

Naval Cover Fakes, Forgeries and Frauds, Part V

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Fred Karcher Vietnam Covers

Frederick L. Karcher, Jr., USCS 4426, had a rather checkered career in the USCS culminating in his mention in this series. Fred joined the USCS in June 1962 while living in Brooklyn, New York, and later moved to Millis, Massachusetts where he was member of the Old Ironsides Chapter # 1. He eventually became the chapter cachet director and identified the cacheted covers he produced for the chapter with "Old Ironsides Chapter" or "Chapter One" and FLK sponsor. After a time, OI chapter members realized that Fred was not providing any proceeds to the chapter treasury from chapter cover sales and politely told him to stop using the chapter name and number as sponsor in the future. Thereafter, Karcher identified his sponsored covers with a number of logos - Boston Naval Group, BNG, Narragansett Group or NNG when he lived in Bristol, Rhode Island and FALKON covers after he moved to Milford, New Jersey.

Fred Karcher's life was cut short in 1982 by heart failure and his extensive collection, estimated at over a million covers, was purchased by a group of USCS members who were astonished to find evidence of significant fakery. They destroyed tens of thousands of covers which they deemed fraudulent saving only examples for the record. Unfortunately, some of Karcher's fraudulent covers - the Vietnam era ones, were thought to be legit and came onto the market in the late 1990s.

Karcher left records which shed light on how he obtained the Vietnam era covers. He apparently learned from public records when ships were to deploy to the Western Pacific. While he did not know when the ships would actually be in the war zone, his solution was to send pre-franked covers, 25 at a time, with a letter of instructions to the mail clerk (he never asked for anything, only gave strict orders). His cover letter had numbered paragraphs instructing the navy mail clerk in essence to: (1) hold the covers until you are in the combat zone (2) place your personal return address stamp on each cover and sign it to validate the frank (a few mail clerks actually did this), and (3) return the covers in the large SASE that Karcher provided, not through the mail.

We may wonder why any mail clerk would comply with such orders, and it is likely that the third paragraph is the answer --the postal clerks who returned his covers viewed them as mere souvenirs and not real pieces of mail because they always went back under separate cover. Incidentally, many mail clerks refused to service the covers and returned them uncanceled. The general reasons given for returning the unserviced covers were: (1) the Navy's

limit is 5 per person, (2) we are not in the combat zone and (3) your free frank is not valid.

Although Karcher was later involved with forged postmarks, the postmarks on the Vietnam covers are all believe to be genuine. Nevertheless, the covers themselves are not true postal history and are fraudulent in the fact that "Free" mail was authorized solely for personnel in the war zone, not for collectors inspired covers.

When I first saw the Karcher Vietnam covers being sold on the Internet and in dealers boxes, my suspicions were aroused on two levels: first, many were addressed to Karcher and second, the "Free" frank on covers postmarked on different ships was obviously written/printed by the same hand. I accumulated two dozen of the covers and checked sources available on the location of the ships on the postmarked date. I found that two thirds could not be placed in the war zone; some ships were in R&R ports in Hong Kong or Japan, some were at Subic, Philippine Islands and one ship had returned to her home port in San Diego on the postmark date. Data was not available on the balance of the sample, but the preponderance of evidence was against their authenticity. Actually, very few ships were stationed in Vietnam. Most were based at Subic (which was not in the combat zone) and shuttled back and forth to the gun line, usually only staying there for two or three weeks before returning to Subic. And while on the gun line, the crews were busy conducting war operations, often at general quarters, certainly not on a pleasure cruise. Doubtless, the postal clerks were not inclined to spend time servicing souvenir covers for a collector.

The word was put out by various means that the Karcher Vietnam era covers were not what they purported to be and the covers slowly were removed from sale. I purchased a small amount to get them out of circulation and Stewart Milstein culled the sales circuits to remove whatever he found. Currently, I have a sample file of 281 of Karcher's Vietnam covers, an analysis of which provides a good picture of his activity.

Analysis of a 281 sample of Karcher's Vietnam-related covers

Karcher annotated his Vietnam (VN) covers in two ways: "Free" and "Free Combat Zone" written or printed in the upper right part of the cover. The two markings actually provided something of a timeline for his work. He started with the "Combat Zone" marking, transitioned to just "Free" in 1969 and pretty much used "Free" in 1970 and afterward.

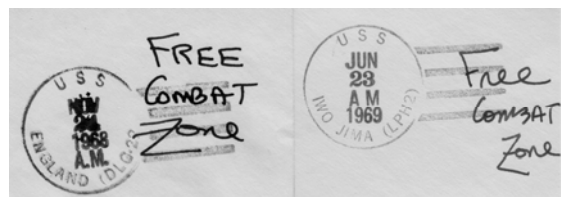


Figure 1: Examples of Karcher's "Free Combat Zone" hand frank



Figure 1a: Two examples of Karcher's "Free Combat Zone" hand frank

The earliest covers received the "Free Combat Zone" marking, with the earliest postmark in the sample 18 October 1966 and the latest 2 May 1971. The date distribution in the sample is as follows:

1966- 1; 1967- 6; 1968- 18; 1969- 31; 1970- 1; 1971- 4 (all from the same ship, same date); total 61.

- In addition, there were 13 covers (mixed dates) either with a corner card or hand return address by the PC
- There were also 3 covers with "Free Combat Zone" marking but no cancel
- Total sample of "Free Combat Zone" covers -77

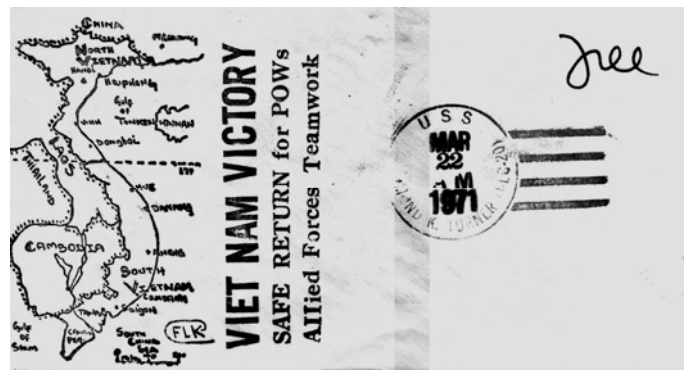


Figure 2a: Typical example of Karcher "Free" frank Vietnam cover with Vietnam rubber stamp cachet

-The earliest cover in the sample simply marked "Free" was dated 23 Jan 1968. The date distribution for these covers is as follows:

1968- 2; 1969- 11; 1970- 76; 1971- 23; 1972- 23; 1973- 7; 1974- 3 with the latest date 23 Apr 1974, total 145.

-In addition, there were 31 covers (mixed dates) either with a corner card or hand return address by the PC.

-There were also 28 covers with "Free" but no cancel, Figure 3.

-Total sample of "Free" covers – 204.

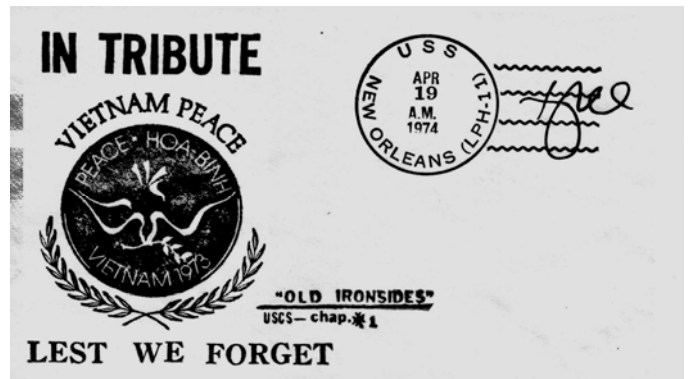


Figure 2b: Example of Karcher's "Free" frank Vietnam cover showing reuse of an earlier cover, this one with an Old Ironsides sponsored logo.

"Free" marking

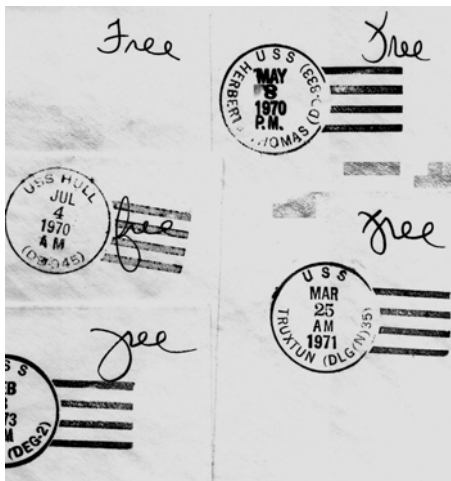


Figure 2: Examples of Karcher's "Free" frank, although slightly different in format, all were obviously done in the same hand.

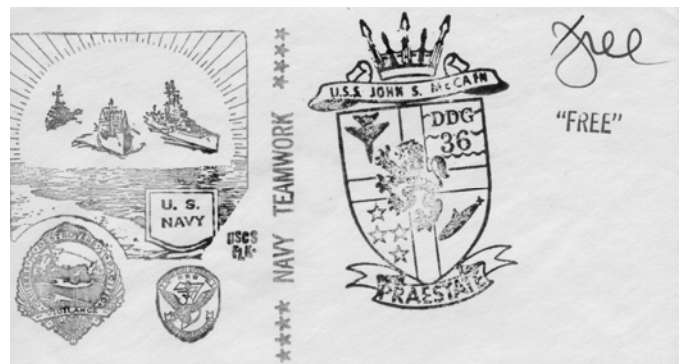


Figure 3: Example of Karcher Vietnam "Free" frank cover not serviced by ship. However, postal clerk did add the ship's rubber stamp cachet.

I note that: 89% of the covers in the sample actually were postmarked by the PC and 15% of the covers received some sort of return hand or rubber stamped marking from the PC beside the cancel.

A total of 5 covers in the sample with no “Free” or “Free Combat Zone” were franked with stamps but had insufficient postage, three with 1 cent, one with five cents, one with 6 cents. These all were postmarked and delivered without any postage due marking.

Not all the covers in the sample were from front line warships. A sprinkling of tender (AS), repair ship (AR), attack transport (APA/AKA) and even some ARL covers with a “Free” type marking were cancelled. Clearly these ships never were on the gun line and, other than the ARL, most likely were not in waters contiguous to the war zone. At best, they would be been in Subic Bay or some other similar location not eligible for “Free” frank.

The cachets were mostly Vietnam or war related, **Figures 4, 5, & 6**. However, there were cachets for 25th Anniversary of D-Day, Battle of Leyte Gulf, MacArthur, Eisenhower and a paste-on of Okinawa invasion. It seems that Karcher used whatever was on hand in addition to his VN specific cachets. The most plentiful cachet was on the VN map with various hand stamps on or with that cachet, **Figure 7**. Many cachets were rubber stamped but there were a goodly number of thermograph cachets.

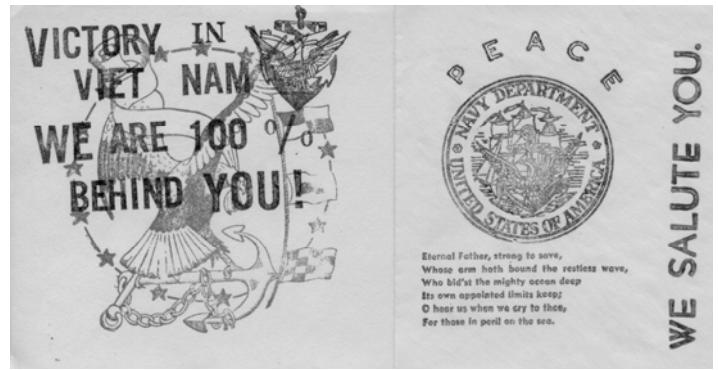


Figure 6: Additional examples of two frequently found Karcher Vietnam cachets

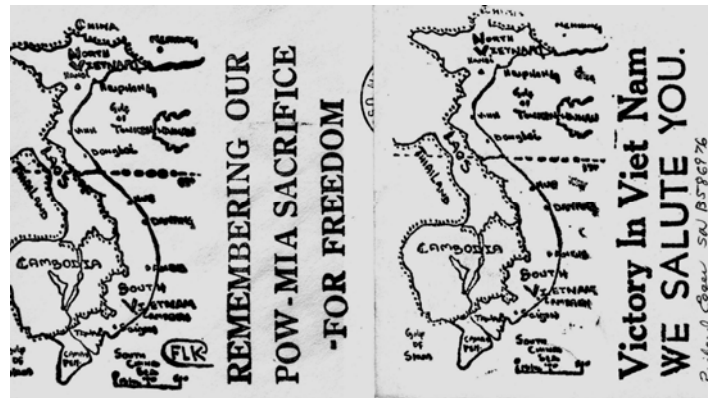


Figure 7: Two examples of most often seen Karcher Vietnam cachets with the Vietnam map augmented by a two or three line rubber stamp wording.



Figure 4: Examples of two frequently found Karcher Vietnam cachets.



Figure 5: Two more examples of frequently found Karcher Vietnam cachets.

Bottom Line

I'm reasonably certain that Karcher Vietnam covers are in collections somewhere, purchased before word was circulated that they are frauds. When the collections are sold, the covers will again surface. Hopefully, with publication of this series, potential purchasers should have the necessary information available to make an informed decision. If you have such covers in your collection, do everyone a favor and mark them “Fraudulent” in ink on reverse. We all owe it to our successors to keep the record honest.

Resource

Appreciation to Dave Kent for the description of Karcher's methods in obtaining his cancels. Dave also believes that on the covers with 1-cent stamps and no apparent postage due collected, those were also returned under separate cover, so the deficiency in postage was not apparent.

On the Web-site

The complete series of *Naval Cover Fakes, Forgeries and Frauds* will be posted on the USCS web-site when completed.