

KILROY WAS HERE – ON STAMPS!

by Melvin Morris



At the last meeting of my stamp exchange club, I ran across a stamp from New Zealand that brought back many – non-philatelic – memories. It also emphasized what I have long believed about stamp collecting – especially topical stamp collecting. That belief can be summarized as – “sooner or later, every topic that you can think of will be covered with at least one stamp.”

The memory dates back to November 1960 when I was in basic training in the army at Fort Dix, New Jersey. We were at hand grenade practice when I proved a bit too slow in dropping to cover after tossing a live grenade. The next thing I knew, I was tossed to the ground by the cadre corporal & ended up staring at the caricature of “Kilroy Was Here!” scratched into the ground of the bunker! I guess it was a crude way that the new recruit trainees were informed that they weren’t the first to goof-up in a dangerous situation!

So, forty plus years later, this all flashed back to me when I saw New Zealand’s 40c stamp (S1422) issued on 19 March 1997 as part of a self-adhesive booklet (S1419-1428) of 10 40c stamps entitled “Wackiest Letterboxes.” Appropriately enough, the stamp I had just obtained featured a letter box with the caricature, “Kilroy Is Back!”

Who was Kilroy and how did he become a legend in World War II and the Korean War? How was he able to – seemingly – always be the first one to arrive in every combat or training area without anyone ever seeing him? The legend seems to have started with James J. Kilroy, a shipyard inspector in Quincy, Massachusetts during WWII. To indicate he had inspected the riveting in a newly constructed ship, he chalked his name on the bulkheads. Troops traveling to the war zones in those ships found it a complete mystery! All they knew for sure was that he – whoever *he* was – had been there first! It is speculated that, as a joke, they picked it up, added the cartoon figure, & scribbled it everywhere. The rest is history!

Not only did Kilroy appear on the battlefield. He was everywhere! He was seen on TV’s

“Mash,” “Seinfeld,” “Home Improvement,” even a “Popeye” cartoon. He was in the movies in “Patton,” “Kelly’s Heroes,” & “To Hell and Back.” My favorite science fiction author, Isaac Asimov even wrote a short story about Kilroy in his book, “Earth Is Room Enough.” He’s been seen in the conflicts in Kuwait, Iraq, & Afghanistan. He has also appeared on the Statue of Liberty & on the newly dedicated WWII Memorial in Washington, D.C.

