

OLD GRAHAM'S PHILATELIC TALES NO.7

During the autumn and winter of 1870-71, the city of Paris was besieged by Prussian troops. The beleaguered citizens attempted to correspond with the outside world by various means. The **balloon post** is well known to carry letters from Paris, but the French also made use of the River Seine itself to carry messages from the provinces to the capital. Several schemes were suggested, including use of a **small submarine** (which was partially constructed before the siege was lifted), but only one was adopted.

Three engineers, with the names of M. Robert, Delort and Vonoven, came up with the idea of using **zinc balls** about the size of a baby's head, which could hold letters, and then be soldered up. The zinc balls had fins on the side to help them catch the current. The density of the zinc was just enough for the ball to float.

On the **1st of December 1870** a gunboat left Paris, and went upstream towards the lines of the Prussian troops. At this point, the Parisian Director of Post (M.Rampon) threw one of the zinc balls into the current, and watched it float back towards the point where they had set out from. The following day, with the aid of a fishing net, the ball was recovered several miles downstream.

On the **7th of December** the intrepid pair of Robert and Delort left Paris **by balloon** with a stock of the zinc spheres, and floated over 100 miles until they could touchdown in un-occupied France. It took until the following month before permission was granted to send the first of the "**boules**".

On the **4th of January 1871**, M.Robert disguised as a peasant, slipped through the Prussian lines to the banks of the Seine, and placed the boules into the water. For the rest of January 1871, he made numerous trips between the Post Office at Cosne, and the river to release the spheres.

Some 40,000 letters had been collected to send to Paris, and it has been estimated that perhaps half of these were entrusted to the water. The public were asked to mark their letters "Paris par Moulins" to hide the secret from the enemy. M.Roberts was based in Moulins, so the spheres are known as "**Boules de Moulins**".

The normal postal tariff at this time was 20 centimes- sending it by water would cost you a Franc!

So you may well be asking, what happened to these letters? The Prussians had stretched fishing nets across the Seine, so it is believed that none of them actually reached Paris.

Since 1871, boules have come to light from time to time, particularly in the period prior to 1910, but as recently as 1988, with their contents intact.

My last tale concluded with a little French tag, and here I can use it again:

Sacre Bleu, mon ami!