British Administration of Eritrea Telegrams

Eritrea had been an Italian colony from 1889 until, in April 1941, the British Troops defeated the occupying Italian Army. Taking control of Eritrea was an essential part of the North African Campaign, in order to gain control of the Red Sea and hold Sudan.

The British Military Administration assumed responsibility for governing Eritrea and, in March 1942, opened up a postal service using the former Italian Post offices. The British KGV1 definitives and postal stationary were overprinted for use in Eritrea and other territories occupied by the Middle East Forces. Nevertheless, in Eritrea full use was made of the available Italian postal stationary and the Italian handstamps were adapted for use.

Following the end of World War II, a telegram service was established on 1st October 1945 from the head post office in Asmara. The completed telegram forms were accepted at all post offices and forwarded to the Asmara head office for dispatch. Initially the charges were paid in cash, but from 1st April the cost of the telegram was pre-paid by affixing the required value of overprinted GB stamps onto the telegram form. The stamps were cancelled by the receiving office and eventually defaced by means of a machine which punched holes forming the word **'PAGATO'** measuring 16 by 70 mm. as illustrated below.



The normal practice was to retain the telegram forms for some months before destroying them. Fortunately, a number of telegram forms from the period October 1951 to January 1952 survived and found their way onto the philatelic market. During this late period of the British Administration, the machine used to punch the holes was either damaged or badly worn. At best only the upper half of **'PAGATO'** is punched, and often there is just a partial impression of **'PAGATO'** with a scattering of partly formed holes.

Most of the surviving forms were printed in Italian on buff paper by the British Government Press in Eritrea with Conditions of Usage (AVERTENZA) on the back.. Some of the original Italian forms were also used during this period, as were some of the original forms printed in English by the Government Press when the service was first introduced. The stamps used on these surviving forms were the 'B.A. ERITREA' overprints introduced in February 1950, when the Military handed over to the British Administration under the control of the Foreign Office. When the Federation with Ethiopia was established in September 1952, the British postal services in Eritrea were closed. Although the complete used telegram forms from the period of British Administration are rather scarce, the individual stamps showing some of the punched holes are more readily available, either loose or, more frequently, on a piece of a telegram form. Intriguingly many of these stamps are on parts of a blue-green telegram form that appears not to have survived in its entirety.

Over the years, many articles on these telegrams have been published in The Overprinter, the journal of the GB Overprints Society, gradually building up an as yet incomplete understanding of this telegram service. However, I have seen no reference to the machine (or machines) used to punch 'PAGATO', and would be very grateful if any member of the Perfin Society could provide some information.

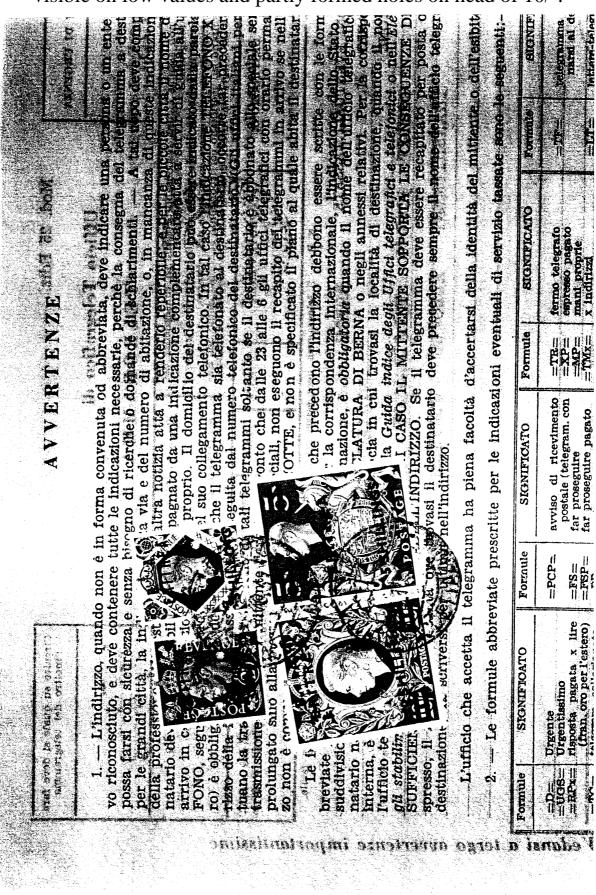
Tony Stanford, GBOS Secretary, PO Box 2675, Maidenhead SL6 9ZN gbos@talk21.com

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Front of Telegram Form showing perfin holes at top left.

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Bulletin 333 (Dec 2004) Page 18



Enlarged part back of a Telegram Form with perfin holes clearly visible on low values and partly formed holes on head of 10/-.

Bulletin 333 (Dec 2004) Page 19