

My Favourite Cover

Charles Lloyd

The *Ligne Aérienne du Roi Albert* (LARA) inaugurated an airmail service between Kinshasa and Gombe on the on the 1st July 1920 and had extended this to Stanleyville by the 1st July 1921. The Congo River could be used to advantage: flying-boats would be used, obviating the need for constructing landing fields; fuel could be carried on river boats to the landing sites and navigation done by following the course of the river. Though the LARA was an excellent proposal, a trial was needed to determine its viability.



This is a letter sent by airmail from Coquilhatville to Kinshasa and carried on a LARA flight (probably the last). After arrival at Kinshasa, there was an instruction to “forward to Kindia on Kwilu” (*faire suivre à Kindia s/Kwilu*).



Transit mark on the reverse:
BANDUNDU 21 VI 22.17
(Heim & Keach Type 5D1-)



Route of the LARA 1, showing the locations of places that are relevant to the cover (●). Kwilu is a district (■) in which palm oil production was becoming the main economic activity (Nicolai, 2013)

This is a "Wallon" cover, four of which are known to exist today and are identified by their registration numbers which are 701, 709, 710 and 716. The late Norman Clowes (1997) reported that the appearance of all of these covers is almost identical and thought that a reasonable assumption for the number posted would be 20. Undoubtedly, they are philatelic in nature.

It was posted at Colquihatville on the 11th June 1922 (Heim & Keach, Type 5C-Dmyt postmark) and flown to Kinshasa, after which it was put on a riverboat and carried to Kwamouth. From there it was taken along the Kwa River to Bandundu (Heim & Keach, Type 5D1-Dmyt transit mark, dated 21st June 1922). Gudenkauf has presented a map that shows that the Kwilu River and its tributary, the Inzia River were navigable at least as far as Inzia. Thus, delivery was completed by a smaller boat. NB. Kwilu was a district producing palm oil through which the eponymous river ran.

Franking for postage (25c) and registration (50c) are correct, being applicable to a letter < 20g in weight. However, at this date the tax for air carriage of a letter of such a weight was 3Fr. The full set of airmail stamps has been applied, amounting to 8.50Fr. Undoubtedly, such a high over-franking (5.50Fr) is philatelic, to have the full set on the envelope.

It is an interesting and attractive envelope. However, delve a little deeper and there is more to uncover. A decision to suspend the LARA service was taken on the 1st May 1922, and confirmed officially on the 7th June. (Although the trial was deemed to be a success, the tropical conditions had taken their toll on the wooden aircraft structure and continuation of a service could not be undertaken.) It had been assumed that the aircraft were flown back to Kinshasa during the intervening period. Clowes believed that such dates always lacked precision and that the arrival of the SS Alberville at Matadi on the 7th June (Delbeke, 2009) might have prompted a final flight. The Alberville was to depart for Antwerp on the 19th. (The previous mailboat was the SS Anversville which had sailed from the Congo on the 29th May, a date before confirmation that the air link was to stop.) After careful analysis, Clowes concluded that the routing given above was not only feasible but also the most probable. He also made a telling observation that, as a local, Felix Wallon would be aware that this last flight would take place and not outlay 195Fr unless air carriage was assured. The posting of 20 covers to himself marks Wallon as a philatelic dealer or speculator.

But who was Felix Wallon? There is little published on him and available on the internet. But, there is an article on a cover sent by him (de Rudder, 2007) and I own a postcard addressed to him.

I bought my postcard (Stibbe 44) in a BCSC auction many years ago for its BPCVPK N°1 cancellation. It had been addressed to "Monsieur Felix Wallon, BMS, Lukolela, Congo Belge". Lukolela is situated on the south bank of the Congo River about 30km downstream from Gombe and is where the Baptist Missionary Society established a station in 1886. Six postage stamps (probably from the 1916 EAAOB issue) had been stuck on the message side and cancelled by favour, Tabora 8th

February 1917 (double circle postmark). Unfortunately, these stamps have long since been removed and only outlines left by discolouration of the card remain. Clearly, M. Wallon had an interest in philately and would contact postmasters to obtain interesting items. What was he doing at Lukolela must be speculation. From the three items of mail, being a missionary seems unlikely. The postcard was sent during the war and he could have been employed on the important River Congo supply route. (Note: In Bulletin 173, Eric Coulton asks members for information on the Belgian convoys operated in early 1917 that carried German internees / POWs from Tabora through the Belgian Congo to Boma and then on to Europe.)



The second item is an envelope featured in an article written by de Rudder in 2007. It was posted on the 19th December 1917 at Dodoma and sent to a Belgian casualty at Le Havre. On the flap Wallon identifies himself as “*Sender - Félix Wallon Belge RTO*”. It was sent by way of the British Indian Army Postal Service through London to arrive in France on the 5th March 1918. Not unreasonably, de Rudder attributes this rarely seen use of a British military postal service by a Belgian national to Wallon being a military man seconded to British forces. The central railway running from Dar-es-Salaam to Kigoma was a primary supply line for the allies in 1917 and the key rail town of Dodoma would have had a Belgian Rail Transport Officer (*Belge RTO*). Although RTO is a British military acronym, this does not preclude a civilian appointment. It would be more important for the individual to be an expert in transport management than being a serving officer. Clearly, M. Wallon had been relocated and the envelope containing his letter was not intended to be philatelic.

What can we conclude? Felix Wallon was at Lukolela in February 1917, at Dodoma in December 1917 and at Kindia in June 1922. He was interested (and appears to have been knowledgeable) in philately and by investing in multiple covers he expected to profit. During the 1920s palm oil exports from the Belgian Congo increased dramatically (by over 20% each year: Nicolai, 2013), which required a commensurate expansion of the transport fleet. Did Wallon remain in the colony after the war and take employment in the palm oil industry (for which Kwilu was a major production area)? There is direct (at Dodoma) and circumstantial (at Lukolela) evidence that transportation management was his profession.

Are there other Wallon covers owned by our members?

References

- Clowes N. (1997) *Airmail covers from Coquilhatville 11.6.22*. The Bulletin of The Belgian Congo Study Circle, Number 103 : Page 6
- Coulton E. (2016) *Wants*. The Bulletin of The Belgian Congo Study Circle, Number 173 : Page 12
- Delbek C.J.P. (2009) *The Belgian Maritime Mail*. Club de Monte Carlo : Page 476
- de Rudder A. (2007) *Out of Africa*. Académie de Philatelie. Brussels : April 2007
- Gudenkauf G. (1986) *Mailboat Steamers on Congo Rivers and Lakes (1896 – 1940)*. Cockrill Series Booklet Number 43, Newbury England : Page 2
- Heim A.I. and Keach R.E. (2004) *Cancellation of the Normal Post Offices of the Belgian Congo 1886 – 1960 and Ruanda-Urundi 1917 – 1962*. 3rd Edition. The Belgian Congo Study Circle
- Nicolai H. (2013) *Le Congo et l’Huile de Palme. Un Siècle. Uncycle?* Belgian Journal of Geography, Part 4
- Stibbe J. (1986) *Entiers Postaux du Congo et du Ruanda-Urundi*. Pro-Poste, Brussels