

AUSTRIA-HUNGARY'S VISTULA RIVER FLOTILLA IN WORLD WAR I

This exhibit relates to the naval flotilla employed along the Vistula River in Poland, first created on 30 July 1914, two days after Austria declared war on Serbia. A handful of steamers was commandeered, equipped with armor plating and cannons and used to protect against Russian attacks. Headquartered at Krakow and operating out of bases at Niepolomice and Nadbezezie in Galicia, activity was extended northward after the Russians were driven out of Poland in 1915. Later, the gunboats served largely as escorts and tugs for the barges moving supplies for the military forces operating on the Eastern Front.

Personnel of the flotillas could send cards and letters free of postage. In fact, the only stamps seen on flotilla mail come on clippings from parcel cards. In order to qualify for free franking, an official unit cachet had to be applied to covers. To satisfy this need, a substantial variety of such markings was produced, thus providing the primary basis for the story in this exhibit. The order in which the material is shown starts with the cachets used at the flotilla headquarters, followed by the specific gunboats and then the shipyards and related shore-based facilities.



Cover mailed in October 1914 from Krakow to Zagreb by First Lt. of Engineers Mijo von Philippovic, the commander of the flotilla. Note cachets of the "Imperial & Royal Military Headquarters in Krakow" (in black) and the "I & R Vistula Flotilla" (in violet).

With patience and diligent search, flotilla mail can be acquired. However, it is collected by a number of avid philatelists, particularly by specialists in Polish material. As a result, competition for unusual items is keen. In fact, some of the unit markings are extremely elusive, and assembling the examples shown here has taken more than two decades.

VISTULA FLOTILLA
Headquarters Cachets

Niepolomice
 8 August 1916

Nadbrzezcie
 1 March 1917

Absender:
 Feladó:
 Odesílatel:
 Nadawca:

Mittente:
 Pošiljatelj:
 Pošiljač:
 Presentator:

Major Karl Jüstel
 Nadbrzezcie, Galizien

Feldpostkarte.
Tábori-Levelezőlap.

From the Army
 in the Field

Administration
 der „Tagespost“



GRAZ.

Srenpfergasse.

By 1916, the headquarters of the flotilla had moved to Niepolomice, about a dozen miles downstream from Krakow. Von Philippovic was still the commander but had been promoted to Captain, as confirmed by upper card mailed to his wife in Zagreb. It has several cachets, including that of the "Headquarters of the I & R Vistula Flotilla." The others are generic markings and indicate "Military Service/Postage Free" and "to be Forwarded." In 1917, some activities were located in Nadbrzezcie, further downstream. Lower card has cachet of "I & R Vistula Transport Line Headquarters" and "From the Army in the Field" in red.

VISTULA FLOTILLA
Headquarters Cachet

Tarnow
11 March 1917

Absender:
Odesilatel:
Nadawca:
Mittente:
Pošiljatelj:
Pošiljač:
Presenter:

Feldpostkorrespondenzkarte.

WEITEL

Fran
Amelia Schrank
Villa Imperial
Franzosenbad
Hotel Imperial Herrlsbad

Handwritten notes on left margin:
Handwritten
Handwritten
Handwritten

Portofrei!



By 1917, headquarters had moved again, this time to Tarnow, about 30 miles further east. This card has the "Headquarters" cachet in purple and a different "to be Forwarded" marking in black.

VISTULA FLOTILLA
Cachet of Patrol Boat Headquarters

FPO 186
11 December 1914

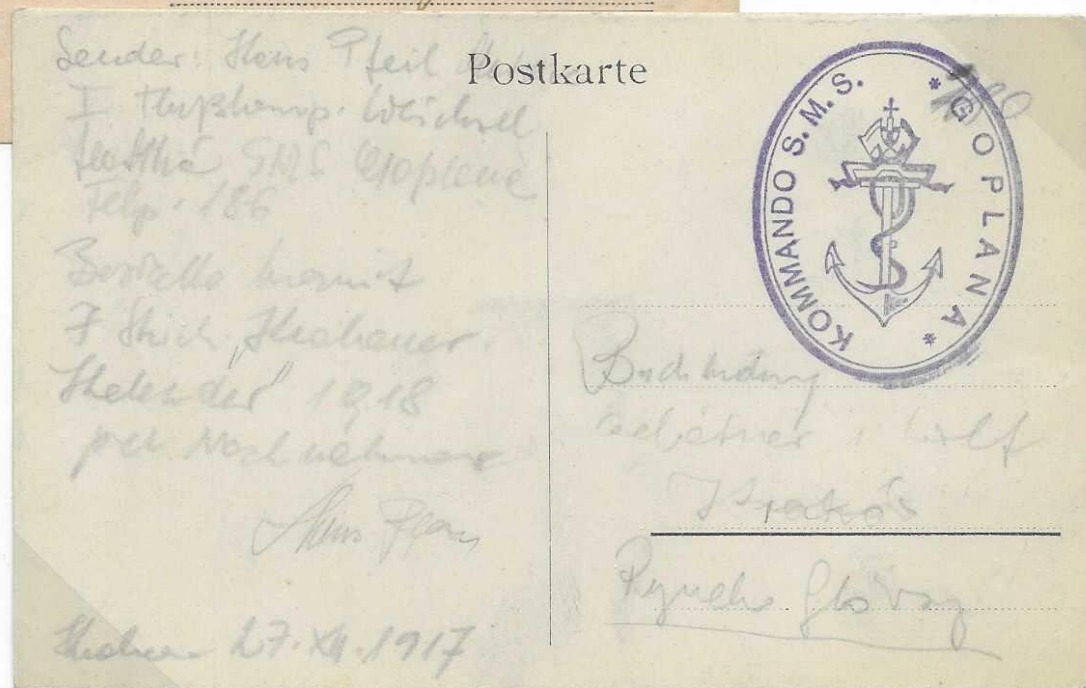


The headquarters of the gunboats was initially located at Krakow. This card was sent by the commander, First Lt. von Philippovic, with a cachet inscribed "Headquarters of the Patrol Boats on the Vistula" applied. This is the only example of this marking seen by exhibitor.

VISTULA FLOTILLA
Gunboat Cachets

Krakow
20 December 1914
27 December 1917

S.M.S. Dunajec
& Goplana

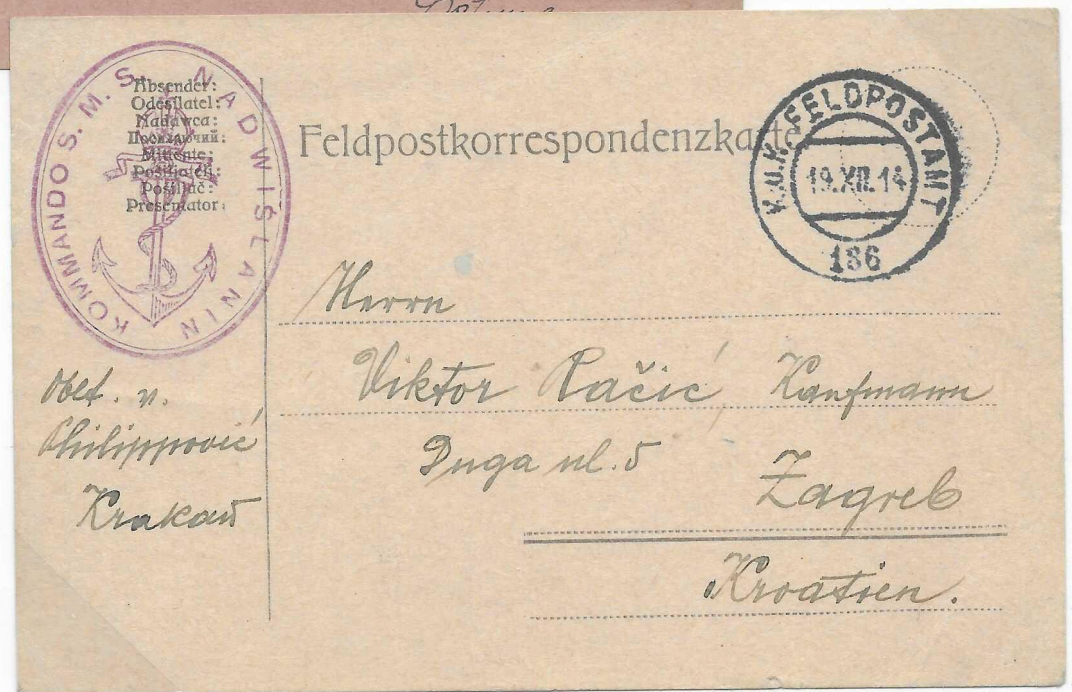
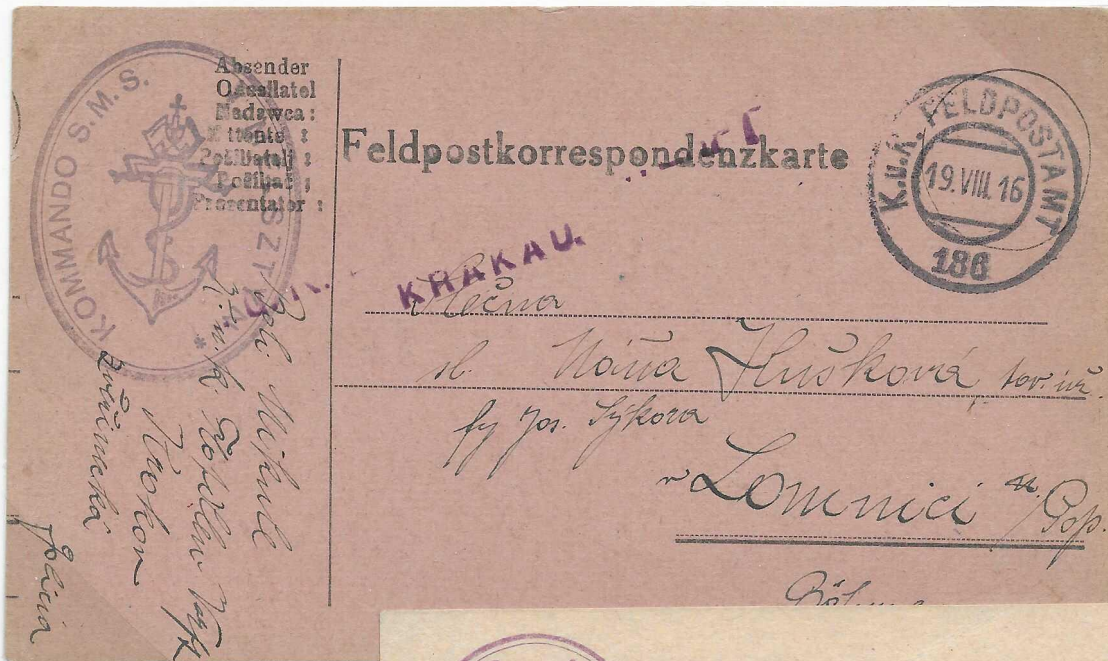


Mail from nine different gunboats can be found stamped with the official cachet of the vessel. The only one of these not mentioned in the literature is that inscribed "Command S.M.S. Dunajec" shown above, which is regarded as the discovery example of this marking. (S.M.S. stands for "His Majesty's Ship" which applied to Austrian naval vessels.) The lower example has a similar marking from the Goplana, which was actually a boat previously captured from the Russians.

VISTULA FLOTILLA
Gunboat Cachets

Krakow
19 August 1916
19 December 1914

S.M.S. Melsztyn
& **Nadwisłania**



These fieldpost cards were sent from FPO #186 located in Krakow. Upper card has the cachet of S.M.S. Melsztyn, which was one of those originally commandeered for naval service on 5 August 1914. It was later sunk during the Russian advance into Galicia. At the end of 1915, Melsztyn was raised and repaired in the Krakow shipyard. Card below sent from S.M.S. Nadwisłania to Zagreb.

VISTULA FLOTILLA
Gunboat Cachets

Nadbezezie
21 December 1916

Krakow
26 December 1914

S.M.S. Polonez
& Wawel

Absender:

Name:

Adresse:

Feldpost

An
Seine Hochwohlgeboren
den Herrn H. und H. Philippovic im Lager B. 124
H. von Philippovic
Kommandant der H. und H. Wawelflotilla
in
Niepolomice.

**KRIEGSDIENST
PORTOFREI**

Posender:
Odeslatel:
Nadawca:
Посылающий:
Mittente:
Pošiljatelj:
Pošiljač:
Presentator:

Feldpostkorrespondenzkarte.

Herrn Viktor Pačić
Duga ulica 5
Zagreb
Kroatien.

H. von Philippovic
feldpost 186.

Upper fieldpost card was sent by First Lt. of Engineers Polivka, who was the commander of S.M.S. Polonez, to flotilla commander Capt. von Philippovic in Niepolomice. Lower card sent by Philippovic to Zagreb. They are marked with the official cachets of the vessels.

VISTULA FLOTILLA
Gunboat Cachets

Krakow
8 August 1916

Zatop
14 January 1917

Parcel Card Clippings from Gunboats



Mail other than cards and letters required payment of postage, thus these examples from packages sent by the sailors provide examples of prepaid franking. As shown by the cachets, these items originated from *S.M.S. Melsztyn* and *S.M.S. Neptun* but presumably posted at the nearest civil post office.

VISTULA FLOTILLA
Cachet of Flotilla Liaison Officer

FPO 186
23 December 1914



There was apparently a liaison officer for the Flotilla assigned to the Army HQ in Krakow. His special cachet inscribed "Flotilla Liaison at Military Headquarters Krakow" was applied to this card before it was deposited at FPO 186.

VISTULA FLOTILLA
River Shipping Company Cachet

Nadbrzezie
13 December 1915

K. U. K. WEICHSELFLOTILLE
KOMMANDO
DEFLUSS-SCHIFFFAHRTS-KOMPAGNIE No. 1
Feldpostkorrespondenzkarte

Absender:
Odeslatel:
Nadawca:
Mittente:
Posiljatelj:
Posiljac:
Presentator:

An
Wgb. Frau
Maria Breneset
in Theben u. der Donau
Lange gasse No 15
Komitat Porson
Ungarn

Breneset Frau
K. U. K. Weichselflotte
1. Schiffahrt-Komp.
in Nadbrzezie
geboren

Postnetz

NADBRZEZIE
13.9.15

By mid-1915, the Vistula was under the complete control of the Austro-Hungarian and German forces from its source to its mouth in the Baltic Sea near Danzig. It then assumed a more commercial character, with the steamboats often serving as tugs to move barges of coal and other supplies downriver. This card is marked with the cachet of the "I & R Vistula Flotilla Headquarters of the River Shipping Company No. 1."

VISTULA FLOTILLA
Transport Line Headquarters Cachet

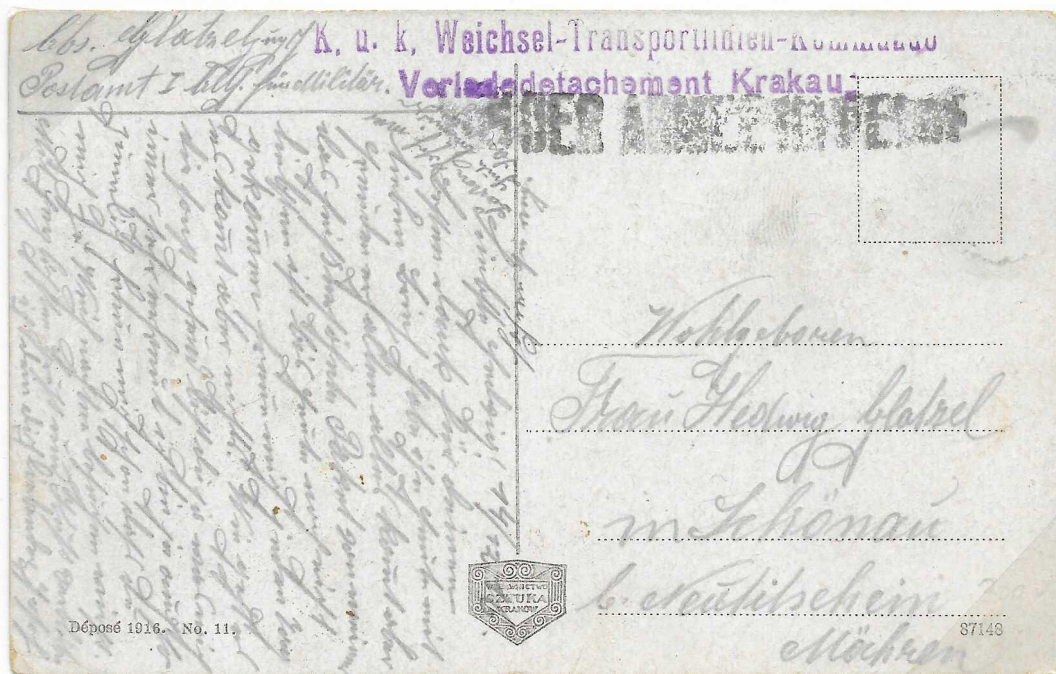
Nadbezezie



This example of the supply service cachet was inscribed "I & R Vistula Transport Line Headquarters." Postcard was written when the HQ was at Nadbezezie in 1915. Coded town marking was applied with Roman numerals "IX 494" used in Galicia.

VISTULA FLOTILLA
Transport Line Headquarters
Shore-Based Facility Cachets

Krakow
11 November 1915
14 December 1916

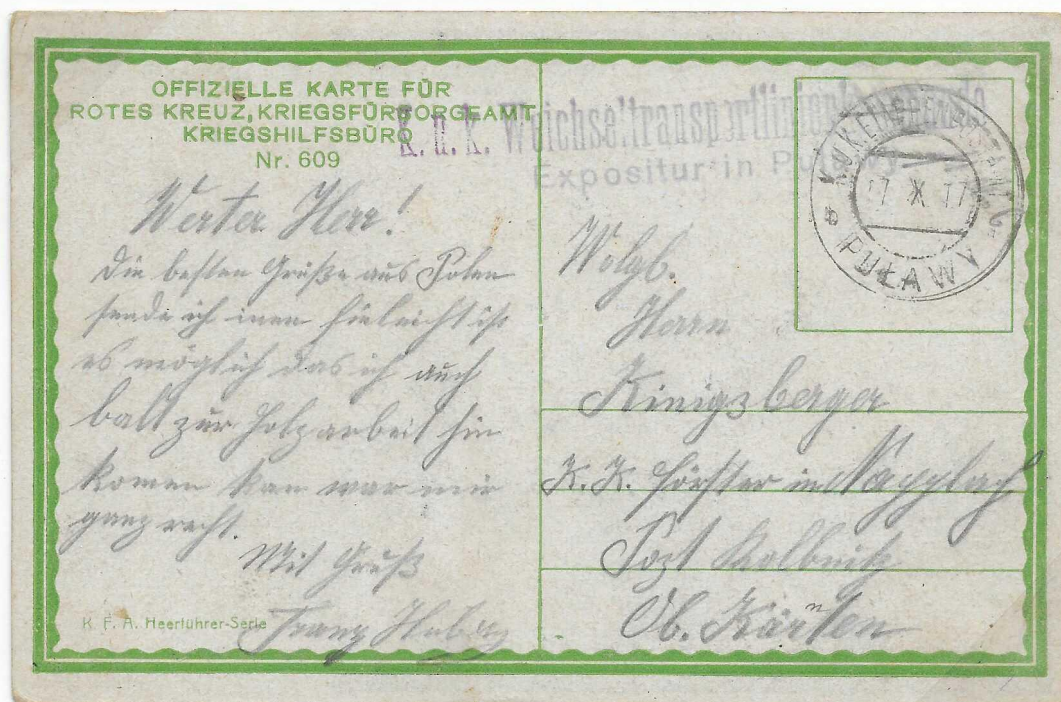


Upper example has a green cachet of the "Water Transport Line Headquarters" and was sent through FPO 186 in Krakow. Lower card with cachet inscribed "Vistula Transport Line Headquarters/Loading Detachment Krakow." It has no postmark but was handled by the fieldpost in the normal manner.

VISTULA FLOTILLA
 Transport Line Headquarters
 Shore-Based Facility Cachets

Krakow
 23 April 1917

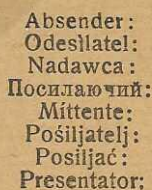
Pulawy
 17 October 1917



The cachet shown on the upper card is a dual version that combines the designations of the "Vistula Transport Line Headquarters" and the "Flotilla Dockyard in Krakow." The lower example has the same major designation but "Branch in Pulawy" below.

VISTULA FLOTILLA

18 October 1914



el postikorrespondenzkarte.

Remount to Capt
 S. P. Campbell
 Garrisonssn Tal
 Kva Ram

From
Käthe Tauscher

Frumpendur

Kärnten
Hella Kuppelweger

Note that many of the cachets in this exhibit begin with "K.u.K." These letters stand for the German equivalent of "Imperial and Royal," which was the proper title in the Dual Monarchy, since the Emperor of Austria was also the King of Hungary.

VISTULA FLOTILLA
Cachet of Shore-Based Facility

Krakow
 20 November 1915



With a high level of shipping activity, the dockyard in Krakow was kept busy repairing and servicing the gunboats. Cards and letters mailed from that facility bore one of several different cachets, including the bold two-line marking of "I & R Flotilla Dockyard/Krakow" at the top of this card. In addition, the card has the marking of S.M.S. Melsztyn and the Krakow censorship office.

VISTULA FLOTILLA
Cachet of Shore-Based Facility

Krakow
8 August 1916



Later, a three-line handstamp was introduced as a unit cachet. This marking was inscribed "I & R. Flotilla Dockyard of the Vistula Flotilla." Sent to Bohemia and then forwarded to a new address.