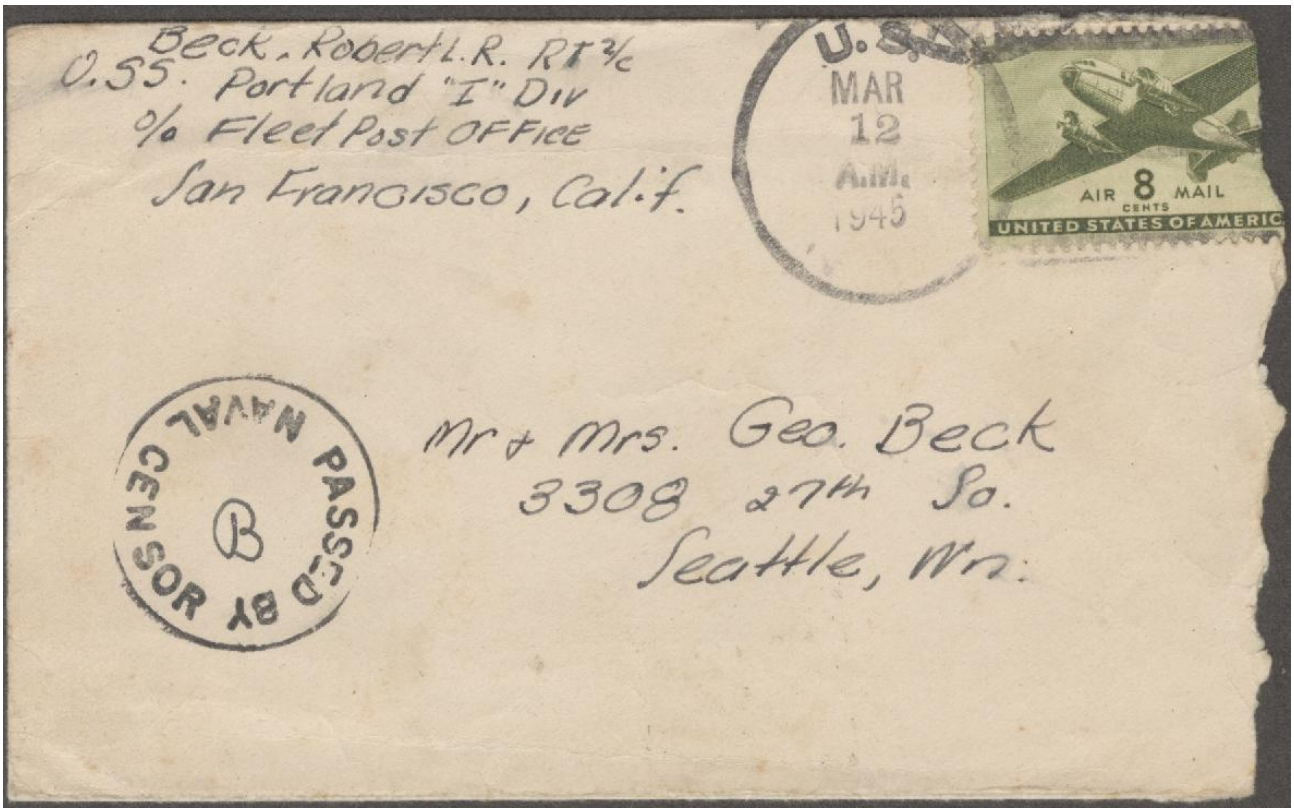
Postal History Rabbit Hole

By Francis Ferguson

I have always found it fascinating to research postal history to see where it takes one. This cover with the enclosed letter from a navy seaman dated 03.11.45 (about 6 months before the end of WWII) is a study in what can be found.



The USS Portland (CA-33)

The following paragraph from Wikipedia pretty much sums up the service record of the ship that was commissioned in 1933.

> *While she was identified as one of the few ships that had fought through the entire war and had not missed any major battle, no attempt was made to save her as a museum ship at either Portland, Maine, or Portland, Oregon. She was struck from the Navy List on 1 March 1959 and sold to Union Minerals and Alloys Corp. in New York on 6 October. She was scrapped at Wainwright Shipyard in Panama City, Florida, during 1961 and 1962.*
>
> *Her tripod mast was preserved at Fort Allen Park, Portland. She received 16 battle stars for World War II service, placing her among the most decorated US Naval vessels of World War II.*

There is much more online about the version of the ship that served in WWII and also a good deal about the newest version of the USS Portland (LPD-27) that was commissioned in 2018 for active duty. The ship CA-33 has a highly interesting and detailed history that can be found online.

The Receiver
From everything I can discover the letter is addressed to the parents who lived in Seattle, Washington. The residence today appears to be a 3-apartment residency which leads me to think the original home at some time in the past was subdivided into multiple apartments. After a good deal of poking around the World Wide Web, no further information can be found on the receiver of the letter.

The Sender
The transcribed letter found below appears exactly as it was written. The letter details family and friends' connections. Robert was 23 years old at that time of the letter being written. It was interesting to read about his Xmas package arriving in March – however that was par for the course from what I understand. I did find it interesting to see how many contractions he used while writing the letter – 17 of them! His cursive writing is exemplary and easily readable. He mentions the desire to be a father of a child sometime in his future.

Robert was rated as a RT-2/C which could be Radarman or Radar Technician specialty with a 2/C pay grade or class indicator (e.g., 2nd Class Petty Officer). War time documentation as to ratings is often sketchy.

I was able to find his obituary he died in 2019 at the age of 97 (B 1922 – D 2019). He was a hydraulics design engineer for The Boeing Co. for 35 years. He did have a son. While I was able to discover the son's name no further verifiable evidence could be found.

USS Portland
March 11, '45

Dear Folks,
It looks like it was really necessary for you to send this stationary to get me to write. I don't know why I have to be so darned lazy about writing—it's not that I haven't the time but I just can't muster the courage to start it.

First thanks for still writing. I really don't deserve it. I got your Xmas package a few days ago and everything in it was in good shape except the candy – that went over the side. Please tell all the folks that signed that good luck card thanks too. I remember most of the names—Hayes – the Boggs etc., but there are some new ones I don't think I've met.

Frank wrote a letter from Italy sounded like he was making out alright. As yet he hadn't been on his first mission. I expect that before long though he will see some real action.

I really felt proud – kinda of strutted a little when I got news of their baby Boy that makes me an uncle, doesn't it? I think it would be more fun to be a father though.

Tell Dick not to the sorry about the navy – he isn't missing much. Life at sea gets pretty darn dull at times. I do hope he can get into something besides the army—that should not happen to a dog—of course the army air corps that's different. I don't know why doesn't try the merchant marines – at least they can back to the states every 3 or 4 months.

I got a letter from Del, before he got married, seemed pretty happy about the coming event. First thing you know I'll be the only bachelor left.

I also got a letter just today from Butler. It seems he's made first class RT, although he didn't mention it in his letter. He was one swell guy and I often wondered if he ever came to the house after I had left for Frisco.

The navy has relaxed some on its censoring rules so although I can't tell you where and what I'm doing right now, I believe I can say a little of what's happened up to the present. Well first we went to Pearl Harbor. From Pearl we crossed the equator and headed for Guadalcanal. On crossing the line, I received the customary treatment of all "polli-wogs". Salt water bath on the deck while trying to swim – hair cut so I looked like a convict, gives you some idea of what we went through.

After Guadalcanal we proceeded to bombard and take Peleliu Island not just us but we were there. Next came Leyte, Mindoro and Luzon all in the Philipines. I guess you read and heard all about that—anyway we were also that. Maybe you heard about the battle of Surigao Straits, which was supposed to be a great naval thriumph. The Portland was in that too. We got credit for a Jap Battleship that night. All in all I've seen a little action since leaving the states. At times I was scared silly – didn't know whether to run-sit- or go blind, no place to run though – so just stayed where I was.

So far we've not been hit – either we're awful lucky or we've got a darn good Captain and crew – I think it's the later. Anyway don't worry about me everythings okay and I feel fine.

So long for now
Love Bob
p.s. Send a dozen white socks.
2nd P.S. How about that picture you were going to send – any picture you have their swell.

Robert Lee Roy Beck RT 2/c

[Associate Editor's Note: (1) If the descendants of Robert Lee Roy Beck would like this letter back in their possession as part of the family history – please contact me. (2) I would like to thank Phil Fettig for deciphering rank/rating information for the sender. His depth of knowledge in this area provides added interest to the article. FF]