



UNITED STATES GENERAL ACCOUNTING OFFICE

WASHINGTON, D.C. 20548

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[Security Procedures of the Military Postal System]

LOGISTICS AND COMMUNICATIONS DIVISION

B-114874

APRIL 19, 1979

The Honorable Harold Brown  
The Secretary of Defense

The Honorable William F. Bolger  
Postmaster General  
United States Postal Service



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We have completed our review of the Military Postal Service (MPS) and have identified weaknesses in procedures and practices used to safeguard registered mail. In our opinion the military services were not adequately controlling U.S. registered mail tendered to U.S. commercial air carriers at overseas air terminals. Registered mail, which may have contained classified documents up to and including SECRET, was being

- tendered to, secured, and controlled by foreign nationals;
- tendered to commercial carriers under manifest documents which did not identify the mail as registered and which could not be used to hold the carrier responsible for losses; and
- controlled, while in the hands of the carrier, under a system which did not permit timely verification of when or if the mail was dispatched and received.

The above weaknesses, especially when considered collectively, caused serious concern over the security of classified material transmitted overseas as registered mail. The Assistant Secretary of Defense, Comptroller (Administration), is aware of the situation and has established requirements that U.S. personnel observe registered mail during the loading and unloading of aircraft and while in the hands of foreign nationals. We believe the proposed revisions, if properly implemented, will provide additional security needed to

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safeguard registered mail. However, the new procedures will be difficult to implement at some locations and will not solve the problem of lack of accountability and untimely verification of receipts and losses.

A separate report on our overall observations on MPS will be issued later.

#### WEAKNESSES IN MAIL SECURITY PROCEDURES

##### Foreign national handling of U.S. registered mail

MPS uses U.S. commercial or Military Airlift Command cargo flights to transmit registered mail to, from, and between overseas locations. U.S. airlines at overseas terminals employ foreign nationals to handle cargo, including mail. The mail, while being handled by foreign nationals, was often not kept under U.S. surveillance. This violated the National Security Council directive, dated May 17, 1972, governing the classification, downgrading, declassification, and safeguarding of national security information, which stated that SECRET material transmitted through MPS may not pass out of U.S. citizens' control at any time. The directive was superseded on December 1, 1978, by the Information Security Oversight Office Directive No. 1, which contained essentially the same provision as the National Security Council directive.

At overseas commercial air terminals, foreign national employees of U.S. air carriers accepted registered mail tendered to them by U.S. military personnel. At two known locations the foreign nationals placed the registered mail in secured cages while awaiting flight departures. While in secured areas, the mail was under the exclusive control of the carrier. At one location we found the carrier had given the responsibility for maintaining the security cage to a commercial security firm. Thus, foreign national employees of a foreign security company had total control over and access to all U.S. registered mail.

Similar weaknesses were also found for in-bound and in-transit mail which was received, unloaded, and secured by foreign national carrier representatives. At one location we found that local procedures even permitted in-bound registered mail to be routed through a foreign customs area prior to delivery to the carrier cargo area.

Inadequate documentation and  
untimely identification of losses

Under Postal Service procedures, commercial carriers acknowledge receipt of bulk mail volumes tendered to them, but do not sign for each bag or outside piece. Mail manifest documents, signed by the carrier, identify the cargo as "mail" and the number and weight of the bags, but the documents do not show the quantities of registered mail that were delivered, the registry numbers of outside pieces, the seal numbers of the bags, or when the bags were dispatched by the carrier. Furthermore, the manifest document does not follow the mail. Thus, if registered mail is lost, responsibility cannot be affixed to the airlines or the military.

A control system has been devised and the Postal Service and MPS are using it to identify registered mail that is not received at the intended destination. Under the system a receipt document identifying the pouches and outside pieces of registered mail dispatched and their registry or seal number is attached to the final pouch of registered mail prior to dispatch. Upon receipt of the mail at destination, the document is returned to the originator. The failure to receive a confirmation within a reasonable period--usually about 2 weeks--results in the originator initiating a followup. The receipt is the only document that follows registered mail.

The above system is sound in that it identifies mail losses but it does not affix responsibility for losses nor is it timely. Time delays in the receipt and followup process procedures are such that classified material can be lost or compromised for extended periods of time before the registered mail is identified as missing. According to one service, the verification cycle can take weeks to complete and, in some cases, documents remain outstanding and unanswered even after several months. In 1978, 59 tracers were sent from the Frankfurt, Germany, military air terminal to the John F. Kennedy International Airport in New York to confirm whether registered mail had been received.

The above procedures became effective on March 1, 1975. Before that time the Postal Service maintained a chain of receipts on registered mail, including its flow through commercial air carriers. We were advised that under the old system, registered mail was also placed in special security containers. The Postal Service abolished this requirement, like the chain of receipts, in an effort to economize.

We were advised that during fiscal year 1977, 54 pouches of mail containing 150 pieces of registered mail were reported lost in the Pacific area, and during the first 9 months of fiscal year 1978, 24 pouches containing 107 pieces were also reported lost in the same area. Most of the losses occurred on flights originating in and/or destined to Bangkok, Manila, Seoul, and Tokyo. We were advised that at least one piece of mail was a classified document. We did not identify any mail losses destined to and from Europe, but found that three containers of registered mail dispatched from London during 1977 were misplaced for 3 months. A delayed tracer resulted in the containers ultimately being found in a remote location at the John F. Kennedy International Airport. Although no classified documents were involved in this incident, it does demonstrate the inherent risk in using the system for sensitive material.

Military postal personnel have filed irregularity reports against the airlines for "failure to protect" registered mail in their custody. Airlines have responded that attempting to hold them responsible for the losses is unreasonable because registered mail documentation does not require proof of delivery. Therefore, neither the airlines nor the military personnel who last handled the missing mail can be held responsible for nondelivery.

When the Air Force's Office of Special Investigations has been asked to investigate mail losses, it generally declines because the audit/investigative trail is lost when the chain of receipts is broken.

New DOD procedures designed  
to correct the problem

Loose control over registered mail was the subject of a recent Assistant Secretary of Defense (Manpower, Reserve Affairs and Logistics) study. The study group found that registered mail tendered to U.S. commercial air carriers was being handled by foreign nationals at 11 of 12 foreign points of entry and proposed that Defense divert all official registered mail destined to, from, or between overseas locations to the Military Airlift Command. We were advised that the Postal Service rejected this proposal primarily because of legal problems that would result from the Command competing with U.S. commercial air carriers. Subsequently, the Assistant Secretary re-evaluated possible alternatives and on October 13, 1978, requested the Secretary of the Air Force, in coordination with other military departments, to

"\* \* \* take action to ensure that military personnel are made available to observe the opening of aircraft cargo compartments and continuously maintain the containers carrying the registered mail under their direct, personal surveillance during the offloading and until the registered mail is transferred into the custody of MPS personnel. Military personnel are also to be made available at these same overseas locations to dispatch the registered mail addressed to CONUS [Continental United States] addresses \* \* \*."

The new procedures had not been implemented as of February 1979 primarily because MPS staffing is insufficient to perform the required surveillance. Implementing the new procedures at some locations will be difficult because some MPS mail terminals are located several miles from airport facilities which will cause logistical and communications problems. Additionally, at one overseas location the U.S. military has been denied ramp access by the host government.

#### CONCLUSION

The system used by MPS to control U.S. registered mail at overseas commercial air terminals is weak and could compromise U.S. security. The system permits registered mail, which may contain classified material up to and including SECRET documents, to be (1) handled and controlled by foreign nationals, (2) passed from hand to hand without signature control for accountability, and (3) controlled under a system which does not permit timely verification of receipts and losses. The new procedures should, if properly implemented, help resolve the U.S. citizen control issue. However, the lack of accountability and control will still remain.

#### RECOMMENDATION

We recommend that the Secretary of Defense evaluate the new procedures of placing U.S. registered mail under U.S. citizen control. We also recommend that the Secretary of Defense, and the Postmaster General in consultation with U.S. commercial airlines, seek cost-effective ways to strengthen controls and accountability for registered mail. Consideration should be given to (1) requiring that registered mail be transported to, from, and between overseas locations in security containers, (2) instituting a system of hand-to-hand receipt between military officials and commercial carriers

of registered mail, and (3) establishing a rapid communications system between those locations that receive and dispatch registered mail, thereby facilitating the early verification of receipts and the detection of losses.

MPS COMMENTS

MPS headquarters and unit officials concur in the need for improved security over registered mail destined to and from overseas areas. They have expressed a special concern about the lack of accountability over registered mail tendered to commercial carriers. However, they have no alternative but to follow Postal Service procedures.

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As you know, section 236 of the Legislative Reorganization Act of 1970 requires the head of a Federal agency to submit a written statement on actions taken on our recommendations to the Senate Committee on Governmental Affairs and the House Committee on Government Operations not later than 60 days after the date of the report and to the House and Senate Committees on Appropriations with the agency's first request for appropriations made more than 60 days after the date of the report.

We are sending copies of this report to the Chairmen of the House Committees on Appropriations, on Armed Services, on Government Operations, and on Post Office and Civil Service; the Chairmen of the Senate Committees on Appropriations, on Armed Services, and on Governmental Affairs; the Postmaster General; and the Director, Office of Management and Budget.

We would appreciate being advised of actions taken on the matters discussed in this report.



R. W. Gutmann  
Director