

Boy Scout Postal Service during the Chaco War (1932-35)

Hallvard Slettebø FRPSL

Chaco

The Chaco War (1932-35) was fought between Bolivia and Paraguay over control of the northern part of the Gran Chaco region (the Chaco Boreal), which was incorrectly thought to be rich in oil. It was the bloodiest military conflict fought in the Americas during the 20th century.

The Chaco region is a triangular shaped area of around 300,000 square kilometres situated between Bolivia and Paraguay bounded by the Pilcomayo River on the south-west, the Paraguay River on the east and the Bolivian Plateau on the north-west. It is a very inhospitable region and, at the time of the war, was largely unpopulated apart from a few primitive Indians and an odd small farming community from the Mennonite Sect.

The Chaco War (1932-35)

Hostile incidents began as early as 1928. The conflict stemmed from the outcome of the War of the Pacific (1879-84), in which Chile defeated Bolivia and annexed that nation's entire coastal region. Though the region was sparsely populated, control of the Paraguay River running through it would have given one of the two landlocked countries access to the Atlantic Ocean. This was especially important to Bolivia, which had lost its Pacific Ocean coast to Chile in the War of the Pacific (1883). Also, Bolivia had found oil in 1924 in the Tarija region of the country. They wished to exploit the full economic benefits by transporting it through the Chaco to the Paraguay River (navigable for large barges) and, eventually, out into the Atlantic.

Bolivia seemed to enjoy overwhelming advantages over Paraguay: it had thrice the latter's population, a well-trained army and an ample supply of arms purchased by loans from American banks. But the morale of Bolivia's army of Indian conscripts was low, and Paraguayans were better fitted to fight in the lowland swamps and jungles, in which many Bolivians died of disease and snakebite as well as gunfire. Both countries had maintained military posts in the disputed region.

Paraguay formally declared war on May 10, 1933, and launched a series of attacks along an extended front late in October and made impressive gains. Paraguay's advance continued into indisputably Bolivian territory in January 1935. After Bolivian counterattacks put Paraguayan forces on the defensive, a truce was arranged on June 12, 1935. About 100,000 men lost their lives in the war. A peace treaty was signed in Buenos Aires on July 21, 1938. Paraguay gained clear title to most of the disputed region, but Bolivia was given a corridor to the Paraguay River.

Chaco War postal history

Despite the numbers of troops involved and the three year time period, covers from the conflict are relatively uncommon. The most frequently seen war-related covers are examples of handstamped military censors on civilian mails from the Bolivian side (Paraguay did not censor civilian mails during the conflict). Many of the military covers that have survived show neither dates nor originations. Nevertheless some collectors have taken on the task to form multi-frame exhibits with Chaco War postal history, and at the London 2010 International Stamp Exhibition two eight-frame exhibits were devoted to this topic. Both of these exhibits received well-deserved gold medals, but even more interesting, both exhibits included one Boy Scout cover, and both exhibitors stated that the covers had been carried by Boy Scouts! The covers in question were sent from the war zones and adorned a Boy Scout handstamp in golden brown colour in addition to military mail handstamps.

Boy Scouts were involved

Thus the search goes to find more information about this Boy Scout postal service. An internet search gave only one hit, at the history section of the website <http://scouts.org.py/> of Asociación de Scouts del Paraguay (ASP) (translated to the Scouts Association of Paraguay). The website is in Spanish only.

The ASP was founded in 1960 but a former association was “Federación Paraguaya de Scoutismo” (Paraguayan Federation of Scouting), which was founded in 1928 and united all activities and institutions of Scouting in Paraguay. From their website we find this interesting information (roughly translated):

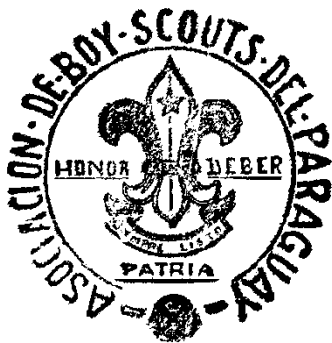
“In the Chaco War, the young Boy Scouts participated as couriers (delivering letters and parcels) to the personnel in the theatre of operations, thanks to their organization and discipline. The then Scout president was Mr. Hipolito Carron. During one bombing, a result of numerous wounded, the Boy Scouts also had to act as stretcher-bearers and nurses. They were soon removed from the battle front, because most of them were just kids (although they resisted going to the rear).

For services to the nation of Paraguay, the National Government awarded to the current Scout Association of Paraguay the “Medal of Recognition Paraguay”.

After the end of the Chaco War, the flame went out of Scouting in Paraguay, though in 1948 some Scout leaders travelled overseas for training and so try to continue this movement.”

Five Boy Scout covers are recorded

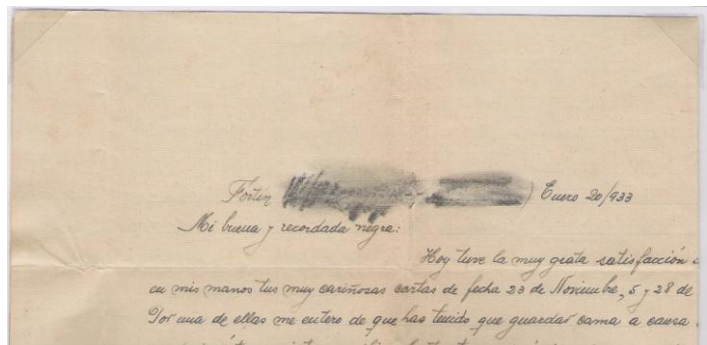
A hunt for information and Scout covers from the Chaco War has so far resulted in attributing five covers to this Boy Scout postal service. All the covers show the same Boy Scout cachet, in golden brown or violet colour. The 45mm circular cachet has the text ASOCIACION-DE-BOY-SCOUTS-DEL-PARAGUAY (Association of the Boy Scouts of Paraguay) along the circumference. In the middle of the cachet is a Boy Scout badge with the motto SIEMPRE LISTO (Be Prepared) and the underlined words HONOR DEBER PATRIA (Honour Duty Country).



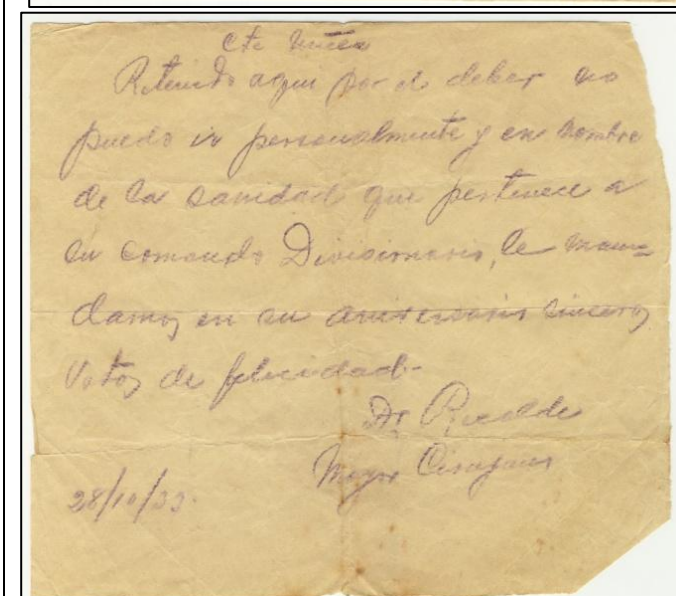
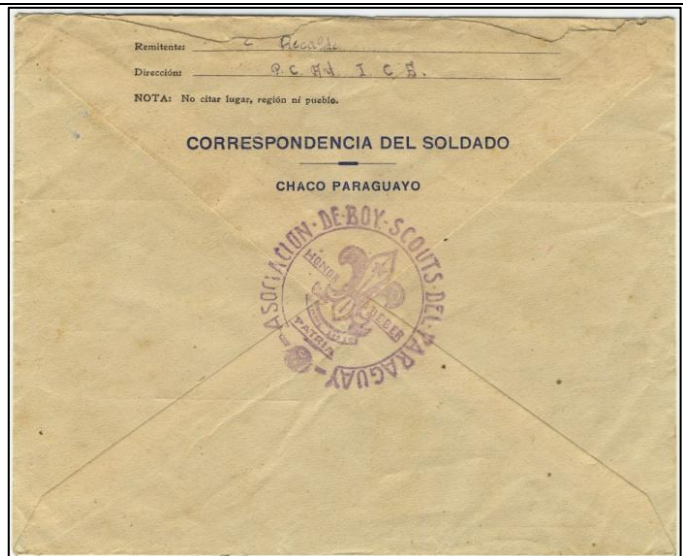
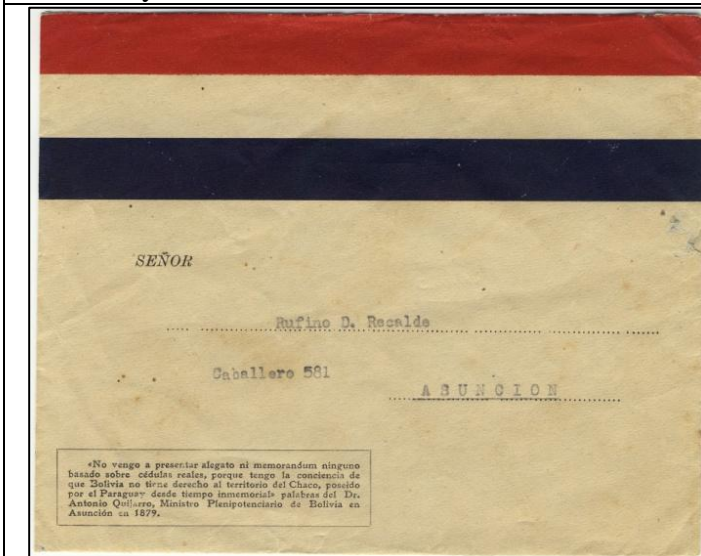
Cachet seen on all five recorded Chaco War Boy Scout covers.



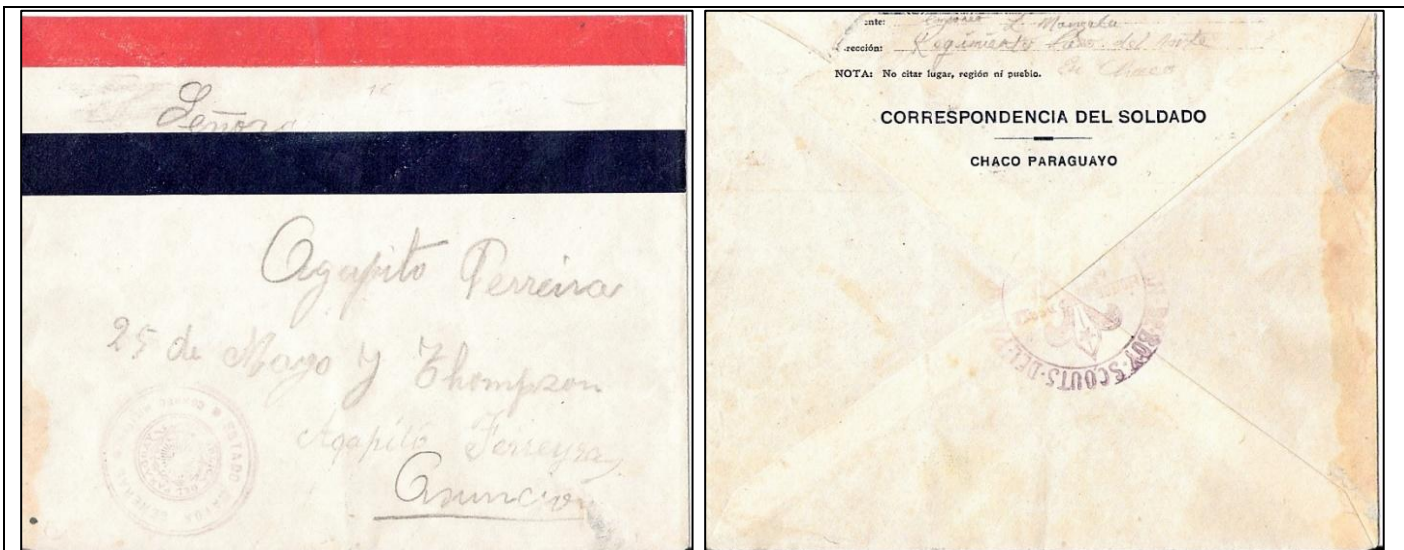
1. Military patriotic cover with flag corner card, sent from Chaco to Asunción. Undated. Boy Scout cachet in golden brown.



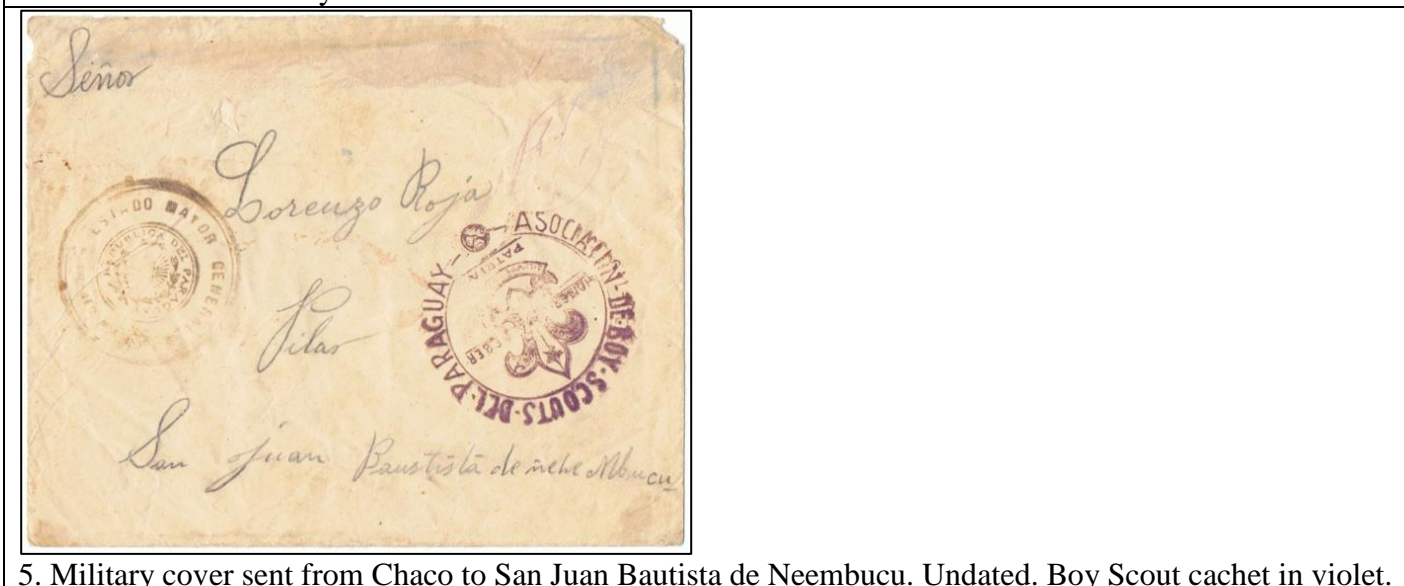
2. Military cover sent from Infantry Regiment No. 3 “Corrales” to Capiatá. The censored content is dated 20 January 1933.



3. Military patriotic cover with Paraguayan flag colours and propaganda printed text, soldier’s mail sent from a member of the First Army Corps (I.C.E.) to Asunción. Boy Scout cachet in violet. The content is dated 28 October 1933.



4. Military patriotic flag cover, soldier's mail sent from a member of the Northern Regiment in Chaco to Asunción. Undated. Boy Scout cachet in violet.



5. Military cover sent from Chaco to San Juan Bautista de Neembucu. Undated. Boy Scout cachet in violet.

Presently, this is all the information available on the Boy Scout postal service during the Chaco War. Please do not hesitate to contact Hallvard Slettebø hallvard@slettebo.no or the editor if you can add to the limited knowledge presented here.

Thanks to Brian Moorhouse and other owners of the covers for sharing information and images.

Sources:

“THE POSTAL HISTORY OF THE CHACO WAR (Bolivia and Paraguay) 1932-1935. A Display to the Royal Philatelic Society of London”, 8th February 2007 by Brian Moorhouse.

http://scouts.org.py/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=4&Itemid=10