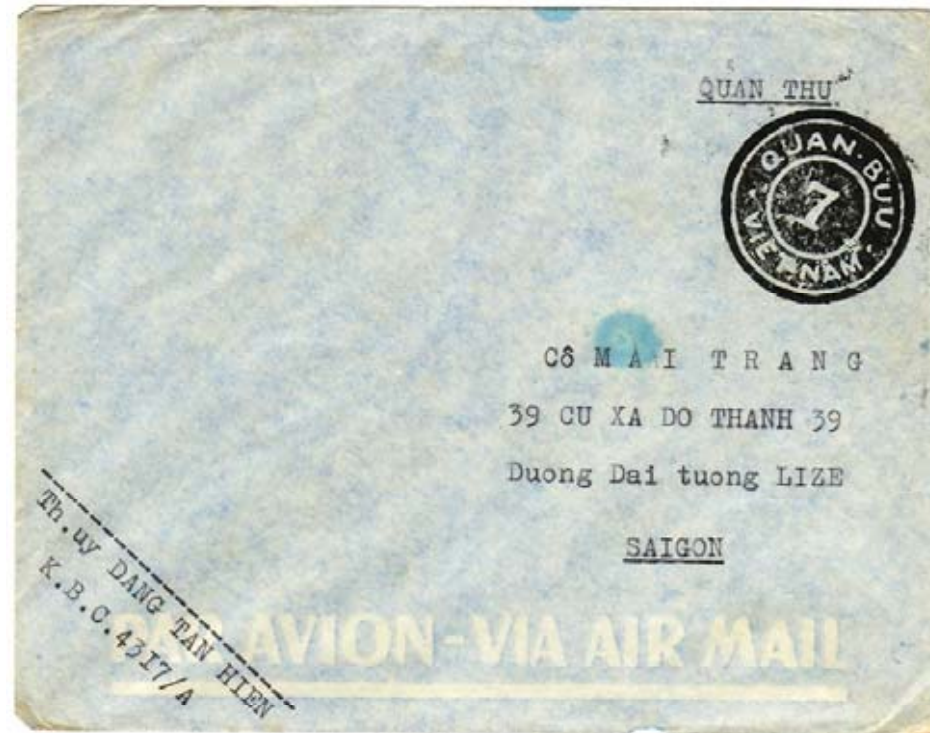


# South Vietnam at War 1952-1956



Presented by Andrew Crenshaw  
At the Society of Indo-china Philatelists Annual Meeting  
NAPEX June 2009

## Presentation Notes

This presentation assumes the viewer is familiar with Indo-china history between 1945 and 1956, from Japanese occupation and capitulation through the end of the First Indo-china War, fought primarily between the French and Viet Minh forces.

Working from this background, the presentation focuses on the formation of an independent South Vietnamese military as told through its postal history, and provides some context for early American involvement during the transitional period of 1952-1956.

The intention is simply to provide a brief sampling of the interesting collectable material from this period, with emphasis placed on postal markings more than on rates or the operation of the postal service.

The *Life* photos are sourced from Google image search <http://images.google.com/hosted/life>

## Selected Timeline

1945	WWII ends; Viet Minh independence; French return after Japanese capitulate
1949	State of Vietnam formed; Vietnamese National Army created
1952	First Vietnamese naval officer aspirants assigned to French combat units
1953	Vietnamese National Army unit comprised entirely of enlisted Vietnamese recruits
1954	French defeat at Dien Bien Phu; Geneva Conference divides North & South Vietnam
1955	French military departs; Republic of Vietnam founded; QUAN BUU postmarks introduced
1956	Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) formed
1959	Construction begins on the Ho Chi Minh Trail
1965	Major US troop buildup begins
1968	Tet Offensive
1975	Saigon falls to People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN)

# **The Establishment of Vietnamese Military Units Under French Control**

## Postal Zone Codes

French postal zones utilized five-digit Secteur Postal numbers to obscure a unit's designation and location.

Under American advisement, the Vietnamese adopted a four-digit Khu Buu Chinh (KBC) code system that served the same purpose.

During the transitional period (1952-1956), one finds various combinations of French and Vietnamese text on the postal markings and addresses of military covers.

### 3<sup>rd</sup> Vietnamese Battalion - 1952

Sent in June 1952, this cover represents a very early Vietnamese unit, identified as the 3<sup>rd</sup> Vietnamese Battalion by the red hand-stamped cachet.

The sender includes his SP number (Secteur Postal = Postal Sector or Zone) as well as his BPM number (Bureaux Postaux Militaires).

BPM 402A was located in Cantho between January 1951 and March 1955.

A Sector Postal was the equivalent of the American A.P.O. address and had five digits.

The 4-digit number "4012" on this cover is actually a Vietnamese KBC zone number, despite the French designation.



## Vietnamese Army Unit - 1953

Mail sent from Vietnamese units under French command after World War II was typically struck with a POSTE AUX ARMEES / T.O.E. cancel leftover from World War II. Cancels sometimes included a B.P.M. (Bureau Postal Militaire, or Military Post Office) number

This cover was sent by a second lieutenant located in the town of Le Thuy of Dong Hoi province (just north of the DMZ) to serve in a battalion.

Note the French 'Vaguemestre' Secteur Postale hand stamp with 4-digit number KBC number

KBC 4776 represented a Vietnamese army unit referred to as "Cu Tram," the name of its Vietnamese battalion commander.



In the enclosed letter the sender mentions visiting his home village and finding it desolated, save for women, children and old men. During this time young men either joined the French to fight the Viet Minh or the other way around. No one could afford not to take a side.



## National Guard North Vietnam - 1952

This cover sent in late 1952 by the commander of the Thai Binh National Guard ("Garde Nationale") in North Vietnam

Thai Binh is located about 20 miles from the Gulf of Tonkin and not far from the Red River, Southeast of Hanoi.





### SP 4721 Rectangular Hand Stamp - 1953

This cover bears a nicely struck *Le Vaguemestre* hand stamp from November, 1953

SP/KBC 4721 was utilized by the Air Force Training Center in Nha Trang

The location or unit served by SP/KBC 4177 is not known



## Le Vaguemestre Hand Stamp - 1953

A nice example of a *Le Vaguemestre* hand stamp cachet - 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment, Vietnamese Army



## Vietnamese Air Force - 1953

This cover was sent from the sergeant in charge of personnel at Soc Trang Air Base southeast of Can Tho on 24 November 1953. The fledgling Vietnamese Air Force was still under French command at this time.

On the red unit cachet we once again have an example the French abbreviation "S.P." Four-digit Sector Postal hand stamps were in use for only a couple of years.

Note the sender used the abbreviation "KBC" in the return address.

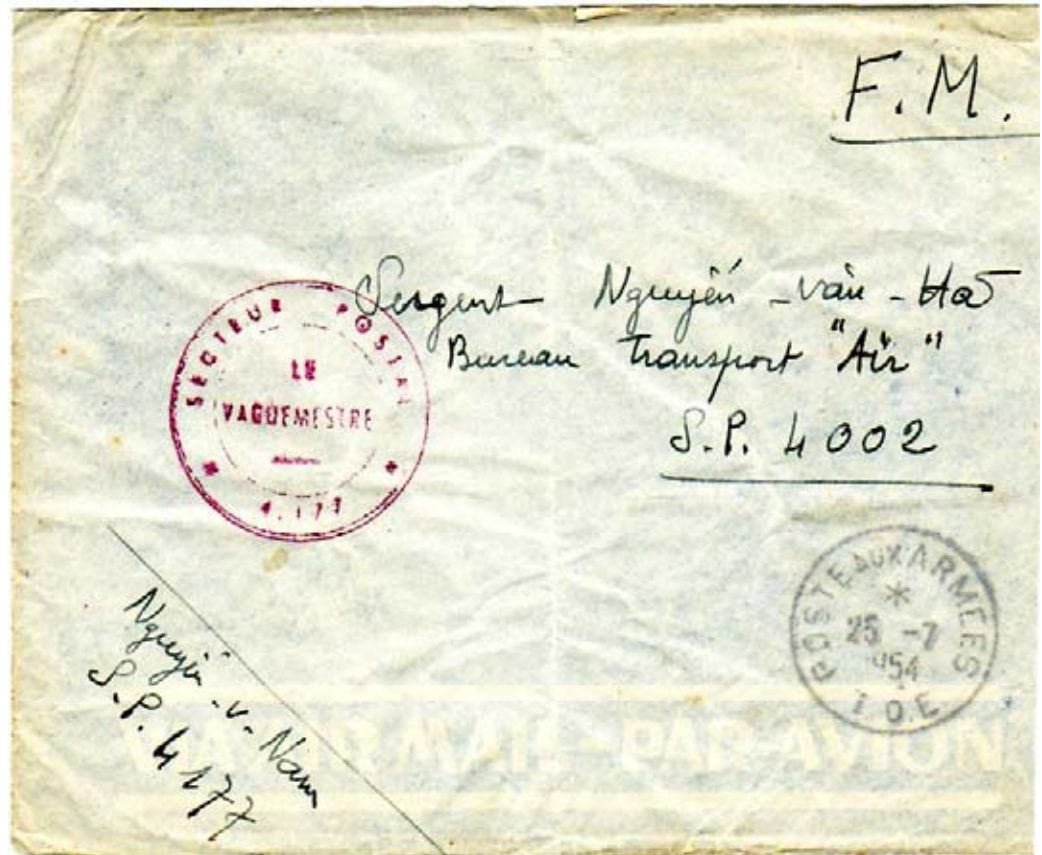




## Secteur Postal Hand stamp - 1954

Cover sent between two military units.

Addressed to the Bureau Transport "Air".  
KBC 4002 served the General Staff and  
Command Center in Saigon.



## Secteur Postal Machine Postmark - 1953

Senders were encouraged to include their unit's Secteur Postal number when addressing letters

The slogan on this machine postmark, dated 24 Sep 1953, reinforces this requirement



## BPM Machine Postmark - 1954

Beginning in 1953, senders were instructed to not include the B.P.M. number on letters and the numbers were dropped from postmarks.

When the B.P.M. number was displayed together with a unit-specific Secteur Postal (S.P.) number, troop locations and movements could be deciphered by the enemy.

The postmark slogan on this cover, dated 23 August 1954, translates as, "Indication of the BPM number or a geographical location is prohibited in military addresses".

The cover was sent from a member of the 22<sup>nd</sup> Brigade at the Infantry School in Thu Duc.





## U.S. Support for the War Effort



Photo source <http://images.google.com/hosted/life>

## MAAG Indo-china - 1951

In September 1950, President Truman sent the Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) to Vietnam to assist the French in their war effort.



The French Army was resistant to take U.S. advice and would not allow the Vietnamese army to be trained to use the new equipment, because it went against the French desire to solidify themselves as a colonial power; they could not do this with a Vietnamese Army.

French commanders were so reluctant to accept advice that may weaken their colonial role that they obstructed attempts by the MAAG to observe where the equipment was being sent and how it was being used.

## Mutual Security Agency - 1952

This cover has a return address from the Mutual Security Agency (MSA) mission to Saigon, which was formed in 1951 under President Truman.

Averill Harriman was the Director of the MSA at this time and was focused on organizing covert operations and psychological warfare in Vietnam. In 1954 the MSA became the Foreign Operations Agency (FOA), then the International Cooperation Agency (ICA) and finally the Agency for International Development (USAID) in 1961.

The cover was sent from Saigon on 29 Jul 1952 to Portland, Oregon but was redirected to Parks Air Base in California.

A Portland machine cancel on the front and hand stamp on reverse peg the cover's arrival as August 5th. Straight line date markings of August 14 and 15 probably mark its arrival at its destination.



Three copies of the first Vietnamese airmail stamp issued March 8, 1952 (Scott #C1) were used to frank the cover. At 9\$90, the sender likely overpaid the rate to North America, which was 8\$50 as of December 1953



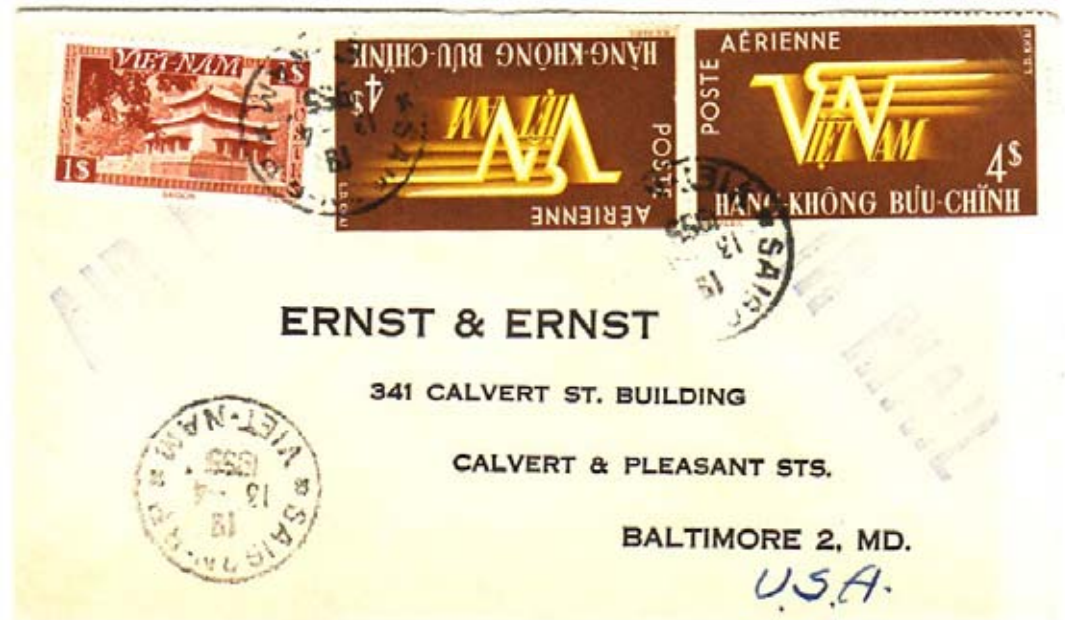
## STEM – FOA - 1953

The United States created the Foreign Operations Association (FOA) in 1953 to coordinate all American foreign economic and technical and assistance programs.

Under FOA, the Special Technical and Economic Mission (STEM) provided assistance with refugee settlement including the 800,000 who migrated from North to South Vietnam. The US Navy transported more than 300,000 under Operation Passage to Freedom

The French resented STEM and the publicity it generated for its efforts.

The French diplomatic counselor in Saigon complained that Americans seem to think Indochina was discovered in 1950 and the “history of civilization in Indochina began with the arrival of US aid. If [a] water pump is delivered [to] Indochina, it becomes, in STEM publicity, [the] first water pump Indochina has ever had.”



H. W. Post  
c/o Forrest L. Dye  
STEM - FOA  
American Embassy  
Saigon, Viet Nam, Indochina



## South Vietnamese Military Unit Training

Photo source <http://images.google.com/hosted/life>

# South Vietnamese Military Unit Training

An Army school system was started to provide technical and specialist schools, arm and service basic and advanced courses, a military academy to train select young men for commissions in the Army, and a replacement training center to provide basic training for conscripts and new enlistees.

The system was built around six key centers:

1. A general school center at Thu Duc with a capacity for 1,000 students and comprising most of the arm and service technical and specialist schools;
2. Separate **infantry school**, to be located initially also **at Thu Duc**, which would include a 400-student officer candidate school and later basic branch officer and noncommissioned officer courses;
3. Medical, intelligence, and psychological warfare schools to be located in the Saigon area owing to the availability of facilities and other resources;
4. **Military Academy at Dalat**, with a two-year curriculum combining academic and military subjects to train new officers, to be transformed later into a four-year institution;
5. Higher military school or college, located in Saigon with a capacity of 250 students;
6. Centralized replacement camp for training conscripts located at Quang Trung near Saigon and with an annual capacity of approximately 24,000 (or about 8,000 at any one time).



## National Military Academy - 1954

In 1948, the French founded the Vietnamese Regular Officers School in Hue.

In 1950, the school was moved to Dalat and until 1954, all commanders and instructors of the school were French officers.

After the Geneva Accords, the Vietnamese gradually assumed control of the Academy and changed its name to "Truong Vo Bi Lien Quan" (National Military Academy).



## Thu Duc Military School 1954

In practice, the principal training establishment during this period was the Quang Trung Training Center, near Saigon, which gave eight weeks of basic training to all recruits and which gave advanced courses to infantry soldiers.

Training in other branches of service was given at the specialized training centers, especially those at the Thu Duc Military Schools Center.

Regular officers were trained at the Military Academy at Dalat and received further career schooling at the Thu Duc Military Schools complex, at the Command and General Staff College in Saigon, and at schools abroad.

Many reserve officers, obligated to serve two years, passed through the Officer Candidate School at Thu Duc.



## Merchant Marine School - 1953

The return address translates from the French as:

State of Viet Nam  
Education Ministry  
Vietnamese Sea Transport  
Merchant Marine School

This school is where the French trained the Vietnamese to serve in various functions on their ships. This school was later turned over to the Vietnamese and was in operation for many years.

After the French left Indo-china the South Vietnamese Navy was founded and inherited a number of warships from the French. In order to build up the Navy the government began recruiting mariners from this school.

The recipient was a second mechanic aboard the French ship *Pigneau De Bihaine*



French Abbreviation

S: "Service"  
M: "Maritime"  
EO: "Extrême Orient"

Red Hand Stamp:

Quoc Gia Viet Nam: "State of Viet Nam"  
Hang Hai Hoc Hieu: "Merchant Marine School"  
Hieu Truong: "School Principal" (office of)



### Pham Ngoc Sang Training in Morocco - 1953

South Vietnamese pilots and other officers sometimes received advanced training at overseas bases and schools.

Occasionally, one finds an early cover addressed to or from an individual who made a significant impact on the war effort over their military career.

This letter is addressed to Pham Ngoc Sang who at one point was President Diem's personal pilot and later commanded the 6th Air Division of the VNAF.



In the spring of 1975, Phan Rang air base became the front lines for South Vietnam. Pham Ngoc Sang managed (with the help of an Airborne Brigade) to hold Phan Rang until April 16, 1975, when the town and the air field were overrun by the North Vietnamese Army. Pham was captured, flown to Da Nang, and then flown to Son Tay, North Vietnam, where he was interrogated. He was held in 're-education' camps until he was finally released in 1992.

## Le Minh Dao, Training at Fort Benning - 1956

During the French era in Vietnam all key command and staff positions had been occupied by French officers. After 1954 many Vietnamese officers had to occupy positions for which they had insufficient training experience. The US-sponsored Off-Shore School Program was established in 1955 in an effort to provide adequate training for Vietnamese officers.

This cover was sent by Le Minh Dao, the South Vietnamese General who is perhaps best known for leading the ARVN 18th Division during the waning days of the Republic of Vietnam.



In February 1956, Le Minh Dao was stationed at Fort Benning, Georgia for military training.

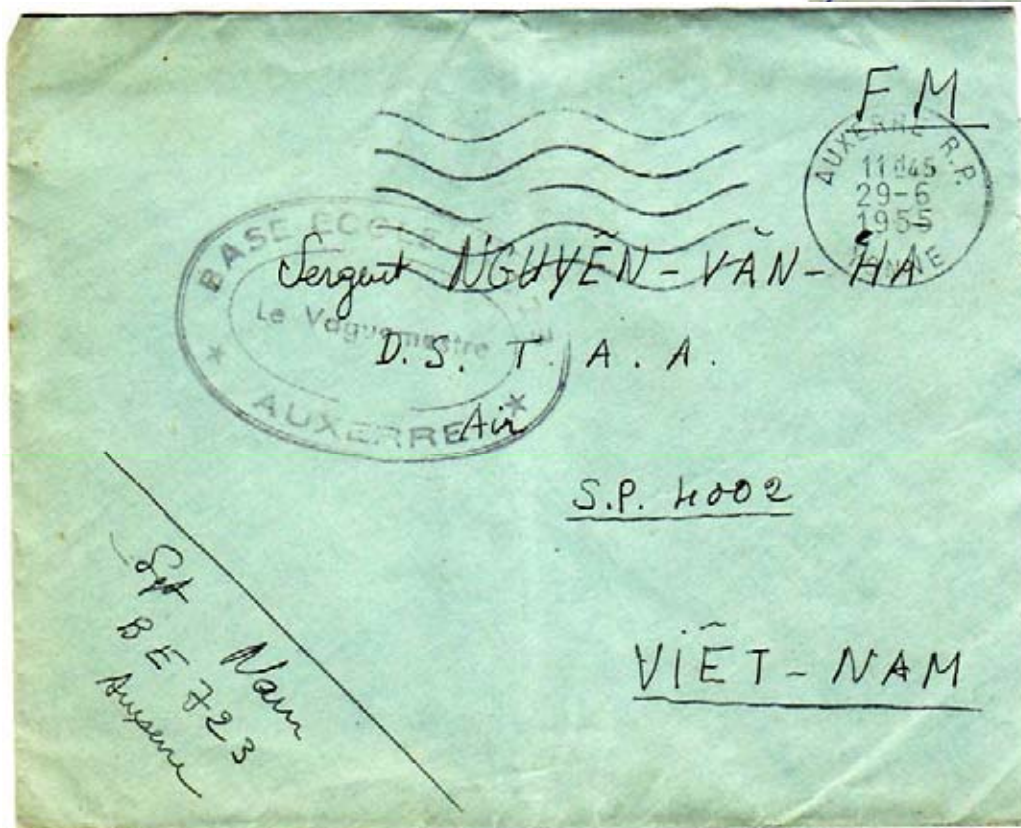
This cover was sent home to his family and the enclosed letter mentions his recent visit to Washington DC during Tet. He writes that he is attending school regularly and expects to be home in June.

After a long and decorated military career, Le Minh Dao was captured after the at the Battle of Xuan Loc by PAVN forces and was sentenced to live the next 17 years in re-education camps.



## French Air Base to Vietnam – 1953/55

Covers sent from trainees in France  
back home to Vietnam.





## The French Defeat

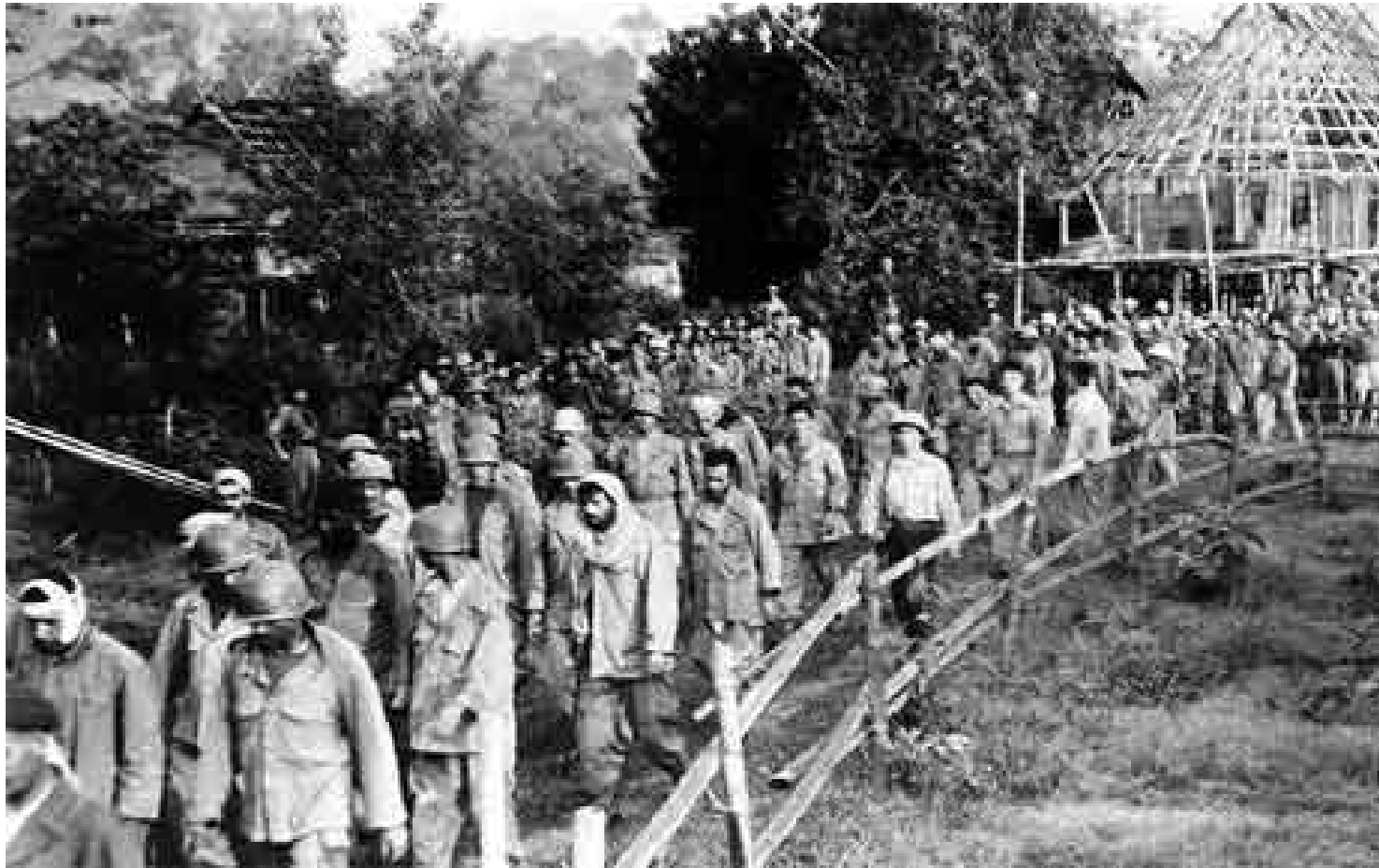


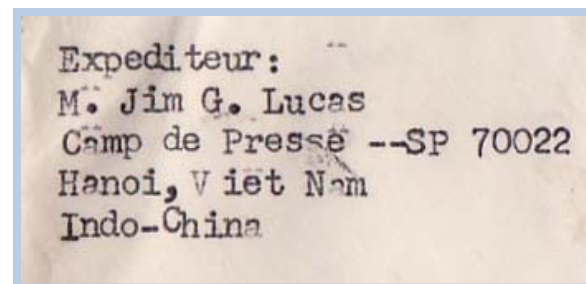
Photo source <http://images.google.com/hosted/life>

## Dien Bien Phu - 1954

The Battle of Dien Bien Phu, a set-piece battle between French forces and the Viet Minh, was to be the downfall of French dominion in Indo-china.

This cover was sent from Hanoi on 12 May 1954 by Jim Lucas as a member of the "Camp de Presse". Presumably Lucas was reporting on the Battle of Dien Bien Phu.

The French had fallen to Vo Nguyen Giap's forces on 7 May, less than a week before this cover was posted.



A 25-year reporter and foreign correspondent, Jim Griffing Lucas won the Pulitzer prize for journalism in 1954. He was selected for Ernie Pyle awards during the Korean War in 1953, and the Vietnam War in 1964.

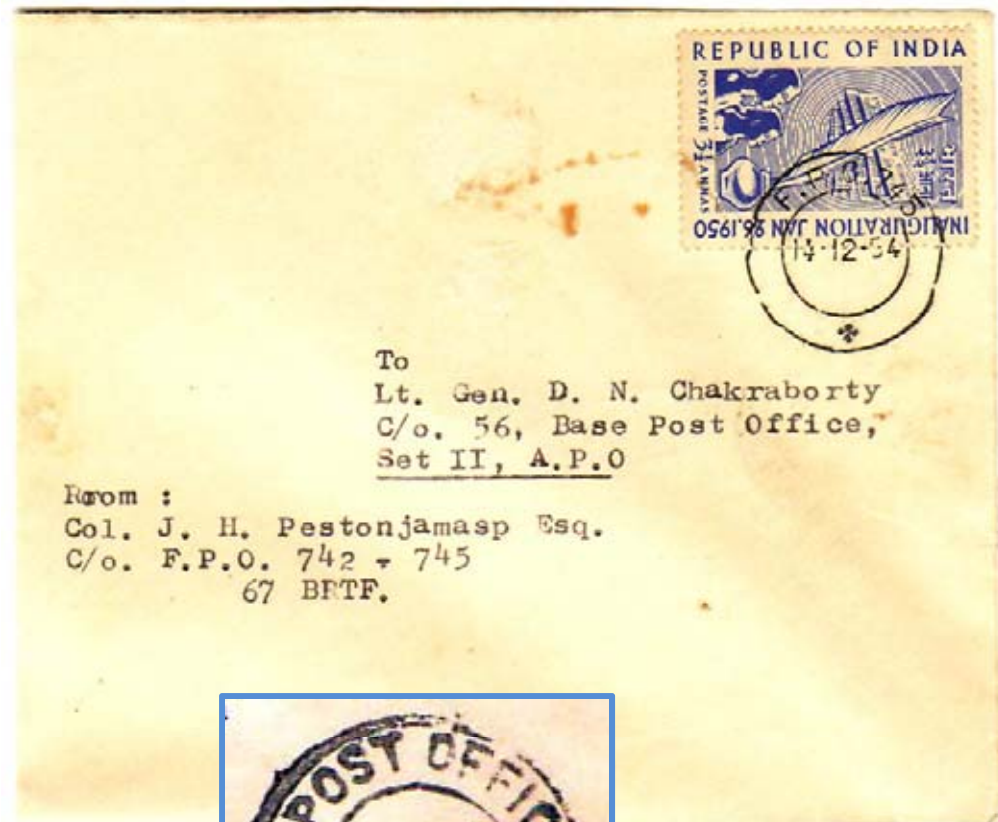
## ICSC Established - 1954

The Geneva Agreements in July 1954 divided Vietnam into North and South at the 17 parallel and established the International Commission for Supervision and Control (ICSC) to enforce the agreement.

India, Canada and Poland were designated as third-parties to participate in the commission.

This cover dated 16 Dec 1954, was sent from an Indian Colonel from the nascent mission. The cover is postmarked FPO 745 in Cambodia.

FPO 742 Vietnam  
FPO 744 Laos  
FPO 745 Cambodia



## Military Land Transfer - 1956

Subject – “return of your parcel of land”

“The land occupied by a French military cantonment (camp) will be transferred to the Army of the Republic of Vietnam on 6 Feb 1956 at 8am.”

4

S.P.60.285, le 30 Janvier 1956.

lère D. I. E. O.  
PLACE DU  
CAP SAINT JACQUES  
N° 213 /

Le Colonel ESQUILAT,  
Adjoint au Général Commandant la lère D.I.E.O.  
et Délégué pour la Place du Cap Saint-Jacques.

à

Monsieur DO - VAN - CONG  
représentant Monsieur DO - THI - TAN -  
18 bis Rue Legrand de la Liraye  
à  
SAIGON ( SVN )

1

ECOMMANDE

SP 75.380  
R 5923

J.E

Monsieur DO. VAN. CONG

18 bis Rue Legrand de la Liraye

SAIGON

O B J E T : Restitution de votre parcelle de terrain  
à PHUOC - LE ( Province de BARIA )

Monsieur,

J'ai l'honneur de vous faire savoir que votre terrain  
sur lequel est construit un cantonnement occupé par les P.T.E.O.  
sera transféré le 6 Février 1956 à 8h, aux FARVN.

Je vous demanderais d'avoir l'amabilité de venir au jour  
et à l'heure précités pour l'établissement de l'Etat des lieux et du  
P.V. de transfert.

Veuillez agréer, Monsieur, l'expression de mes salutations  
distinguées.

COMMANDEMENT DE LA PLACE DU CAP SAINT JACQUES



## Rent Collection - 1954

As the French began leaving Vietnam, they attempted to collect on all debts. Shown here is a letter from the Engineering Commander, requesting payment of 3<sup>rd</sup> trimester rent

N.  
COMMANDEMENT DU GÉNIE  
DIRECTION DU GÉNIE  
D'INDOCHINE  
CHIEF DE BUREAU DU GÉNIE DE SAIGON  
SERVICE-IMMOBILIER  
8-Rue Docteur Angier  
Tél. : ORATOIRE 267  
N° 1050 /S.I.-1544

4 SEPT 1954  
Saigon, le 195

Le Lieutenant-Colonel ALLIAUD  
Chef du Génie de SAIGON

à

Madame Veuve TRUONG LUONG NGOC née  
BUI THI CHIN N° 135 Rue Legrand de la  
Piraye à

SAIGON

O B J E T : Quittance de loyer du 3<sup>e</sup> trimestre  
1954

REFERENCE : Ma transmission n° 631/SI du 18.8.1954

Madame,

J'ai l'honneur de rappeler à votre  
attention la transmission citée en référence et de  
vous demander de bien vouloir me faire connaître  
la suite que vous avez cru devoir lui réserver.

Veuillez croire, Madame, à l'expression  
de ma parfaite considération.



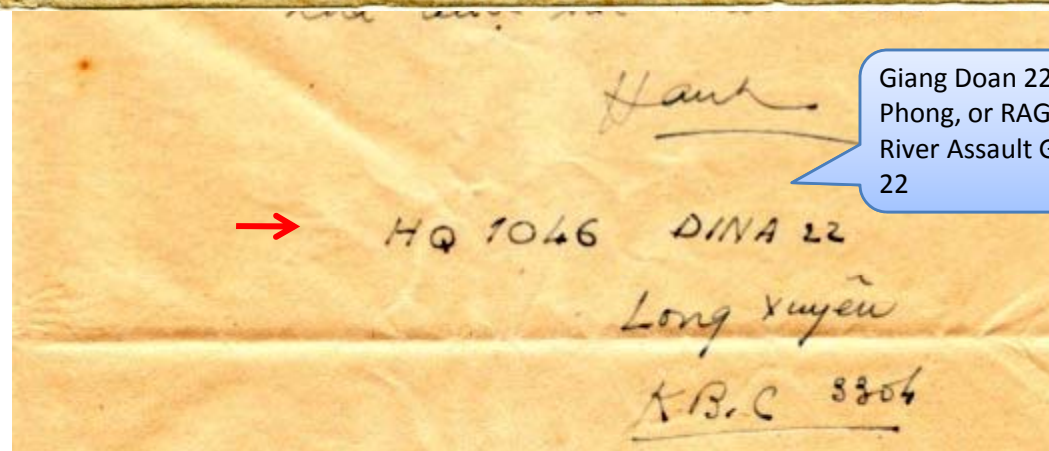
## Dinassauts and Riverine Warfare - 1956

In May 1955, the French transferred command of 4 Vietnamese Dinassauts to the senior officer in the new Navy, Lt. Commander Le Quang My.

Dinassaut 22, 23 and 25 were Vietnamese. Dinassaut 4 was French at the time.

In early 1956, the 4 dinassauts were operating on the Mekong and waterways south of Saigon against the Hoa Hao.

On Feb 12 they redeployed to Rach Gia area "to press the illusive Ba Cut in operation Nguyen Hue. Ba Cut was finally trapped and captured in April 1956 and the Hoa Hao resistance collapsed."



Giang Doan 22 Xung Phong, or RAG 22 - River Assault Group 22



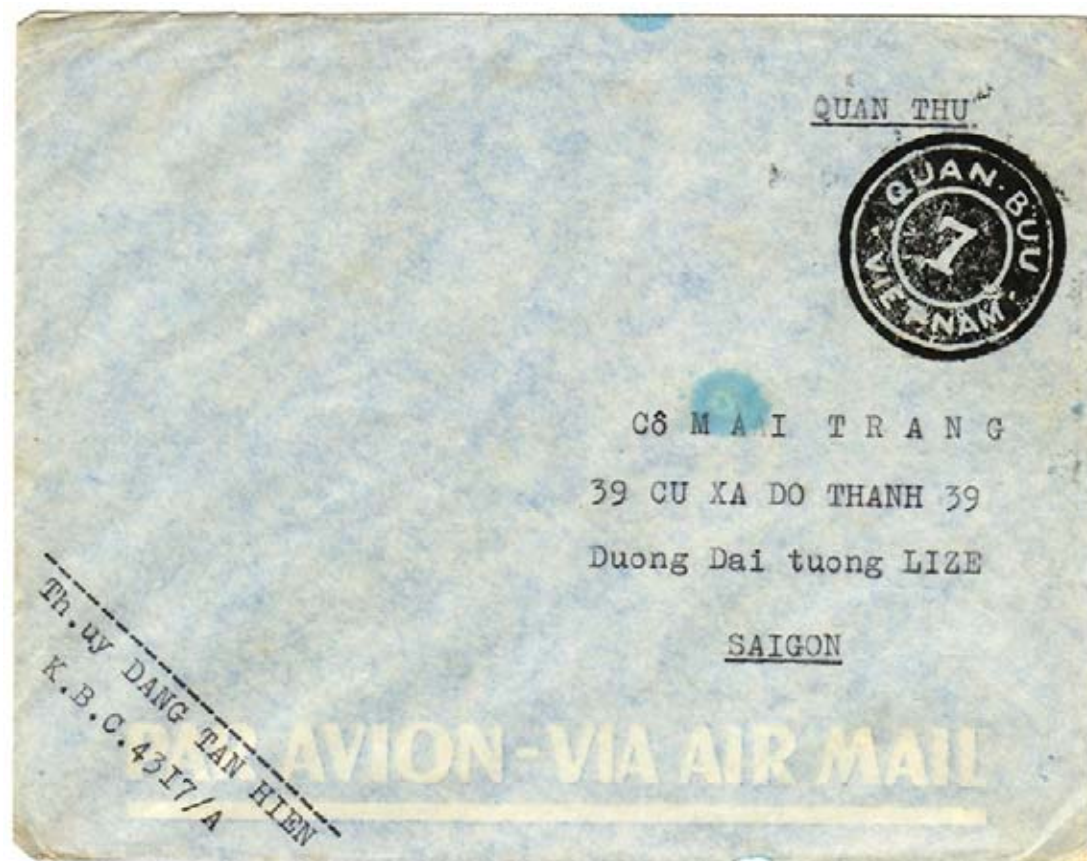
**Establishment of the South Vietnamese  
Military Postal System  
June 1955**



## 1955 – Transitional Military Postmarks

The cancels depicted here were taken from a single correspondence sent from a Transportation unit at KBC 4317/A in Dinh Tuong province. They illustrate the logical progression of postmarks in mid-1955 starting with a typical French POSTE AUX ARMEES cancel, transitioning through the provisional QUAN-BUU 7 marking, and ending with an official Vietnamese QUAN-BUU 7 postmark.

The numeral “7” indicates the Quan Buu Cuc, or military post office that serviced the military region. QUAN-BUU postmarks are reported with numerals 1-8. The practice of including a numeral was fairly short-lived although covers are known through 1959 and even one usage reported as late as 1972.





## QUAN-BUU 1 - 1956

This registry form from KBC 4218 shows an example of a QUAN-BUU 1 postmark.

The form was filled out by a member of the CTTT or "Cong Thu va Tao Tac," which was the equivalent of the Corps of Engineers.



G. 9 ETAT DU VIET-NAM

POSTES ET COMMUNICATIONS  
SERVICE DES POSTES

(A remplir par le bureau d'origine)

Envoi recommandé ( )

Lettre { avec valeur déclarée de \_\_\_\_\_ 2)  
Boîte  
Colis  
Mandat de poste de \_\_\_\_\_ 2)  
déposé au bureau de poste d \_\_\_\_\_  
le \_\_\_\_\_ 19 \_\_\_\_\_ sous le No \_\_\_\_\_  
expédié par M. Tran Phu Thuan  
et adressé à M. Tran Phu Thuan  
CTTT - Binh Thuan

(1) Indiquer dans la parenthèse la nature de l'objet, lettre, boîte, échantillon colis postal etc.,  
(2) Siffler les indications inscrites.

28-11-56

VIET-NAM

Timbre du bureau renvoyant l'avis

M. Tran Phu Thuan Binh Thuan  
"Binh Thuan" Binh Thuan  
Binh Thuan  
(Lieu de destination en gros caractères)

(Rue et numéro)

VIET-NAM

Le soussigné déclare qu'il a été dument livré payé 26-11-56 26-11-56 19-56

Timbre du bureau distributeur ou du bureau payeur

Signature (1)

du destinataire : de l'agent du bureau destinataire :

(1) Cet avis doit être signé par le destinataire ou, si les règlements du pays de destination le comportent, par l'agent du bureau destinataire et renvoyé par le premier courrier directement à l'expéditeur.

Au Viet-Nam, cet avis n'est, dans aucun cas, signé par le destinataire.

### 1955/1956 – Numbered QUAN-BUU Cancels

From the *CATALOGUE DES OBLITERATIONS MILITAIRES  
FRANCAISES 1900-1985* by Bertrand SINAIS





## Earliest Known QUAN BUU postmark

This cover bears the earliest reported QUAN-BUU postmark, dated 27 May 1955.



Cover from the collection of Richard Aspnes

## Earliest QUAN BUU postmark - 1955

Reverse of the above cover showing 30 May 1955 Saigon back stamp.

The cover shows evidence of censorship with the circular “SAX” hand stamp as well official tape used to reseal the cover after examination.

The “39” marking was probably also applied by the censor to indicate the individual or desk that reviewed the enclosure.

The “SAX” marking is certainly French, with the words “Ouvert Par Les autorités de control Vietnamiennes” in the outer ring.

The words “Kiem Soat” on the resealing tape mean “censored” in Vietnamese.



Cover from the collection of Richard Aspnes

### 'Kiem Soat' Label - 1956

This cover, shown front and back, illustrates the migration to a Vietnamese-language censor hand stamp.

The large letters "KS" in the center mean Kiem Soat, or censored. A mute numeral (41) was also applied, presumably representing the individual who censored the letter.

Overt evidence of censorship is virtually never seen on South Vietnamese mail after this point outside of mail sent from prisons and Chieu Hoi camps.

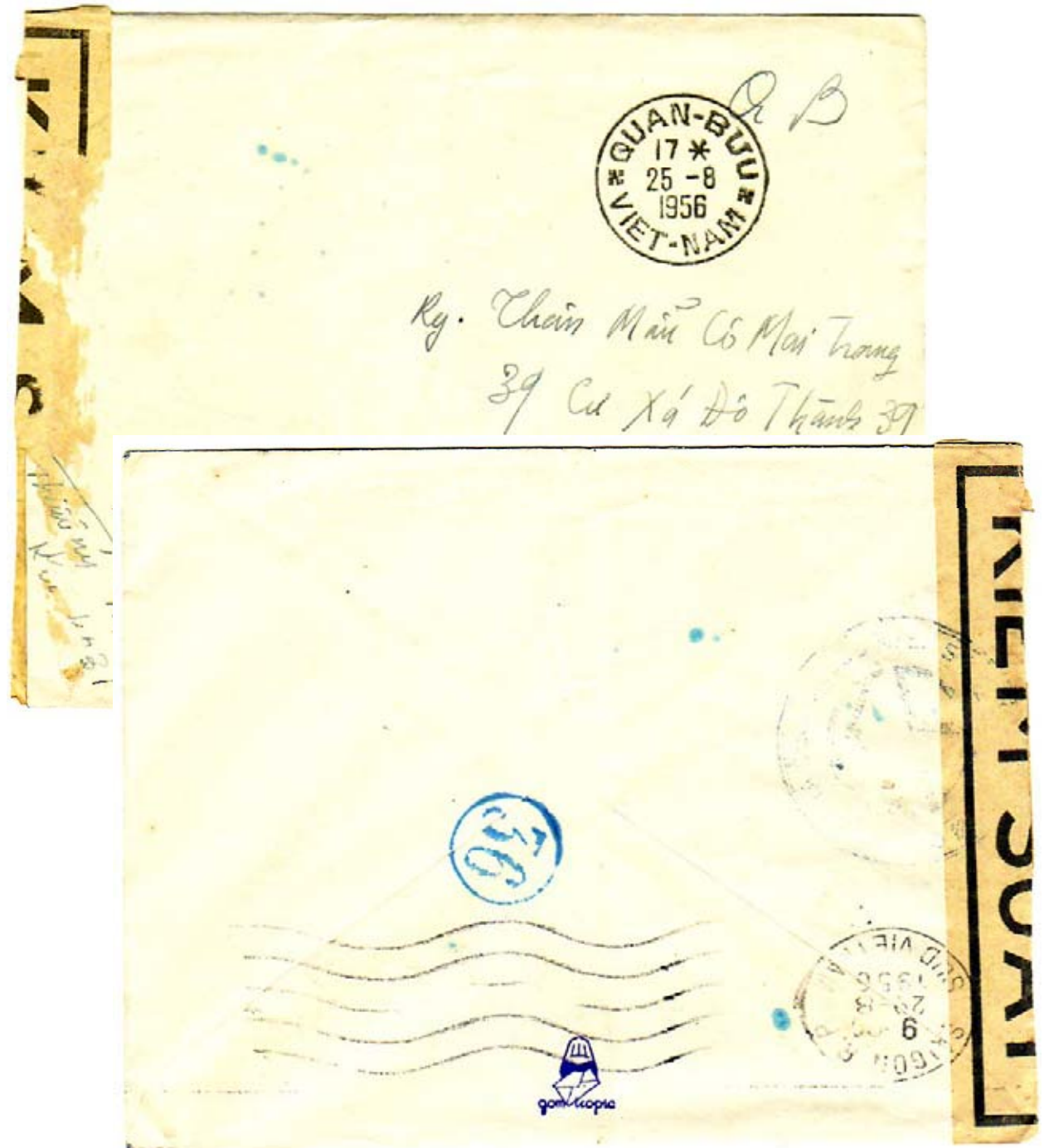


Cover from the collection of Richard Aspnes



### 'Kiem Soat' Label - 1956

Another example of a Kiem Soat label and faint "KS" hand stamp. From August 1956.



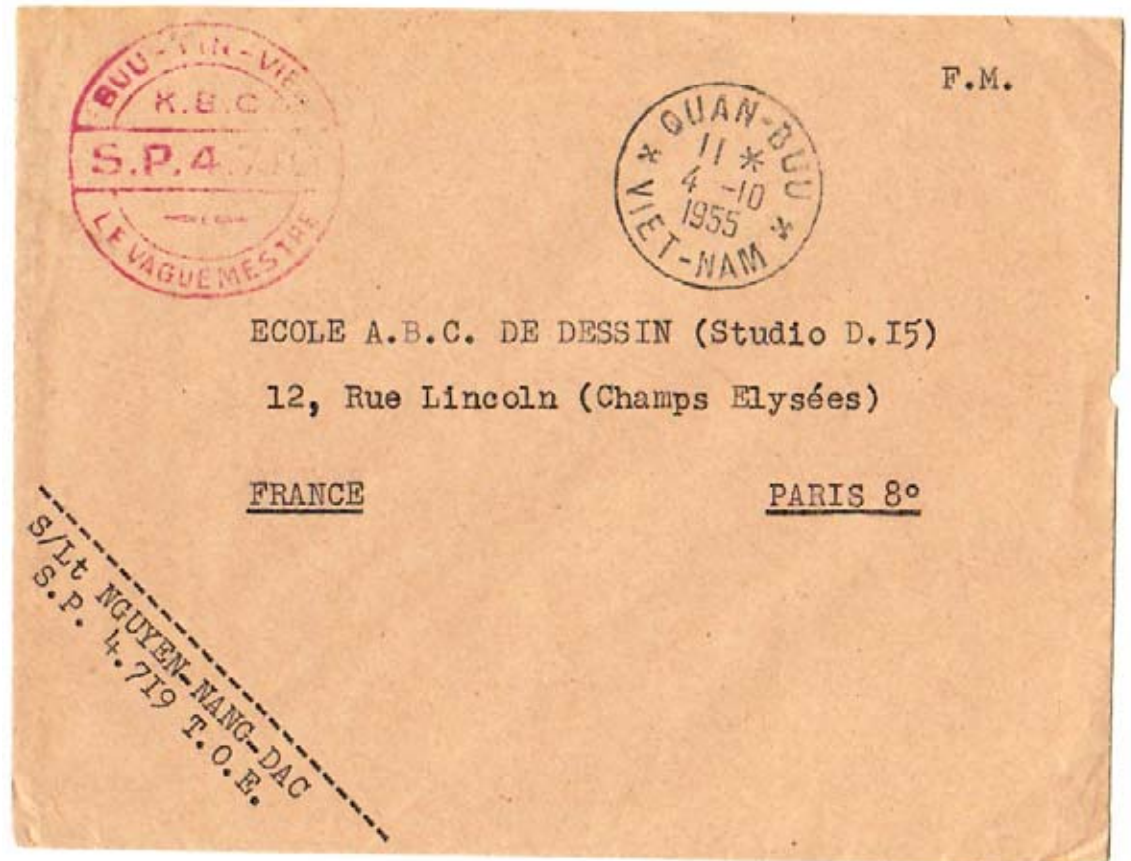


## Transitional KBC Cachet - 1955

This October 1955 cover is a nice example of transitional KBC cachet struck with red ink.

The Vietnamese BUU-TIN-VIEN is analogous to the French LE VAGUEMESTRE, both roughly meaning “mail messenger”.

Both “KBC” and “SP” abbreviations appear on the hand stamp.



## Oval Cachet - 1955

An oval cachet, reminiscent of the French style contains the Vietnamese “BUU-TIN-VIEN” and “KBC”. The return address contains the French abbreviations “SP” and “TOE”

October 1955 QUAN-BUU  
postmark

The reported location of KBC 4669 was An Phu Dong, just east of Saigon. It is not known the type of unit(s) it represented



## KBC Oval Cachet - 1955

This cover bearing an oval hand stamp cachet is an early Vietnamese Air Force cover from 12 Jan 1955 (note the words “Khong Quan” in the top of the oval).

KBC 4721 was the Air Force Training Center in Nha Trang





## S.P. Oval Cachet - 1955

This cover sent between military units bears a double-oval Le Vaguemestre cachet bearing an "SP" abbreviation



## State of Vietnam Armed Forces - 1955

Many fully Vietnamese KBC markings initially contained the text, "QUAN DOI QUOC GIA VIET NAM" meaning, "State of Viet-Nam Armed Forces" as shown in on this cover



## Vietnam Armed Forces - 1955

The words, “Quan Doi” were exchanged for “Quan Luc” under Ngo Dinh Diem, meaning “Vietnam Armed Forces” as shown on this cover, sent from the National Military Academy in Dalat at KBC 4027.

Note the “QUAN-BUU 8” postmark from 6 July 1955.





## Cachet with Unit Designation - 1955

Occasionally a postal zone marking can be found that includes a unit designation. The red hand stamp on this cover from 18 June 1955 reads, "FORCES ARMEES VIETNAMIENNES / 1st REGIMENT TROUPE DE ?NIES".

The pre-printed return address with KBC number provides a nice contrast.



## Standardized KBC Cachet Style - 1956

By 1956, the variety of KBC markings greatly diminished as most units adopted a standard cachet style that would be used with minor variations by Vietnamese units for the next 20 years.



## French and Vietnamese Military Postal Marking Terminology from the Period

### French Terms

Bureau Postal Militarie = Military Post Office

Post aux Armees = Army Post Office

Théâtres d'Opérations Exterieures (TOE) = External Occupied Territories / French Expeditionary Forces Abroad

Franchise Militaire (FM) = Military Franchise (used to indicate free delivery)

Le Vaguemestre = Officer responsible for the delivery of mail (Post Orderly)

Secteur Postal (SP) = Postal Sector or Zone

### Vietnamese Terms

Quan Buu = Army Post

Khu Buu Chin (KBC) = Postal Zone

Buu Tin Vien = Mail Messenger

Tong Thu Vien = Mail Messenger (used interchangeably with Buu Tien Vien)

Quan Doi Quoc Gia Viet-Nam = State of Viet-Nam Armed Forces

Quan Doi Viet-Nam Cong Hoa = Viet-Nam Armed Forces

Quan Luc Viet-Nam Cong Hoa = Viet-Nam Armed Forces (changed from Quan Doi by Diem)

Quan Thu (QT) = Military Mail

Chi Huy Truong = Commanding Officer

Buu Tram = Local Post Office

Buu Tin Thong Dich = Mail Translator