Cachet of the Commanding General

A wide variety of administrative markings were employed during the campaign. Here, the cachet of the commander-in-chief was applied to the stationery of the General Staff's Map Service.
Cachet for the Commander of Troops in Annam

Soldiers would occasionally write "Corps Expeditionnaire du Tonkin" on their covers even though they were serving in Annam, a different political area. Here a letter posted from Hue, Annam bears the purple cachet of the commander of the troops there.

POSTAL MARKINGS
HUE COCHINCHÎE CORPS EXPE
HUE ANNAM OCT 1900
REVERSE
SAIGON-CENTRAL COCHINCHINE 10 OCT 00
Cachet of Commander at Dong-Dang

This postcard sent from Dong-Dang to France bears several cachets. The large rectangular cachet of the Commander at Dong-Dang is notable because of the stylized Chinese writing in its center.

POSTAL MARKINGS
DONG-DANG TONKIN  1 JANV 03
Cachet of Commander at Ha-Giang

The cachet of the commander at Ha-Giang, while generally similar in format to others, is distinctive because of the Chinese characters in the interior.

POSTAL MARKINGS
CORPS EXPÉDITIF TONKIN
HA-GIANG TONKIN 10 JULI 1900
Cachet of Commander at Ha-Giang

A later version of the Ha-Giang commander's cachet is larger but preserves the Chinese characters in the center.

POSTAL MARKINGS
CORPS EXPEDITE TONKIN
HA-GIANG TONKIN 5 AVRIL 03

REVERSE
HANOI TONKIN 11 AVRIL 03
ST FIRMN-EN-VALGODEMARD HÊTES ALPES 23 MAI 03
CORPS ISERE 24 MAI 03
MEAUDRE ISERE 25 MAI 03
Cachet of Commander at Trung-Khanh-Phu

The commander of the military post at Trung-Khanh-Phu utilized an oval shape for his cachet, a departure from the typical circular format.

POSTAL MARKINGS
TONKIN CORPS EXPEDIT RE
CAO-BANG TONKIN  15 AVRIL 93

REVERSE
HAI-PHONG TONKIN  23 AVRIL 93
PARIS 71 PI. VICTOR HUGO  2 JUIN 93
Foreign Legion Cachet

Among the most famous of all military units is the French Foreign Legion. Here a letter from a Legionnaire received a cachet of a unit serving on the border with China.

POSTAL MARKINGS
TONKIN CORPS EXPEDITRE
HANOI TONKIN 13 FEVR 03
REVERSE
8 PARIS 8 DISTRIBUTION 22-3 03
Cachet of the Review Commission

Here the cachet of the Review Commission was applied with both red and blue inks.

Review Commission Cachet

POSTAL MARKINGS
TONKIN CORPS EXPÉDITRE 10 JUIL 02
HANOI TONKIN 10 JUIL 02
REVERSE
4 PARIS 4 DISTRIBUTION 12-8 02
Cachet of the Tenth Marines

The cachet for the 9th Company, 10th Marines was fashioned in a manner that simulated a typical postmark of the period, albeit on a larger scale.
Personal Cachet

Cachets could sometimes be quite ornate as in the case of this personal cachet. Since the postcard was mailed after revocation of the franchise, postage was required and was affixed on the reverse side.

POSTAL MARKINGS
MON-CAY TONKIN 4 AVRIL 05
HAIPHONG TONKIN 5 AVRIL 05
VICTORIA HONG KONG 13 AP 05
REVERSE
MON-CAY TONKIN 4 AVRIL 05
Service Optique

The Service Optique was part of the military’s communication system in Indochina. Contrary to first impression, it was not based on signaling flags ( semaphore). Rather, the Service Optique was based on mirrors. Using mirrors to reflect sunlight allowed messengers to transmit coded messages great distances at the speed of light. A series of stations was established for reliable communications (at least, on sunny days).

POSTAL MARKINGS
TONKIN CORPS EXPEDITÉE 26 OCT 94
HANOI TONKIN 25 OCT. 94
CORPS EXP. TONKIN LIGNE N. 4 4 NOV. 94
Location without Post Office
Donc-Chau Tonkin

A civilian post office was never established at Donc-Chau, Tonkin. Soldiers' mail was sent to Phu-Doan for onward transmission.

Commander's Cachet  Military Postmark  Civilian Postmark
Location Without Post Office
Bac-Muc Tonkin

The civilian post office at Bac-Muc did not open until 15 October 1899. Before then, military mail was transferred to Tuyen-Quang for processing.

Military Postmark
Commander's Cachet
Civilian Postmark

POSTAL MARKINGS
CORPS EXPEDRE TONKIN
TUYEN-QUANG TONKIN  25 OCT 93
REVERSE
HA-NOI TONKIN  26 OCT 93
PARIS B. DISTRIBUTION  30 NOV 93
Missing Military Postmark
Ha-Noi Tonkin

The free mail franchise was established effective 16 June 1883. Special military postmarking devices were not widely available at the outset. The front of this free letter bears no postmark other than Hanoi’s civilian postmark.

Civilian Postmark

POSTAL MARKINGS
HA-NOI TONKIN 27 SEPT. 84
REVERSE
2 LYON 2 RHONE 15 NOV. 84
By 1904, the army post office at Bac-Ninh had closed. Military mail was handled directly by the civilian post office. Consequently, soldiers’ mail was only postmarked by the civilian post office.

Civilian Postmark

POSTAL MARKINGS
BAC-NINH TONKIN 8 JUIN 04
REVERSE
HAIPHONG TONKIN 9 JUIN 04
CAEN CALVADOS 14-7 04
Reserve Brigade
China Occupation Force

The cachet on this cover shows that the Reserve Brigade for France's China Occupation Force was located in Haiphong in 1904.
Living Conditions

Troops serving in the Tonkin Expeditionary Force could expect very different field conditions depending on where they were stationed. Period postcards show that, near major cities, barracks could be quite comfortable as compared to more primitive conditions at border outposts.