

# AIRMAIL

## A HISTORY OF AUSTRALIAN AIRMAIL

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**Why a history of Australian airmail when all we apparently need is a listing of known airmail items?**

**Why is it necessary to broaden the history beyond matters which are purely philatelic?**

I have been surprised, as I have written “the history” [*Airmail: The Story of Australia’s Overseas Airmail* in four parts], how important it can be to understand more than can be obtained from the markings, frankings and postmarks on an envelope. Understanding the attitudes of the time and the limitation of the aircraft, and those who flew them, is frequently essential to fully understand a particular item.

**The first question to be answered is what is mail?**

The current dictionary definition of mail is, “items carried by a postal service”. As a result items carried by air before the development of our airmail service have not been considered as mail. Mail, however, has traditionally been about messaging not how the mail was carried.

Some of the earliest mail recorded were messages on baked clay tablets carried by runners in Persia about 3,000 BC. Over the years mail services have developed to become items carried by organisations managed by Kings and wealthy families.

Nevertheless not all items of mail were carried on the official services. In England in 1836, just a few years before postal reforms were introduced, a merchant recorded that in one year he had received 2,068 letters by the official postal service and 5,861 letters by other services.

I have, therefore, defined mail as, “a written message from one party to another to communicate in the course of normal business or personal activity”. Understanding that determining whether an item is mail does not depend on how it is transported. It is important in understanding just when the first airmail was carried into Australia from overseas. Until now, some of the earliest examples of mail by air have been ignored as they were not carried by a postal service. I have categorised these items as ‘Opportunity Airmail’.

I have defined ‘Opportunity Airmail’ as mail sent by aircraft when the opportunity arose to do so and when no airmail service managed by the Post Office was operating.

The intention was to reduce the transit time mail would take to reach its destination.

An important part of the airmail story involves items not sent to communicate but to commemorate. These items are very prevalent during the record breaking flights from England to Australia between 1919 and 1939.



FIGURE 1 : 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. Leski Sales – N° 210 March 2003.

I have defined these items as 'Flight Souvenirs', i.e., "an item carried by air be an individual on the flight." They were not sent through a postal service and their purpose was to commemorate rather than to communicate.

The first mail sent by air from a foreign location to Australia were messages from Australian soldiers stationed near Baghdad in December 1918 (Figure 1).

An aircraft named *Old Carthusian* was flying between Martlesham in England and Delhi. The crew on this aircraft were given items of mail, messages to families and friends, the soldiers hoped would reach Australia in less time than the normal sea travel. The soldiers, knowing the flight was to terminate in Delhi, expected the mail to be carried from Delhi to Australia by surface transport.

For some reason, never satisfactorily explained, this mail was unloaded in Karachi and never onforwarded. It was finally carried to Australia by Ross and Keith Smith about a year later. This mail from Baghdad, however, was not the only Opportunity Airmail carried by the Smith brothers on their epic flight from England to Australia in late 1919.



FIGURE 2 : Opportunity airmail sent 'per favour' of Ross and Keith Smith by a fellow guest at the Raffles Hotel, Singapore.



Other items of Opportunity Airmail included Christmas cards sent by the Calcutta Post Office to various GPOs in Australia and a letter given to Ross Smith by a fellow guest in the Raffles Hotel, Singapore. This letter, (Figure 2, page 3), begins, "I am writing on the chance of getting this through by aeroplane ...". This group of items, and there may be more similar items yet to be identified, are the first airmail to reach Australia from a foreign destination.

In the September 2010 issue of *Philately From Australia* an article was published entitled, "The First Ordinary Airmail Letter to Australia". This article described an item of Opportunity Airmail given to Parer and McIntosh competing in the 1919 air race (Figure 3). The race had already been won when Parer and McIntosh departed but nevertheless they are considered as race participants.

This is not the first airmail item from an overseas destination but it is one of a few items

of Opportunity Airmail carried in the 1919 air race from England to Australia and is therefore important in the airmail story. Understanding the attitude of the general population and the Post Office to flying in 1914, together with a knowledge of how the event came to take place, demonstrates how this knowledge can alter conclusions made only on the basis of information provided on a cover.

That Maurice Guillaux flew the first airmail in Australia is one of the great myths of Australian aerophilately. Guillaux's flight took place just four years after the first aeroplane was flown in Australia. This first flight was in the air for only two minutes. It was not a flight which gave the general public or the Post Office any confidence that the aeroplane could contribute usefully to transport. The Post Office, always concerned that the mail be transported efficiently and safely, would not consider sending mail on Guillaux's flight



FIGURE 3 : The only item of opportunity airmail known carried by Parer and McIntosh.<sup>24</sup>



conducted in a fragile unreliable aircraft. There was no guarantee that this flight, the longest undertaken in the world at that time, would be successfully completed.

Not surprisingly, the Post Office archives reveal that this flight was not organised by the Post Office nor did it pay any of the expenses of the flight. Even the postmarker was supplied by the aviators. The flight was organised by a Sydney entrepreneur who put a business proposal to the Post Office which the Post Office accepted. No mail was flown, only the souvenir postcards sold by the aviators.

The first mail was flown in Australia in 1920 (Figure 4). The items flown by Guillaux are not mail, but are flight souvenirs, which are still incredibly important in the story of Australian airmail.

A “history” tells the story whether any item of mail from the event is known to have

survived or not. In 1920 the Post Office organised mail to be flown from Port Augusta in South Australia to Sydney. This was not an airmail service but a special service to quickly carry mail that had arrived in Fremantle by ship for the Prince of Wales departing Sydney on *HMS Renown*. The mail was sent by rail to Port Augusta then flown to Sydney and taken by a tug to the ship outside the Sydney Heads. The difficulties of flying this mail were incredible but the flight was a success.

As far as I am aware no items of mail addressed to those on board *HMS Renown* exist. There is always the chance that items, perhaps in a naval collection, will be recognised as important airmail items in the Australian airmail story.

Yes there is more to the airmail story than routes and rates and it is important to understand the history of an item if we are to fully understand the item itself.

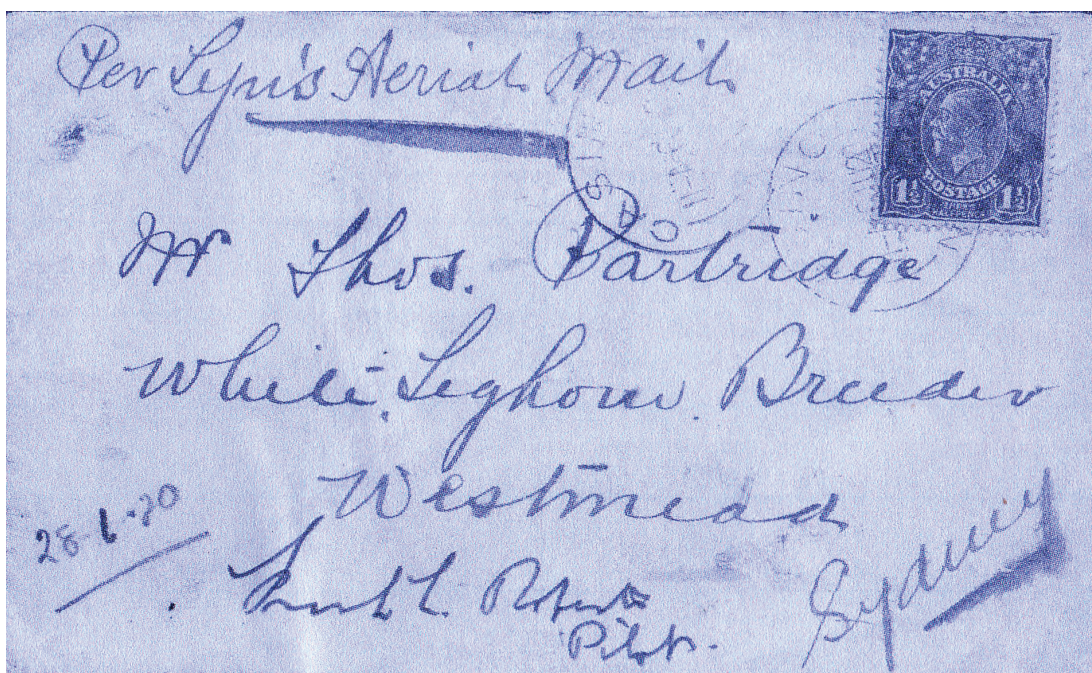


FIGURE 4 : Cancelled Casino 11 am on 28 June 1920 and censored 'Per Lyn's Aerial Service'.



