

Synopsis for U.S. Army Post Offices in Greenland 1941-1945

Additional Information to Aid in Understanding the Exhibit

Reasons for Exhibit. Greenland APOs produced scarce mail from isolated bases with unusual postmarks and postal history features. For example, the Forte-Helbock APO handbook notes in its introduction that APO 679 in Greenland is one of the rarest of all World War II APO's. Forces in Greenland which did not use the APO system, such as the Navy, the Coast Guard, and the Sledge Patrol, are not included in the exhibit.

The Greenland Bases. After the German takeover of Denmark on 9 April 1940, U.S. military planners, including the President, decided to establish bases in Greenland, under the Monroe doctrine, to defend the island from enemy aggression. The main strategic value of Greenland lay in the fact that it is the breeding ground for northern European weather. Thus weather information was important in planning to either launch or defend against Allied air raids into Axis Europe. The Army set up detachments of 8th Weather Squadron to track Greenland conditions and Signal Services detachments to report them.

Two airfields were constructed at Narsarsuak (APO 809, later 858) and Sondre Stromfjord (APO 809a, later 859) to ferry Army planes to and from Britain, especially the smaller planes which could not cross the Atlantic without a fuel stop. Early in the war the Eighth Air Force passed through Greenland to Europe. A small emergency landing field was constructed at Ikateq (APO 679) in East Greenland to assist aircraft in difficulty. A fourth base was set up to guard the cryolite mine at Ivigtut (APO 615). Cryolite was critical to the efficient production of the aluminum used in airplane manufacture.

The Rationale for U.S. Bases in Greenland given on the title page are the objectives set out by General Hap Arnold when the mission to Greenland was being planned.

Greenland Place Names. Four sets of designations are in common use for the places where the APOs were established, the places names used by the Army, the APO numbers, the Navy codes, and the names used on modern maps. For example Sondre Stromfjord, APO 809a, later 858, has Navy code Blue West 8, and is shown as Kangerlussuaq on modern maps. For convenience, only the Army place names and APO numbers are used in this exhibit.

Exhibit Organization. The primary level of organization is by APO number, with the four original APO numbers first, followed by the two reassignment numbers. Within the APO sections the secondary organization is by postmark types, which are shown in chronological order of first use.

References. The standard histories of the U. S. Army in WW II have been used in constructing this exhibit plus some specific military histories for Greenland. Both American and Danish postal history sources have been used. By far the most useful reference is the Danish postal historian Per Rønberg's superb website http://www.warcovers.dk/greenland/geen_main.htm. Information on this web-site was essential to building this exhibit. Statements of the number of items "reported" are based on this site.