

Morse Code V for Victory: Morale through the Mail in WWII

By Diane DeBlois & Robert Dalton Harris
Smithsonian National Postal Museum, September 27, 2008

The citizens of the overrun Low Countries of Europe tuned in to the BBC on the evening of January 14th 1941 to hear program organizer Victor de Laveleye announce:

I am proposing to you as a rallying emblem, the letter V, because V is the first letter of the words “Victoire” in French, and “Frijheid” in Flemish: two things which go together, as Walloons and Flemings are at the moment marching hand in hand: two things which are the consequence one of the other, the victory which will give us back our freedom, the victory of our good friends the English. Their word for Victory also begins with V. As you see, things ‘fit’ all round. The letter V is the perfect symbol of Anglo-Belgian understanding.

You have every interest in knowing how many among you want liberation. All the patriots of Belgium must have a rallying emblem; let them multiply this emblem around them; let them see it written everywhere; let them know that they are legion. Let the occupier, by seeing this sign, always the same, infinitely repeated, understand that he is surrounded, encircled, by an immense crowd of citizens eagerly awaiting his first moment of weakness, watching for his first failure.¹

In the weeks that followed, news reached the BBC from Belgium, Northern France, and the Netherlands that V's had appeared chalked on walls. The German army might march through the streets of Brussels with crooked crosses on its flags and on its armbands; but Belgian urchins laughed at them as they raised two fingers in V shape or quickly chalked a V on the pavement on their way to school.

As part of this V campaign, the BBC announcer known as Colonel Britton advocated adding an aural component – the three dots and a dash for the Morse code V. He told listeners at home and abroad to tap it, whistle it, hum it – all to show solidarity. And then, on the night of June 27, he introduced the opening notes of the movement known as “Fate Knocking at the door” of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony.

The next day, the BBC’s program for French listeners carried a special feature entirely built around the V sound. Not only was Beethoven repeated and the Morse taps but every sound in the daily life of a French village could be incorporated: the school mistress clapping her hands for quiet; trains rattling in the night; dogs barking and cocks crowing; customers calling for water in a café; the blacksmith hammering at his anvil.



And then, on July 18, Winston Churchill sent this message across the airwaves: “The V sign is the symbol of the unconquerable will of the people of the occupied territories and of Britain; of the fate awaiting Nazi tyranny. So long as the peoples of Europe continue to refuse all collaboration with the invader, it is sure that his cause will perish and that Europe will be liberated.” Soon after, he was encouraged to raise his right hand in the V sign to underscore the message. (Though he had to be reminded that it should be palm out so as not to perpetrate a working class slur.)

¹ Charles J. Rolo, *Radio Goes to War – The “Fourth Front”*, NY 1942, Chapter XIV “V for Victory”



Hitler's Minister of Propaganda, Joseph Goebbels, paid the campaign the highest compliment by trying to emulate it – claiming Beethoven as a German and pretending that all V's stood for the German word for victory: Viktoria. But there was little credibility. The ...- had successfully raised morale in occupied Europe, and had become a rallying emblem for optimism in Britain and in the Commonwealth.

The first printed promotions announced sympathy with the occupied nations – lapel pins and decals for front windows in the home or rear window of the car.

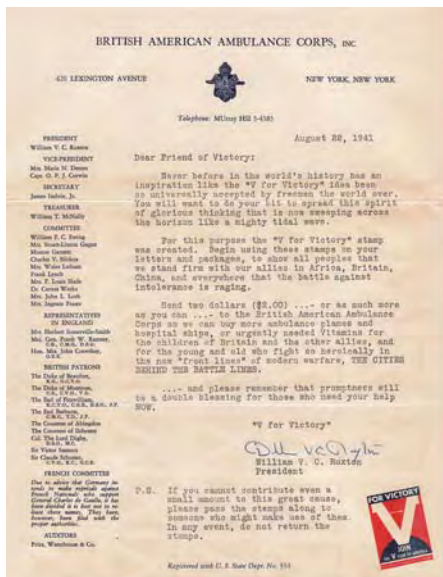


But almost immediately, the posted letter became a billboard for solidarity. Every element of an envelope was potentially a propaganda device, not only for V for Victory but also for the tapped code: a handwritten or a printed slogan; an illustrated cachet; an adhesive label; a handstamp; a postage meter slogan; even punctuation.



All of this began in the commonwealth countries already at war but, the interesting thing is that it caught on so quickly in the United States, even before Pearl Harbor. The earliest use in our collection is a handstamp on a letter sent from New York to India in the beginning of August 1941.

Most of these early American uses were to signal support for Britain. An August 1941 design for a poster stamp was promoted by the British American Ambulance Corps, based in New York. "Never before in the world's history has an inspiration like the 'V for Victory' idea been so universally accepted by freemen the world over. You will want to do your bit to spread this spirit of glorious thinking that is now sweeping across the horizon like a mighty tidal wave." The promotion was sent in a window envelope, franked with an advertising meter: "Join the V for Victory Club of America" with the flap sealed with one of its own poster stamps.



Another early label campaign dates from November – the Committee to Defend America by Aiding the Allies, out of Boston, - distributed decals to place on one’s automobile. “Make your position known. Resolve that every day you will urge someone to support the Administration’s foreign policy. Tell them that you stand for anything calculated to beat Hitler. Don’t be modest. Your opinion counts and affects others. Keep Talking.”

NOTICE OF MEETINGS

Nov. 9, 1941—“Labor Fights for Freedom Rally”
FRANKLIN UNION, 41 Berkeley St., Boston — 3 P. M.
Speakers: **Henry Parkman, Jr., Chairman**
Executive Committee — Fight for Freedom, Inc.
JACK JONES of England
Representing English Trades Union Council
Joseph Salerno
President of Massachusetts
John J. Keenan
President of the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America

ENTERTAINMENT: Musical smash hit “SONS OF SAM”
 Nov. 16, 1941—“Stage Murders”
Speaker: **W. C. Sullivan**
 An impressive program of national groups will be held this day all over the world. Religious as well as national groups will be represented. A protest to be held at 7 P. M.

Nov. 23, 1941—“Un-American Activities”
Speakers: **SENATOR** **Hon. Ma** **Rex Stout**
 Famous author of “Nero Wolfe” stories; Executive Committee Member of Fight for Freedom, Inc.

ALL RELIGIOUS AS WELL AS NATIONAL GROUPS WILL BE REPRESENTED.
 ENTERTAINMENT: Stage and screen stars from musical shows in Boston.

Is America United? Come and Prove She Is!
THE COMMITTEE TO DEFEND AMERICA and FIGHT FOR FREEDOM, INC.
 45 DEVONSHIRE STREET, BOSTON - CAPITOL 1790

Once the United States entered the war, the campaign became less about solidarity with Britain or the citizens of overrun countries and more about a united home front.

Gummed labels became the most popular way to spread the slogans. The National Poster Stamp Society issued poster stamps, published by F.H. Dietz in New York. And hundreds more were published, most anonymously.



Slogan meter cancellations and advertising meter frankings were an obvious and popular form of broadcast for the simple ...- and business firms adopted them early and often. Merchants developed ingenious ways to adopt the V for victory message – on packaging and promotions as well as on mail.



Shortly after Pearl Harbor, a stamp collector called E.W. Morrison of Mahomet, Illinois, created slogan cancels and envelope cachets – and he kept up a formidable output throughout the war. But the most important philatelist in the distribution of the ...- slogan was Jacques Minkus – “the man who brought stamps to Main Street” (in the words of Eisenhower’s postmaster general). Main Street was actually Fifth Avenue in New York City. In 1931, Minkus had established a stamp department at Gimbels Department Store – the first of 38 such venues. His first output of patriotic illustrated envelopes was in 1940; his second June 1942. They were distributed through Gimbels to be sold in chain stores, military post exchanges, drug stores and mass distribution outlets. Cover contests determined which designs were chosen. Many had the ...- incorporated directly; and some seem to have the rhythm expressed in three images plus a punctuating one (as in Mussolini, Hitler, Hirohito – then Uncle Sam’s heel).

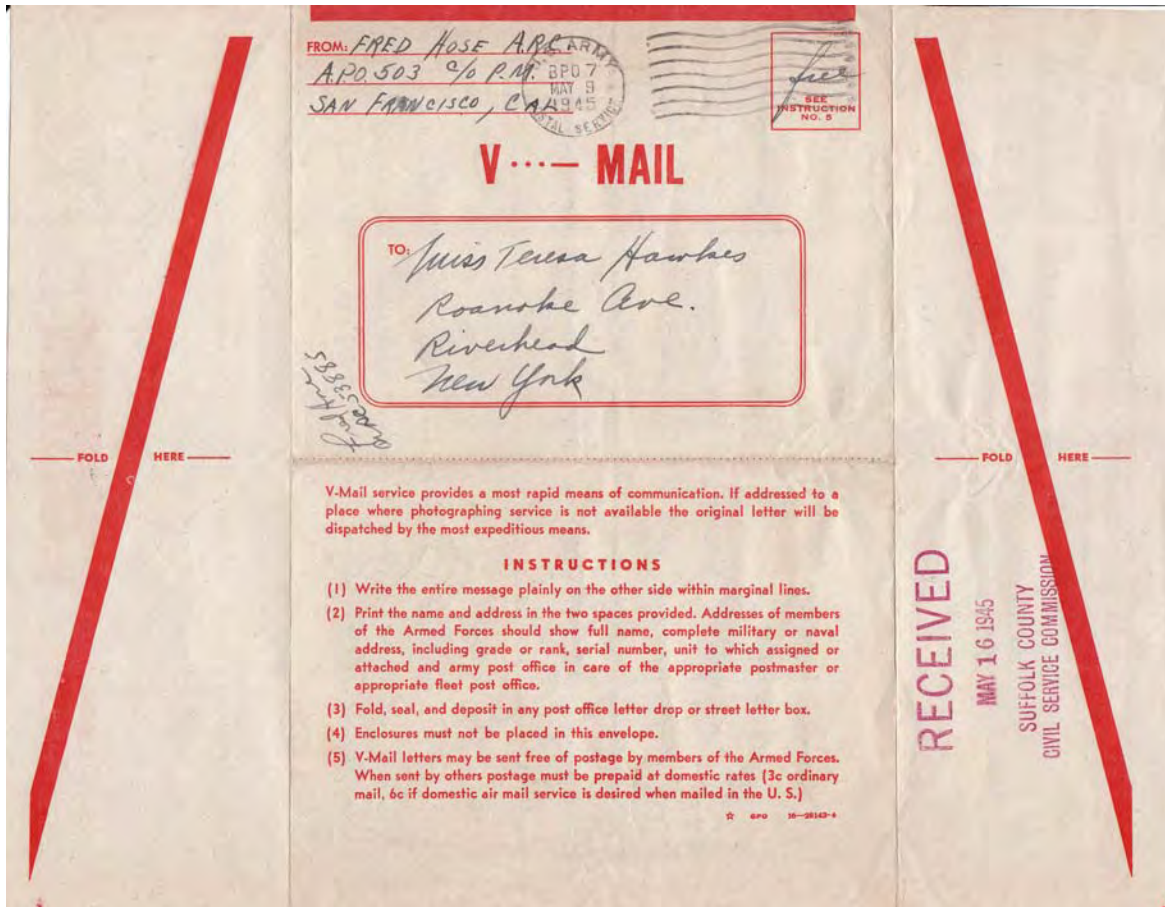


Though the 52 Minkus designs were just a drop in the patriotic cachet bucket (Larry Sherman records 1600 William S. Linto designs, for instance) they were the most widely available, commonly used, and universally known.

The War Cover Club published in the *War Cover Philatelist* of March 1942 an advertisement for Patriotic Covers from Fleetwood Cover Service of Mount Vernon, New York with the slogan: "Covers that exemplify the American Spirit ...- Victory!"

In fact, Larry Sherman's tabulations in his *United States Patriotic Covers of World War II*² indicate just how saturated the mails were with such visual morale-boosting propaganda.

And then there was V-Mail. James W. Hudson in 1994 told *The American Philatelist* the story of his being the first U.S. officer trained for Army V-Mail processing at Eastman Kodak Co. in Rochester, New York, in the Spring of 1942. From the beginning, the stationery compounded the Morse Code with the V in V-Mail, so that the slogan was repeated on all the promotional literature, on the sending form, on the photographic miniature, and upon the envelope in which that was delivered.



The same blanket coverage of the nation was given to selling war bonds. Walt Disney used ...- in his campaigns for children's United States Savings Stamps.³ And the V plus Morse Code appeared on all the advertising for all five of the War Loan Bond drives, which were wildly successful.

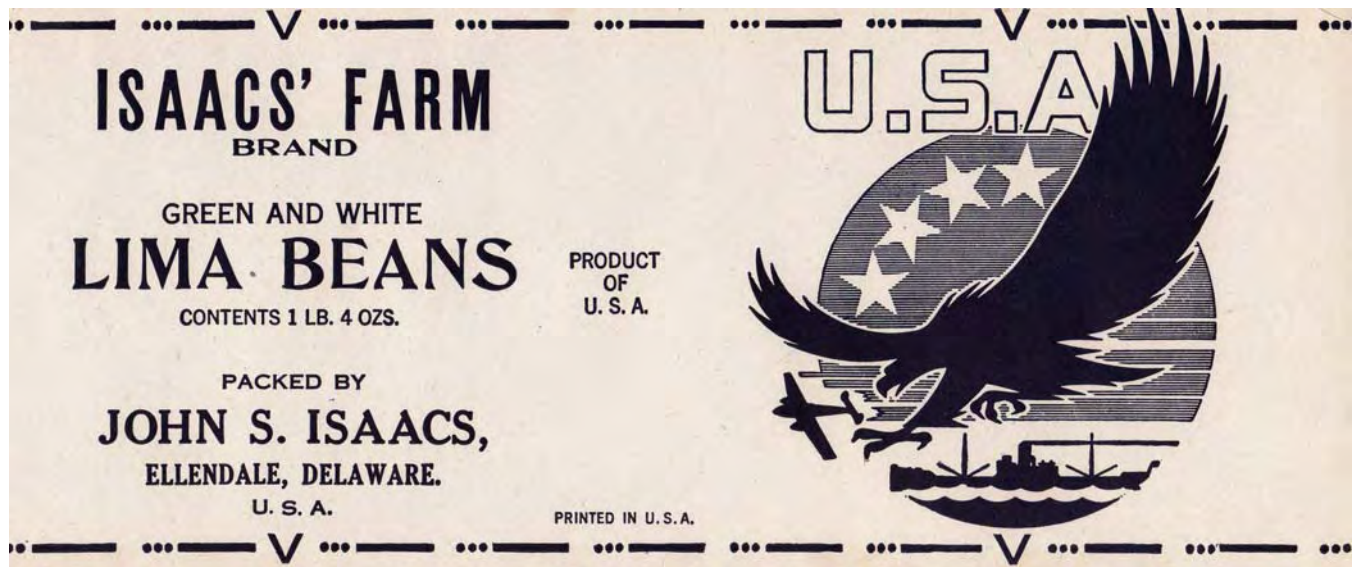


² 1999, Collectors Club of Chicago

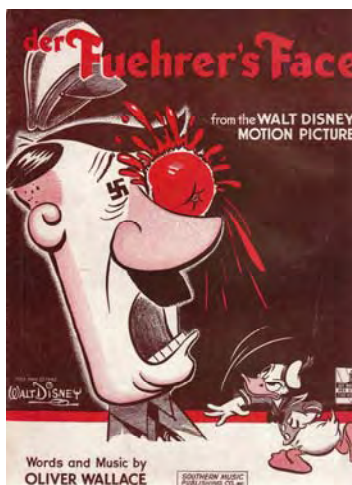
³ The Disney Studio was an early promoter of the V campaign – Donald Duck was usually used to show rage at the enemy. During the war years, 90% of studio production was for films like *Der Fuehrer's Face* (1943). See Robert Heide & John Gilman, *Home Front America*, San Francisco 1995, page 86.



Victory gardens, a civilian campaign which dovetailed with rationing, used the V and Morse code – on meter indicia and envelopes as well as tin can labels.



It had become clear in the first World War that music was a great morale booster for the troops. But for a while it appeared that there just weren't the right kind of catchy songs for this new war. Walt Disney tried humor with the movie theme song "der Fuehrer's Face" in 1942. Leo Roy in the same year tried a bi-lingual Victory song. Dale Evans became famous for songs over the radio. Bing Crosby sang "Can't You Read Between the Lines" – to continue to promote V Mail in 1945. But, by and large, the most popular songs were "oldies" – "We sang them before ... so let's sing them now!" for "Victory in Verse and Voice" (published in 1941). It's our belief that the musical notation of the ...- (along with Beethoven) provided the most satisfactory music over the course of the long and bloody conflict.



There was special celebration at VE day in the Spring of 1945 – a friend remembers that his Boy Scout troop added the Morse code for “E” to the slogan Even the slogan meter bells rang out victory.



And, with VJ day in August 1945, the slogan became commemorative.

Given the scope of our collection, it is clear that many men in the armed forces embraced this whole campaign philatelically – and, perhaps emboldened by a stamp collector in the White House, philatelists became patriotic agents. The campaign and its contemporary documentation bonded servicemen and civilians.

March, 19th 1944.

Major Wm. V. Hannay,
Hdq. 87th Bn.,
Camp Roberts, Calif.

My dear Major -

Have just received a letter from my wife back home saying you had written.

The cover you sent (one of Drinkel's) is greatly appreciated. Am sending you this one from "Somewhere in Italy".

Many thanks for your kindness.

Pfc. Albert E. Schaffer,

Pfc. A. E. Schaffer, A.S.N. 32381068,
87th Dep. Rep. Sqdn. A.P.O. # 520,
70 Postmaster, New York, N.Y.



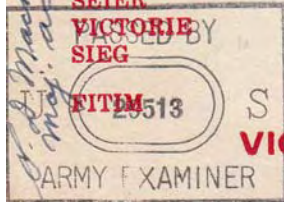
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VICTORY

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