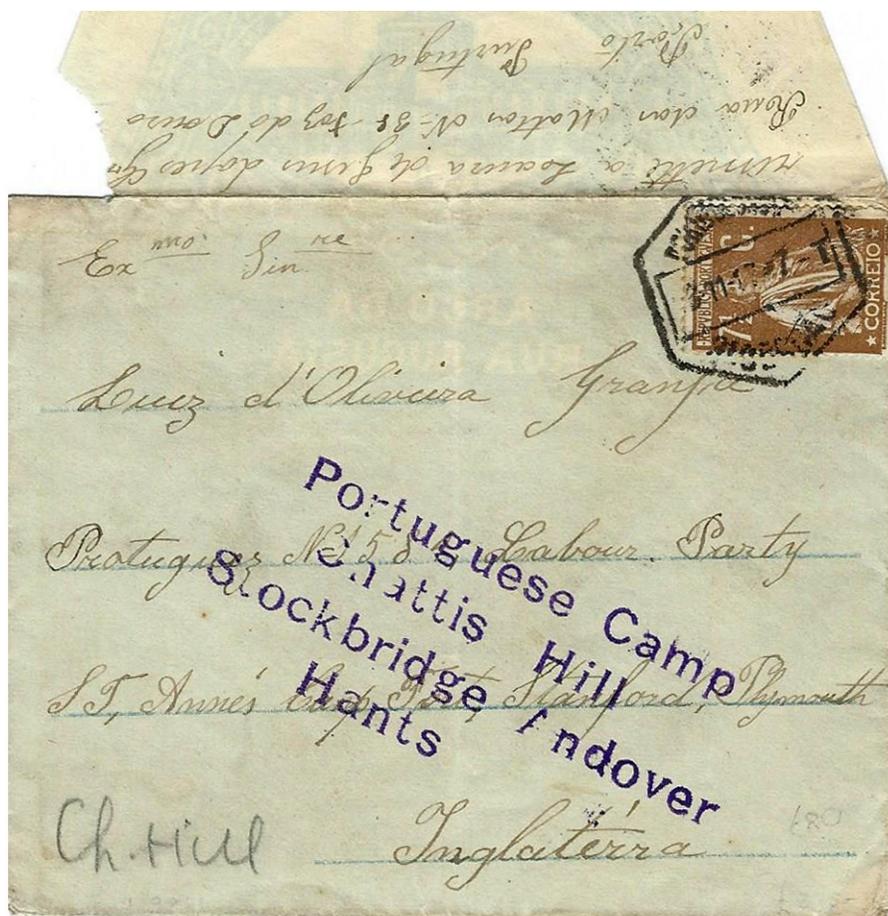


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World War I: Portuguese *Madeireiros* in England (see page 2)

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## WORLD WAR I: Portuguese *Madeireiros* in England

by John K. Cross

Roy Teixeira sent me a scan of the cover illustrated on the front of this *P-I* (whose flap was cut down so it would fit) and asked me if I had any information relating to it.

I consulted a number of printed sources but was only able to document the fact that I had started begun my search with an incorrect assumption. Focusing on the portion of the address that read “Labour Party”, I at first thought that the cover might refer to a political party that was perhaps in exile in England. But no such Portuguese political party existed at this time.

The cover is correctly franked by a 7½c for single rate foreign letter and sent from Porto on 8? November 1917. Next thought: could a military context have relevance vis-a-vis the marking; perhaps some Portuguese troops were sent to a training camp in England. I found I was partially correct when I found the following rather terse note on Wikipedia, the first entry under “1917” on the website “Portugal During World War I”:

"A few Portuguese troops are sent to New Forest, England, to help with a timber shortage in collaboration with the Canadian Forestry Corps [CFC]. Today the area is known as the Portuguese Fireplace."<sup>1</sup>

And so opened for me a chapter of WW I of which I was totally and profoundly ignorant.

The CFC was created when it was discovered that huge quantities of wood were needed for use on the Western Front. Although wood was at first imported from Canada, available shipping could not fulfill demand. Duckboards<sup>2</sup>, shoring timbers, crates, railroad ties—anything that needed wood had to be provided.<sup>3</sup>

In common with the Canadian contingent, Portuguese troops originally slated for the front lines became military lumberjacks [*Madeireiros*] instead, at least for awhile.

### **Focus on the Portuguese Fireplace and Lyndhurst**

The Portuguese Fireplace is a war memorial in the New Forest National Park near the Hampshire village of Lyndhurst. The significance of the memorial is explained on a plaque next to

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<sup>1</sup> So, “labour party” as in work detail. It seems that the Portuguese army unit was blended into the Canadian Forestry [or Timber] Corps rather than forming its own separate command.

<sup>2</sup> A duckboard is a platform made of wooden slats built over muddy ground to form a dry passageway. Duckboards were especially useful at the bottom of the trenches to hopefully ameliorate the wet and muddy conditions.

<sup>3</sup> "Felling of broadleaved trees [esp. oaks], and their replacement by [faster growing] conifers began during the First World War to meet the wartime demand for wood." ("New Forest" from Wikipedia) All Wikipedia references (including those to “Portuguese Fireplace”) were retrieved the first week of April, 2017.

the fireplace which reads:

"This is the site of a hutted camp occupied by a Portuguese army unit during the first World War. This unit assisted the depleted local labour force in producing timber for the war effort. The Forestry Commission have [*sic*] retained the fireplace from the cookhouse as a memorial to the men who lived and worked here and acknowledge the financial assistance of the Portuguese government in its renovation."

"The fireplace is what remains of the cookhouse of the camp of those people who lived, worked and helped out in the area."



Although a number of lumbering camps with their sawmills were established by the CFC in England, Scotland and France, that near Lyndhurst was the first. "In 1917–1918, the Canadian Forestry Corps received help from Portuguese laborers. A typical encampment was 4 to 5 acres (20,000 m<sup>2</sup>) in size. The camp was surrounded by four fences of various sizes and also included a mess room, canteen, sleeping quarters, wash and bath houses, tailors' and boot shops, laundry, drying room, cookhouse, hospital and non-commissioned officer's quarters; electricity was included. Guards were positioned at wooden and barbed wire gates as well as strategic points around the camp. There were 25 huts on site for workshops and various other uses. [POWs were also used as laborers, hence the fences and guards.]

"At the height of the camp's usage there were around 100 Portuguese and 200 Canadian and associated workers on site. Light railways were built by the Canadians with a single locomotive, and this helped to speed up the timber production. The Canadians were better equipped for the environment than were the Portuguese, who at one point went on strike because they were not even given oilskins." ("Portuguese Fireplace")

Special arrangements had to be made so that Canadians and Portuguese received not only abundant food, but also food that suited their dietary requirements. The Portuguese required a diet which consisted largely of fish, bread, potatoes, beans, rice and olive oil as well as green vegetables and onions. ("Woe betide the Quartermaster who issued beans the slightest bit musty, or oil that was stale, for these men were connoisseurs, and the whole camp would be around him with dishes in

hand, every man explaining his grievance in his own way. “ B&D p.30)<sup>4</sup>

### **The Wider Picture**

The Canadians who first arrived in England in May, 1916, were drafted from Base Camps in the South of England to operate in various selected woods in different parts of the country. The same course was followed with successive arrivals, the number of operations increasing steadily. Each company ran either a single operation or several operations near one another. In all, the Canadians have tackled over 70 different operations in Britain.

### **Attached Labor**

The Canadian Forestry Corps were assisted in many instances by bodies of unskilled or semi-skilled labor in order that the utmost use might be made of the skilled services of the Canadians. In some cases Portuguese, in others Finns (also referred to as surplus seamen), and in others prisoners of war, were tried, and perhaps the best results on the whole were obtained from the last named, because of the fact that the Canadians were a Military Force. (B&D, pp.29-30)

The provision of attached labor became essential when, on account of the need of men for the combatant service, some 500 of the less skilled Canadians were transferred from the Corps.

Eventually it was arranged in September, 1917, that the Canadians should have first call on all the labor that could be made available, up to 2,000 Portuguese and 2,000 Finns, and as many prisoners of war as could be provided.

The arrangement was that the Timber Supply Department fed, clothed and administered the attached labor through a Quartermaster and two interpreters for every 100 men. The Canadians were responsible for providing huts and for directing the work of the men. Eventually it was decided that Portuguese were better used for “other work” than timber; they were replaced by the better suited Finns and prisoners of war.<sup>5</sup>

Portuguese laborers were employed at a number of the Camps, including Virginia Water,

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<sup>4</sup> B&D: full reference: Bird, Charles Wesley; J.B. Davies (1919). *The Canadian Forestry Corps; its inception, development and achievements*. Prepared by request of Sir Albert H. Stanley. London H.M. Stationery Office. Online: <http://www.archive.org/details/canadianforestryOObirduoft>

<sup>5</sup> “Other work” was of various kinds including the cleaning up of sites, construction of roads and loading of timber. In addition to working in the forests, the CFC on the 16th September, 1916, was asked by the Home Defence Wing of the Royal Flying Corps for their assistance in clearing land in various parts of Great Britain for the purpose of preparing landing grounds. This branch of the work undertaken by the Forestry Corps grew with great rapidity, and eventually the Corps undertook work on the construction of aerodromes throughout the length and breadth of Great Britain. The work consisted of clearing sites, ditching, draining, trimming and felling trees, hauling gravel, leveling, making conduits and drains, grading, ploughing, scraping, filling depressions, uprooting hedges, re-sodding, cutting pickets, stripping turf, etc.

At least 36 camps not only grew vegetables but also had a “piggeries”. Chickens and especially rabbits were also raised. (B&D)

Mortimer, Lyndhurst (above), Mamhead and Ampthill.<sup>6</sup> As soon as accommodation had been arranged, either in premises taken over or in huts, Quartermasters and stores were sent, followed by advance parties of 40 Portuguese, the strength being brought up to 150 men for each CFC, when the Camp was ready. Similar arrangements were made in connection with the Finns; these men were used more especially in Scotland, where the climate was too severe for Portuguese.

### Dissecting the cover

The cover was mailed in November, approximately two months after the Portuguese were made/designated “Attached Labor” (September, 1917). It was addressed to:

Portugues No. 158(th?) Labour Party  
St. Anne’s Camp, Fort Stanford [*sic*, Stamford], Plymouth  
England

Observations: B&D did not list any CFC Company numbers as high as 158. Therefore, it is plausible that the Portuguese had their own set of unit numbers. Plymouth is in Devon, CFC District 54; Hampshire was also in District 54. (“Hants” in the handstamp is an older abbreviation for Hampshire. )

So apparently the unit of the letter’s recipient was transferred within the same district before the letter’s arrival. It was therefore forwarded . . . but from where and by whom? Was the handstamp applied in Plymouth (or its environs, i.e., perhaps the CFC camp remained there; each Company had its own post office)? Could the letter have been intercepted at District 54 Headquarters (established at Southampton, Hampshire on 22nd, August, 1917) and redirected from there?

The three localities of Chattis Hill, Stockbridge (2 mi. E Chattis Hill) and Andover in the handstamp are again all in Hampshire (CFC District 54) but are rather clustered and so might have been operated by the same CFC Company (see “The Wider Picture” above; and this unity may be why all three localities appear on the same handstamp). This cluster of localities is actually some

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<sup>6</sup> CFC District 53 included Virginia Waters in Surrey county (CFC Company 101), Mortimer in Berkshire (no Company number given), and Ampthill in Bedfordshire (CFC Company 126). Mamhead in Devon ( no Company number given) was in District 54.

In addition to this information in B&C., they spoke specifically about the Portuguese at Virginia Waters (p. 20):

“The strength of the Company, No. 101, at Virginia Water was in the early stages about 300, but was gradually reduced until it was below 200 ‘other ranks.’ In addition, Portuguese were attached for semi-skilled work, the number at one time reaching 150. About two-thirds of them were accommodated at Kingsmead House, Winkfield, and the remainder at Virginia Water Camp. Some were engaged in the woods making pit props, others loading lorries, working at the mill, and a few at miscellaneous jobs such as cutting fuel wood in Camp, working in stables, shoe making, cooking and orderly work. “

