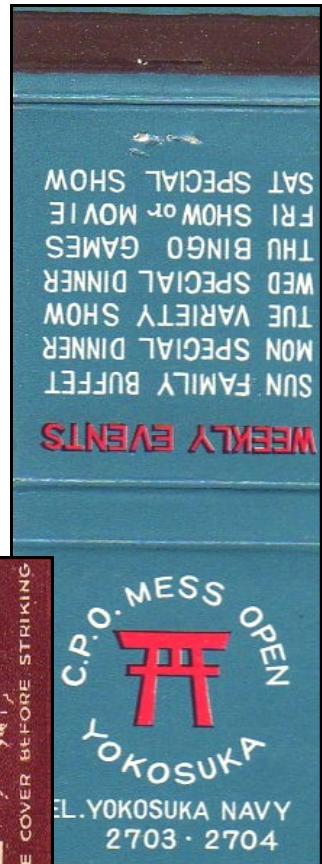
By
Mike Prero

This is a BIG category! "Military," or "Service," includes covers from any branch of the active U.S. military: Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, national Guard. It does not include veterans organizations, Navy Ships, or World War II Patriotics, all of which are collected as separate categories.



This is a very popular and truly fascinating category. Most male collectors in the hobby are veterans, themselves, of course, and can personally identify with many of the covers here. Women that lived through the World War II era will also find familiar names and places with these covers, as they remember where loved ones were stationed, and perhaps where they worked or served, as well.

For lovers of history, there's a lot here of special interest. With the advent of war in Europe in 1939, American military bases began a flurry of activity and quickly experienced phenomenal growth. Although "Military" is by no means limited to the World War II



era, from these bases came the covers that so many of us especially enjoy within this category. And, they tell us so much more than simply the name of the installations (many of which have long since disappeared). They tell us the patriotic slogans in use at the time, and thus the mood of the country; they give us insights into the companies, divisions, etc. that existed then; their art demonstrates the design of military equipment in use; and the military hospital covers reminds of the human cost of the war.

The art on many of these covers is an attraction in itself. Many bear specific branch or unit logos; others come with cartoon characterizations of the “enemy;” and still others boast patriotic art designed to sustain the war effort at home.

You can find Military covers in practically all known shapes and sizes, plain and fancy, including boxes, of course. Twenty-strokes are the most common in the category, but forty-strokes were particular popular during the war, since they also served as post cards. The insides of this latter type present several variations in print color and shape of the box outline for the postage stamp. Today, although you can still find at least a few Military covers being issued from military bases, including from the support facilities, such as credit unions, etc., they are far less common than they once were.

Although there are Pre-War, War, and Post-War covers, the 1940s War era was undoubtedly the Golden Age of this category. Throughout, sets, series, and conjunctives abound, and it's sometimes agonizing to try and decide where you're going to put that Military/Girlie, Military/Matchorama, or Military/Jewelite cover. There are also a number of tantalizing sub-categories within this field; military hospitals, P.O.W. camps, Army air fields, and the like. Some collectors seek these specifically out of special interest. And, there are foreign locations, as well: Greenland, Labrador, Japan, Cuba, Korea, the Philippines, and many more. These overseas U.S.. installation sites enhance this category even further.

How you go about organizing a Military collection is up to you, but with this many covers you need something very structured and logical. A number of options come to mind: 1) arranged by military branch (i.e., Army, Navy, etc.), 2) arranged by location (i.e., country, state, city), 3) arranged by unit type (i.e., infantry, air, armor, hospital, etc.), 4) you could even arrange them according to age.

As an example of a real collection, I actually use all of the above methods at the same time. I have all of my Military covers housed first by location (U.S, and then foreign locations, alphabetically by country). Then, for the stateside covers, they are housed by state, then military branch, then city, and then unit type. It's really more simple than it sounds! Thus, I can turn to my U.S. covers, open an album to California, go to Sacramento, and see appropriate installations (such as Mather Air Force Base) and so on. And, all those Mather Air Force Base covers, for example, are further arranged by age, with the oldest first, etc. All general Military covers (not from specific locations) are housed at the front of my collection and then arranged in the same manner. Whatever type of organization you use, it has to be fairly precise; you don't want to page through thousands, or even hundreds, of covers when you're checking for dupes or trying to find something specific.

When I first wrote this article in 1996, there was no listing for the general category of Military covers. However, there were, and still exist, a number of specialty lists and indices which have been done over the years. Horace Rush put out a Military Royal Flash listing in the 1940s, and Meryl Morgan either updated it in 1950 or came out with another altogether. Mike Hickey did a Military 40-strike listing in 1987. I ran an index of Air Force bases in the Sierra-Diablo Bulletin, #38-39, August-September, 1987, and in the same year compiled an index of U.S. military bases. The Sierra-Diablo Bulletin, #47-48, May-June, 1988, ran an index of P.O.W. camps, although it is not all-inclusive. Dave Landy had also put together a very

comprehensive index of "United States Military Installations" (1966). Since then, however, I've created a Military listing, consisting of separate Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine, and Miscellaneous lists. Currently listed are 2,986 Army, 1,876 Navy, 1,289 Air Force, 444 Marine, and 755 Miscellaneous covers (the latter includes Coast Guard, National Guard, Maritime Service, etc. issues).

As with most categories, there's telling just how many Military covers were issued or how many actually exist. In 1996, John Nichols had 6,190, and I currently have 7,547 in my collection; and I would assume both of these figures would be towards the high end, but I'm sure there are larger collections. How much larger? I don't know; they've never been reported, but I'd be surprised if the final figure was over 10,000. Could be, though! You never know these covers exist before they surface.

In any event, if you have any sense of history at all, this is a category that will register with you—the scope, the mood, and the power of the War era, especially. You'll see superb artwork on some of the World War II covers that is really stirring; there are P.O.W. camp covers that open up another aspect of the war; there are all those wonderful Disney logo covers; some beautiful sets and long series (some of the recruiting covers, for example); old covers, new covers, plain covers, fancy covers. There are also some great photos on some of the more recent issues. Just think back. If you weren't in the Military yourself, you certainly knew of relatives and friends who were. Wherever you grew up, there was also probably a military base of some kind or another nearby. As a History teacher, and a History buff, it's the story that each one of those covers represents that's the real attraction to me. But, Military is a wonderful category that has something to offer every collector. They're not that difficult to collect either, but those covers won't be as easy to obtain as they were for collectors in prior years, and they're bound to become even harder and more expensive. So, if you have any inclination at all in this direction...better get started now!

