



UNTOLD TALES OF FALMOUTH

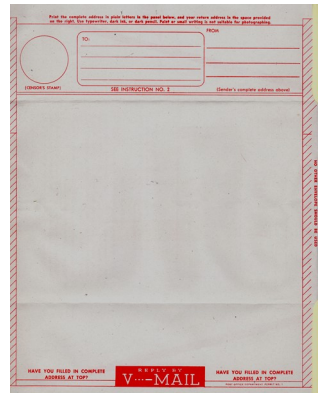
from the archives of Museums on the Green

Staying in Touch with V-Mail

When Americans went off to war in 1941, the military knew how important it was for them to stay in touch with the folks back home. The APO, or Army Post Office, was formed to see that mail between those in the service and their families would be efficiently delivered. It became apparent that more than the normal mail service was needed for those overseas, so in June 1942 the V-...Mail, or Victory Mail, system was developed. The dash and three dots between the V and Mail is the Morse Code symbol for V or Victory. The first overseas operation was established in Casablanca following the invasion of North Africa. Later it was extended to other parts of the world.

The Museums on the Green archives has some original V-Mail letter sheets that were a part of this system (see photo). A standard size, single sheet of paper formed both the letter and, when folded, the envelope for the letter. Both those in the military and their families, sweethearts and friends at home used V-Mail to write letters. In 1942, the *Falmouth Enterprise* announced that the V-Mail letter forms were available at the post office building at 120 Main Street. Anyone could pick up two V-Mail forms per day for use in the new system.

V-Mail became very popular. By July 1942, over 1,000,000 V-Mail letters had been sent to military troops outside the United States. When a letter was written on the V-Mail form with the appropriate postage (three cents for normal domestic and six cents for airmail) and placed in the mail, it was sent to the APO for delivery. The letters were microfilmed on a machine developed



Top: Luana Wirick, from her Falmouth high school yearbook, 1943. It's safe to bet that she used V-Mail to write to her husband, sailor Chester Weeks.

Bottom: Blank V-Mail form, c. 1944, in the Museums' archives.

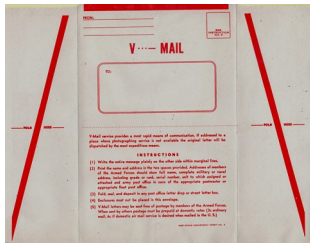
by Kodak, reducing the bulk and weight that normal paper letters would create. The small microfilm bundles were then shipped by air to locations overseas, where another Kodak machine printed the microfilmed letters onto paper for delivery to the addressee.

This system of mail delivery had been developed in 1941 by the British, again with the assistance of Kodak, when mail routes to the Middle East were blocked by German troops in North Africa.

The APO was a large organization with hundreds of workers both in the U.S. and overseas to handle the mail. Not only did the letters have to be microfilmed and then reprinted, but each letter had to be reviewed by censors to ensure no sensitive military information was included. Addresses were checked against a card file of all military personnel and their current locations.

There were practical limitations in the use of V-Mail. For example, no enclosures were allowed. However, in 1943 a method of transposing photos onto the V-Mail form was permitted. Yet even in this case, there were limits: only photos of “infants born after a soldier departed for overseas or those under 1 year of age” could be sent, though the photo could include the mother. Lipstick residue was harmful to the microfilm machinery, so impressing a kiss on the letter was forbidden. Splashing perfume on a V-Mail was pointless, as the scent could not be transferred to the printed facsimile.

Many V-Mail letters came in and out of Falmouth. On December 17, 1943, the *Enterprise* reported that selectmen had “received V-Mail Christmas greetings from Cpl. Theodore P. Robbins in Iran and Sgt. Michael Dutra who is also overseas.” Others thanked the *Enterprise* for its “Mail-Away” edition of the paper, provided free through the Board of Trade to troops overseas. One such V-Mail related how Richard DeMello of Teaticket, stationed in the Pacific, read in the *Enterprise* that another man from Falmouth was on the same island as himself, and the two were able to meet.



“JOE DOES THAT EVERYTIME HE GETS V-MAIL FROM HIS GAL”

Top: Falmouth post office, Main Street, 1940. The present-day brick post office was completed in 1940.

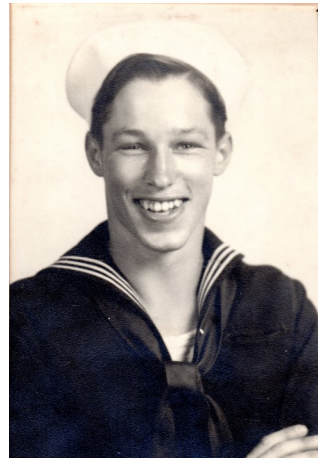
Middle: V-Mail form, reverse side, showing directions on how to fold it and write the address.

Bottom: The morale benefit of V-Mail was portrayed in this cartoon from the *Enterprise* of January 12, 1945.

Recently, the archives received photos and memorabilia of a local couple who almost certainly made use of V-Mail. Luana Wirick graduated from high school in Falmouth in May 1943. Her fiancé and fellow Quissett resident, Chester Weeks, had graduated two years before, and then enlisted in the navy. The couple married in June 1943. Luana joined Chester in St. Paul, Minnesota, where he was undergoing training. By January 1944, Chester was deployed and Luana was back in Quissett. She gave birth to a son in March.

Chester was a water tender, 2nd class, on the destroyer *Johnston*. He died on October 25, 1944, at the battle off Samar. Before sinking, the *Johnston*, along with its small escort unit (“Taffy 3”), held off a vastly superior Japanese naval force and protected the American beachhead at Leyte.

Chester never met his son. But, whether by slow surface mail or by the quicker, more reliable V-Mail, there’s a good chance that he did see a picture of him.



Water Tender 2nd Class
CHESTER S. WEEKS
Lost on destroyer Johnston
at Leyte Strait, Oct. 25, 1944

Terry White
edited by Meg Costello

Learn more:

[The Smithsonian describes how V-Mail was used.](#)

[Watch a 2 minute newsreel about the V-Mail system.](#)

[Read about the heroism of U.S.S. *Johnston*.](#)

[Watch a 5 minute video that explains the lead-up to the battle off Samar.](#)

[Watch a 2 minute video on the legendary charge of the U.S.S. *Johnston*.](#)

The rest of the battle is depicted [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#).