

UNDERSTANDING THE AIRMAIL STORY

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In the last issue of Australian Stamps Professional I showed that Guillaux did not carry any mail by air between Melbourne and Sydney in 1914. In this article I explain the term 'mail' and how misunderstanding the word has resulted in the development of aerophilatelic myths.

Aerophilatelists collect and study items of mail carried by air yet surprisingly there has been confusion as to just what is 'mail'. Items of correspondence, messages, carried outside the postal system have not been considered as mail and as a result the Australian airmail story has not been fully understood.

Whilst today mail is described as 'items delivered by the postal system' in the past much mail has been carried outside any such system.

Mail is about messaging and at first messages were sent orally by runners. Almost at the same time as writing was first developed the first written messages began, often in ways we would not contemplate today. In early Greece messages were written on the shaved heads of slaves who began their journey after their hair had grown and kept the

messages secret. Gradually, with the development of paper, mail services began which carried written messages or 'mail'.

As official mail services developed providing the service over longer and longer distances became more and more expensive and the cost of sending a letter increased considerably. As the cost of mail increased many looked for other cheaper methods to carry their mail. As a result extensive services, other than the official postal system, developed.

Shortly before the introduction of the first stamps in England mail was extensively carried outside the official postal system. Hornung, (The Illustrated Encyclopedia of Stamp Collecting – Hamlyn 1970), records that in 1836 an English merchant received 2,068 letters by the official postal service and 5,861 letters by other means. At the same time another citizen received 117 letters of which only 7 came through the official postal service.

FIGURE 6 : Above – a typical example of 'Official Mail' carried without postage during WWII. It is clearly stamped 'OFFICIAL FREE' and identified as from the Treasury Department, Territory of Papua.

When considering the Australian Airmail story it was necessary first to define 'mail' which I have defined as, . . . "a written message from one party to another to communicate in the course of normal business or personal activity". For an item to be mail it does not have to be carried by an official postal service. The essential element of mail is messaging. The first airmail carried from an overseas destination into Australia was carried outside an official airmail service. They are, nevertheless, very important items at the very beginning of airmail services.. But their importance has not been recognised.

The first flight from England to Australia flown by Ross and Keith Smith in 1919 is a very important event in the Australian Airmail story. This flight did not conduct a mail service for the Post Office. The items carried were mostly flight souvenirs sent to commemorate the flight, (Figure 1). Importantly, and not generally recognised, the flight also carried a few items of mail. These included the first items of mail sent from an overseas destination to Australia – items of 'opportunity airmail'.



FIGURE 1 : A flight souvenir, carried by Ross and Keith Smith, franked with the stamps of India, cancelled Melbourne 26 February 1920. Carried from Bandar Abbas where Indian stamps were in use.

I have defined 'Opportunity Airmail' as, . . . "messages sent by aircraft when the opportunity arose to do so when no official airmail service operated. The intention was to reduce the transit time to the destination".



FIGURE 2 : An 'On Active Service' letter sent from Baghdad on 11 January 1919 on the 'Old Carthusian'. Endorsed "Per Plane". No postage was required as airmail rates had not been established and surface mail from soldiers was free.

The very first items of airmail sent to Australia from an overseas destination were letters written by Australian soldiers based near Baghdad in December 1918, (Figure 2). These soldiers took the opportunity to send messages to family and friends in Australia, on an aeroplane passing through, in the expectation the letters would reach Australia sooner than by the normal sea transport. For some reason, which has never been satisfactorily explained, this mail was not quickly onforwarded to Australia and remained in India. It was finally flown to Australia by Ross and Keith Smith.

Ross and Keith Smith also carried other opportunity airmail. The Calcutta Post Office sent Christmas cards to various GPOs in Australia taking the opportunity to send the messages by air, (Figure 3).



FIGURE 3 : Opportunity airmail sent 'per favour' of Ross and Keith Smith by the Calcutta GPO. No postage required.



FIGURE 4 : Opportunity airmail sent 'per favour' of Ross and Keith Smith by a fellow guest at the Raffles Hotel, Singapore.

Ross Smith was also given a letter by an Australian woman, a fellow guest, staying at the Raffles Hotel in Singapore (Figure 4). This letter of three pages was addressed to Orange, New South Wales. The letter began, ... "I am writing on the chance of getting this through by aeroplane by Captain Ross Smith who leaves tomorrow..."

As Ross and Keith Smith were not conducting an official airmail service no postage rates had been established for mail posted from overseas to Australia. Mail was therefore carried free to Australia. The soldiers in Baghdad were entitled to free postage to and within Australia as they were on active military service. The guest in Raffles Hotel, on the other hand, stamped her letter with a penny postage stamp to buy postage in Australia.

Ross and Keith Smith carried both mail and flight souvenirs. I have defined Flight Souvenirs as, . . ."items carried by air by an individual on the flight.

They were not sent through a postal service and their purpose was to commemorate rather than to communicate".

As I have written the Australian Airmail Story I have found it necessary to develop more categories of airmail items than the conventional designators of 'Official' mail and 'Unofficial' mail. I have found that mail is the important element in the story and having defined mail I then needed to establish other categories of mail which included 'opportunity airmail', 'unofficial mail', 'company mail' and others. Non mail items include 'flight souvenirs'.

Company mail is mail carried outside the official mail system. It is generally internal airline mail carried between airline offices on their network by their own aircraft. Gary Watson has, in his collection of Australian Air Mail, an item sent through the Qantas Empire Airways system to the QEA Sydney office (Figure 5).

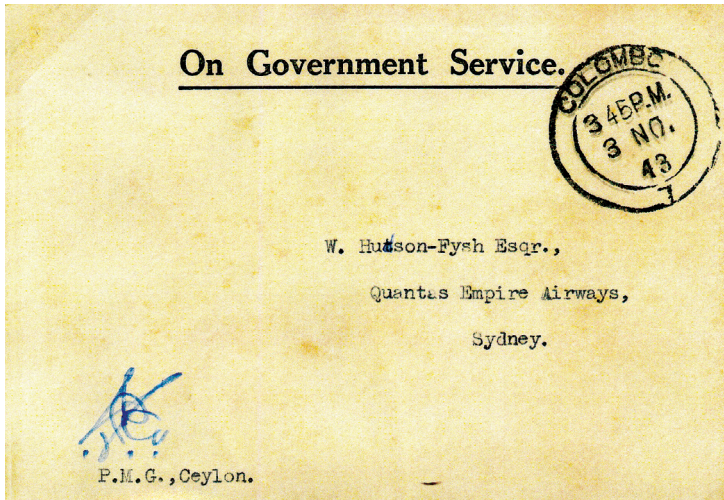


FIGURE 5 : Company mail from the Post Office in Ceylon to QEA carried as company mail on an aircraft before the establishment of an airmail service.

It is interesting that the item is from the Postmaster-General of Ceylon before the establishment of an airmail service between the two countries.

Official mail is another category of mail which has not always been understood. During WWII mail from government departments and high officials such as State Governors received specially handling in the Post Office. Such mail could be posted without stamps. It was not charged postage due but the postage cost was debited against the appropriate departmental account (Figure 6). For a short time in June 1940 only official mail was carried on the short lived Trans-Sahara route between Australia and England.

Finally, just to complicate the story, I illustrate an item which is both a flight souvenir and an item of mail (Figure 7). This item was carried as a flight souvenir by Scott and Campbell who won the Centenary Air Race between England and Australia in 1934. A typical flight souvenir it was franked with a 1/2 penny British stamp to obtain a 'per favour' cancellation at a British Post Office. It was then carried by Scott and Campbell to Australia where

it was posted back to England. Under the current definition of mail, although this item carries no message, it is a postal article. The item is correctly franked for carriage by sea to Colombo, by rail to Karachi and then by Imperial Airways to London.

In summary, as I have written, the Australian Airmail Story I have discovered that the term 'mail' has not generally been fully understood and it is necessary to categorise mail in more detail than the traditional division of 'official' and 'unofficial'.

Book 2 continues the Australian airmail story during the exciting years 1934 to 1939. This was a period

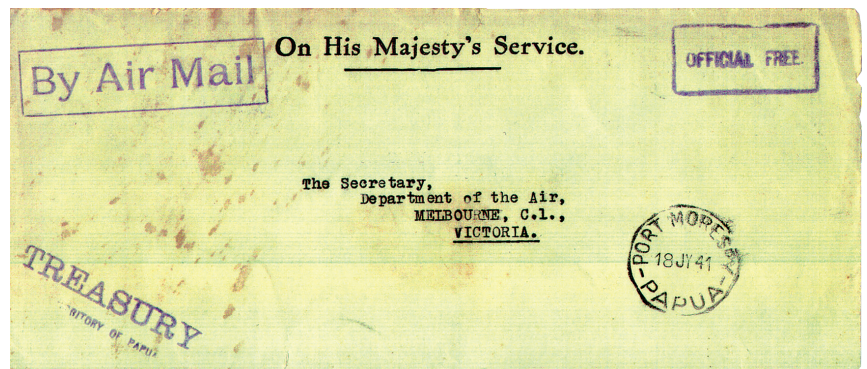


FIGURE 6 : A typical example of 'Official Mail' carried without postage during WWII. It is clearly stamped 'OFFICIAL FREE' and identified as from the Treasury Department, Territory of Papua.



FIGURE 7 : A flight souvenir carried on the England Australia Air Race in 1934. A halfpenny British stamp was applied in England before departure to obtain a 'per favour' cancellation. Correct postage was added in Australia for return on the sea/air service via Karachi to England.

of rapid development when airmail services finally reached Australia and the Empire flying boats were introduced which revolutionised the carrying of airmail between the two countries.

The period is also of interest because it was during this period that P.G. Taylor flew the flying boat 'Guba' across the Indian Ocean to prove a reserve route between Australia and England could be established should war occur. A flight not without some excitement when they could not find the Cocos Islands and had to fly to Batavia.

In New Guinea the first flights from Australia occurred during the volcanic eruption in Rabaul when Australian journalists travelled there. An eventful journey where they found it necessary to overnight in a New Guinea village. When they landed they were uncertain whether the occupants were cannibals or not – but they were lost and had

to land. In 1937 the first commercial air service began between Australia and New Guinea.

It was during this period that KLM, after trying for many years, finally was allowed to fly into Australia using the subsidiary KNILM.

In addition to these stories, which are told in detail, Book 2 includes reproductions of the P.M.G. Department Airmail Schedules of that period which are often, today, difficult to locate.

Book 2 of the Australian Airmail Story, THE RAPID ADVANCES BETWEEN 1934-1939 OF THE ENGLAND/AUSTRALIA AIRMAIL, is now available.as These books detail events relating to the development of airmail services in chronological order enabling collectors to quickly recognise events connected with any cover being examined. So often we need to understand the history to fully understand an item of mail.

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