



The Prexie Era

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Twilight of the Prexies: Air Mail to Pitcairn Island

by Stephen L. Suffet



Figure 1: Double 25-cent per half ounce air mail rate to Pitcairn Island via New Zealand. Onward service to Pitcairn was by steamship.

This article is the first in a series that looks at usages of the United States Presidential Series stamps after the Post Office Department (P.O.D.) introduced the Liberty Series beginning with the release of the 8-cent value on April 9, 1954.

Except for the two CANAL ZONE overprinted stamps, P.O.D. issued all the basic denominations and formats of the Prexies within a nine month period during 1938-1939. This, of course, does not include production varieties, such as the stamps with the electric

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eye markings in the sheet margins or the dry-printed \$1 stamp. Even counting the **CANAL ZONE** stamps, the entire process of releasing the Prexies took less than 17 months.

By contrast, it took 11 years to do the same for the Liberty Series. Even ignoring the 25-cent Liberty Series coil stamp of 1965, which had no equivalent in the Presidential Series, it still took seven years to phase in the Liberty Series. During that time, many Prexies remained in current use. Each of the Presidential stamps continued to be produced and distributed to post offices during at least part of that period, some even after equivalent stamps in the Liberty Series had been issued. Many Prexies remained in post office stock for sale to customers after production and distribution had ended, and many others remained in the hands of the public after post office stocks ran out.

Figure 1 shows a pair of 25-cent Prexies paying two times the 25 cents per half ounce air mail rate to Pitcairn Island in 1959. The cover was postmarked Grapevine, Texas, a small city in the Dallas - Fort Worth metropolitan area, on July 27 of that year. A receiving postmark on the front of the cover shows it reached Pitcairn Island 17 days later, on August 31.

Located in the South Pacific approximately midway between New Zealand and South America, Pitcairn Island is one of the most remote inhabited places on earth. It was first settled in 1790 by nine of the *H.M.S. Bounty* mutineers along with six Tahitian men and eighteen Tahitian women they had cajoled, bribed, tricked, or forced into coming along. In 1959, the population of Pitcairn Island was only 149. Since then it has declined by about

two-thirds.

Although the general U.S. air mail rate to most of Africa, Asia, and the Pacific had been set at 25 cents per half ounce as of November 1, 1946, there is no indication that rate had applied to Pitcairn Island until March 22, 1949, when the notice, shown in Figure 2, appeared in *The Postal Bulletin*.

According to the notice, “air-mail articles will be dispatched via New Zealand for onward

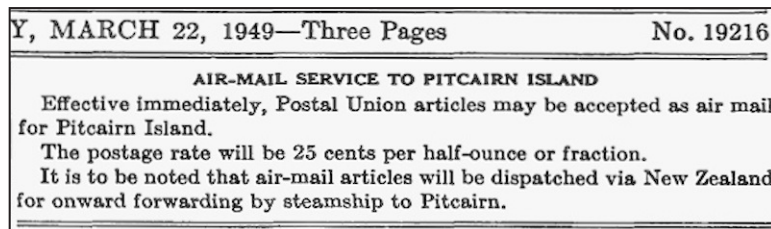


Figure 2: Detail from *The Postal Bulletin*, March 22, 1940.

forwarding by steamship to Pitcairn.” The air mail rate to New Zealand at the time was, of course, 25 cents per half ounce,

but *The Postal Bulletin* is silent on whether this forwarding by steamship was a new service or simply an official acknowledgement of a practice already in place.

In either case, the extension of the 25-cent rate to Pitcairn Island does not appear in *U.S. International Postal Rates, 1872-1996*, by Anthony S. Wawrukiewicz and Henry W. Beecher. In fact, the only air mail rate to Pitcairn Island they list is one via the Canal Zone that appeared in the July 1939 edition of the *United States Official Postal Guide*. That rate was 15 cents per half ounce, the same as the air mail rate from the U.S. mainland to the Canal Zone, and it provided air mail service only as far as Cristobal, the port on the Atlantic side of the Panama Canal. Transport from Cristobal to Pitcairn was by surface means. See Figure 3.

Wawrukiewicz and Beecher do not say when this 15-cent rate via the Canal Zone ended, nor do they indicate if any service to Pitcairn Island via New Zealand became available in July 1940 when U.S. Foreign Air Mail Route 19 from California to the South Pacific was

inaugurated. The rate from the U.S. mainland to New Zealand was set at 50 cents per half

colony, now a British overseas territory, included three other islands, all uninhabited; Henderson, Ducie, and Oeno.)

Pitcairn Islands (airmail letter rates)			
(In cents); Shaded area = absence of route/rate; Arrow (→) = continuance of rate.			
Route	Terms	Unit	1939
a. FAM from Miami to Cristobal	C	per 1/2 oz.	15c

S = surcharge; C = rate is inclusive of both ordinary postage and that for airmail service; FAM = foreign airmail route; oz. = ounce.
a. 1: USOPG (Jul 1939).

Figure 3: Table from *U.S. International Postal Rates, 1872-1996*.

ounce at that time. Presumably no additional postage would have been required for onward transportation by steamship to Pitcairn, provided such service actually existed.

(New Zealand, at the time, maintained a postal agency on Pitcairn Island to handle the island's postal affairs. Pitcairn Island didn't even issue its own postage stamps until October 15, 1940, and when it did, those stamps were inscribed Pitcairn Islands, plural. That is because the

P.O.D. issued the 25-cent Liberty Series sheet stamp on April 18, 1958 to replace the same value in the Presidential Series. Nevertheless, according to *The Prexies* by Roland E. Rustad, P.O.D. continued to distribute 25-cent Prexies during Fiscal Year 1959, which began July 1, 1958, and ran through June 30, 1959. Finding 25-cent Prexies used on cover in 1959 or later is not at all unusual, and the author has even obtained one used in 1970 on a cover that appears to have no philatelic connection.

Finding an air mail cover used to Pitcairn Island, however, is highly unusual. The one illustrated here would make a worthy addition to any Presidential Series collection.

Complete Run of *The Prexie Era* Available

A complete run of *The Prexie Era* newsletter, from No. 1-68, is currently available on CD. Send Jeff Shapiro \$10 and your street address. Your editor will burn a copy and put it in the mail. Jeff can be reached at the following address:

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Survived at Pearl Harbor, Sunk in the Falklands War

by Jeffrey Shapiro



While many collectors are familiar with the battleships U.S.S. *Arizona*, U.S.S. *Pennsylvania* and U.S.S. *West Virginia*, all destroyed during the December 7, 1941 Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, more than 120 other vessels were present at the Hawaiian Naval Base that day.

One of them was the U.S.S. *Phoenix* (CR 46), a Brooklyn class light cruiser named after the mythical bird that arose from ashes and, specially, the capital city of Arizona.

Launched in March 1938, the *Phoenix* saw service prior to World War II while on patrol off the West Coast of the United States. Based at Pearl Harbor, the *Phoenix* survived the Japanese attack and various other encounters with the Japanese in the Pacific Theater of

War. After winning eleven battle stars for WWII service, the *Phoenix* was decommissioned in July 1946.

In 1951, the ship was sold to the Argentine government and renamed the A.R.A. *General Belgrano*, after

the founding father of Argentina, Manuel Belgrano (1770-1820). On May 2, 1982, during the Falklands War, the *General Belgrano* was attacked by the British nuclear submarine, *Conqueror*, and sunk with the loss of 323 of her crew. The *General Belgrano* gained distinction as the first ship to be sunk by a nuclear powered submarine.

The registered official cover shown here was sent from the *Phoenix* while at Pearl Harbor, on June 22, 1941 and received at San Diego, CA three days later. It is franked with two 20-cent Clipper airmail stamps paying two times the 20 cents per half ounce airmail rate, plus a 15-cent Prexie paying the registration fee for indemnity less than \$5.

A Circuitous and Expensive Route to South Africa

by Bob Hohertz



This cover exhibits an interesting sequence of events, none of which appear to have been correct or intended.

First mailed on January 3, 1940 from New York to Johannesburg, South Africa, the sender affixed 70 cents postage. The airmail rate to South Africa at that time was 25 cents per half ounce from Europe if the letter reached there by sea or 55 cents per half ounce if it went all the way by air. There is no notation on the cover as to whether the sender expected the letter to get to Europe by sea or air.

It is likely the sender knew the letter weighed more than a half-ounce and was trying to pay enough to cover the cost. They could not have been trying to pay double the rate for air all the way, which would have been \$1.10, but postage for one-half to one ounce by sea and air would only have been 5 cents for sea passage and 50 cents for double air, leaving 15 cents overpayment. No prior rates could explain the amount paid, either.

The sender would have been fine, except a postal clerk weighed the letter and found it



between one and one-and-one-half ounces. Interestingly, the clerk quoted a rate of 30 cents per half-ounce, which is correct for neither air all the way nor sea and air. The latter starts out at 30 cents for the first half-ounce, but as 5 cents sea postage is good for up to and including one ounce, the second half-ounce only costs 25 cents. The second ounce going by sea is only 3 cents, so the third half-ounce should have been 28 cents, not 30 cents.

Since the sender had already paid what the postal clerk believed was 10 cents too much (actually 15 cents too much) he asked only for

an additional 20 cents, perhaps failing to note the destination. The sender affixed a 30-cent stamp bringing payment to one dollar for 83 cents postage owed.

The story might have ended here, were it not for the backstamps. These show the letter, originally mailed January 3 and remailed January 4, reached Lisbon on January 15. So far, so good. The next backstamp, however, shows it reaching Tananarive, Madagascar on February 20. Surely, even irregular air transport should not have taken forty days. It

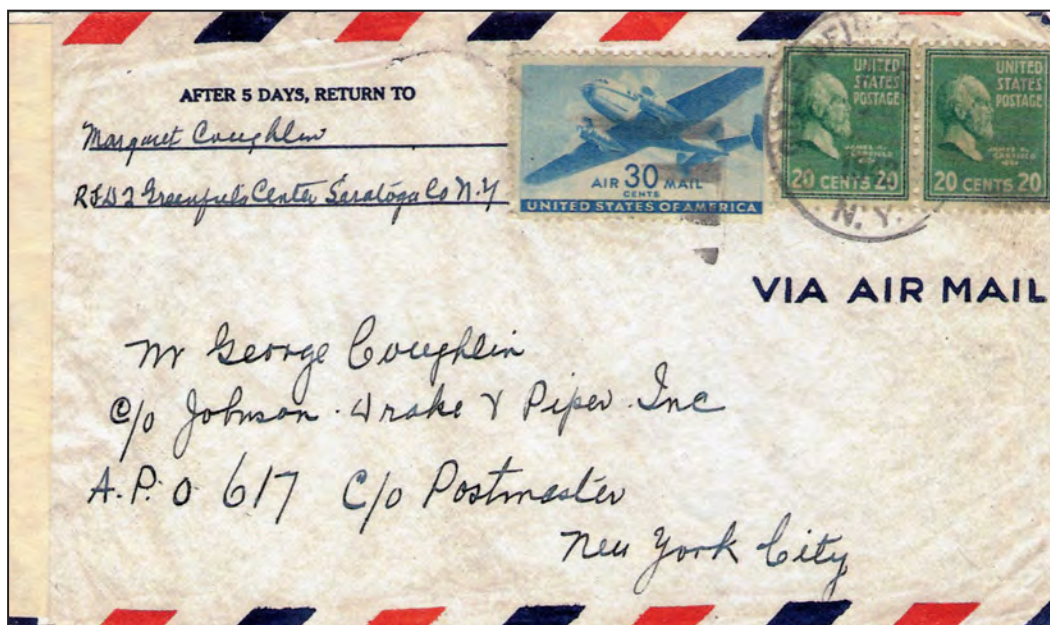
would appear to have gone by sea.

The next backstamp is difficult to read, but the letter seems to have reached Mozambique sometime in late March, though the date could be read as late May, which seems unlikely. There is no record of when it finally reached South Africa.

Could the letter have gone to Lisbon via FAM 18 and onward by sea, just the opposite of expected treatment? If not, this letter, which was overpaid for partial air service, may never have seen the inside of an airplane.

A Top Secret Mission to Eritrea - "Project 19"

by Stanley Sablak



This correspondence, between spouses, was addressed to a civilian worker on an air base at APO 617 - Gura, Eritrea. The addressee appears to have been an employee of Johnson, Drake, and Piper, Inc., an engineering and construction firm under contract to the Army Corps of Engineers to build runways, bridges, and roads.

During the summer of 1941 British forces were facing disaster in North Africa. The Royal Air Force desperately needed a repair base in

the region to return its damaged air fighters to battleworthiness. Calling on the U.S., which was not yet in the war, "Project 19", as it became known, was a top secret program in which Boeing and Douglas machinists, sworn to secrecy, were recruited from Seattle, Southern California and Midwest airplane manufacturers and brought to an abandoned Italian airplane plant in the Eritrean hills.

The project continued until General Rommel abandoned North Africa in Spring 1943.

Held Six Months by Italian Censors

by Bob Hohertz



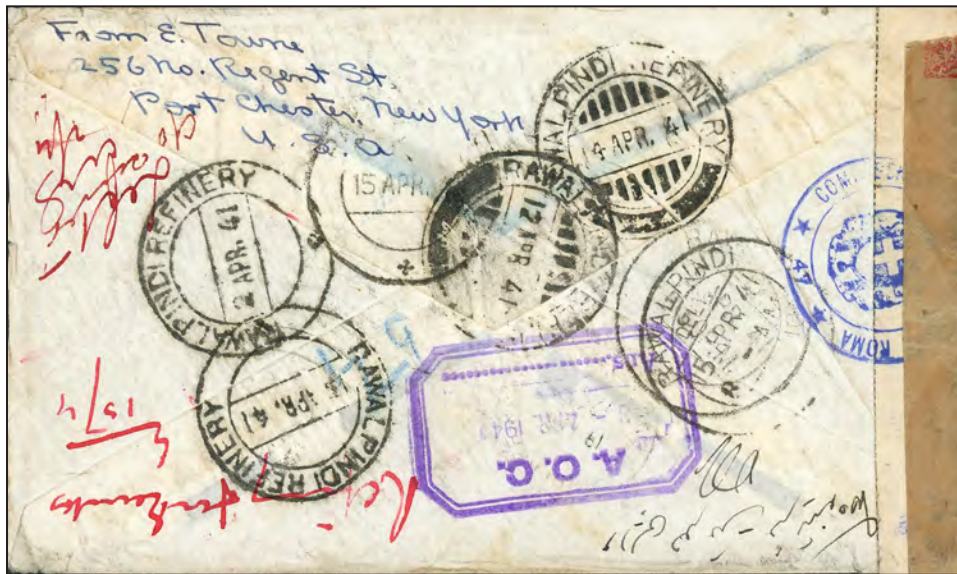
Back in the days when I was a practicing actuary I attended a Society of Actuaries meeting in New York City. When I arrived at the airport to return home I was quite early, and when I checked in to get my boarding pass the nice lady behind the counter told me that there was an earlier flight with open seats if I would like to take it. I certainly preferred that to sitting in the waiting area for several hours, so I accepted. To keep a long story short, after everyone was on the plane it was announced that the airplane had developed a problem, which would soon be fixed. After several hours and a round of free drinks we all deplaned, and though I found my original flight had left, there was another one with available seats leaving an hour or two later.

When I finally arrived home my wife asked me why I was so late, and I cheerfully told her, "Oh, I was able to catch an earlier flight."

What does that have to do with this cover to India? Well, it had a similar experience.

The sender mailed the letter on June 8, 1940 from Port Chester, New York, destined for Rawalpindi, India, and indicated it was to go "Via Pacific Air Mail." The 70-cent Pacific route postage was overpaid by five cents. However, a postal clerk must have noticed a flight from New York to Horta leaving on June 8 and a subsequent flight from there to Lisbon on June 9. From there the letter would travel to Rome to meet the Empire Route service on to Athens, Alexandria, Tiberias, Baghdad, Basra, Bahrain and Karachi. Surely this was a faster route than dispatching the letter first to San Francisco, then island-hopping it across the Pacific to Hong Kong for the better part of a week until it could join the Empire Route for onward dispatch to Bangkok, Rangoon, Calcutta, Allahabad, Gwalior and Karachi.

The problem was that Italy declared war on England on June 10 while the letter was in transit to Rome. The western end of the Empire Route was collapsing rapidly. The last flight crossed France on June 11 and surely did



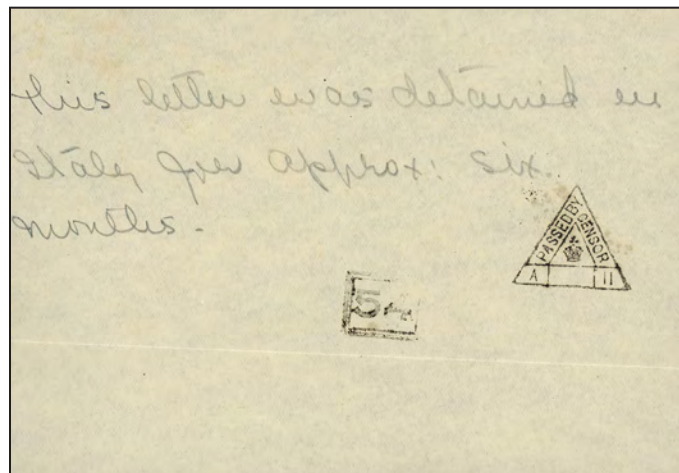
would not think it had languished in their office for almost a year.

Conflicting instructions may be found on the cover: “to be returned to sender” and a change of address to New York for the addressee. None of the back stamps shed any light as to which of these alternatives

not stop at Rome, where the letter ended up on June 9 or 10.

was followed, or when. I’d like to think it got to the addressee, and when he asked what happened, it told him, “I was able to catch an earlier flight.”

En route to someone working at the Attock Oil Refinery in India (now Pakistan,) the most logical occurrence would have been for Italian censors to destroy the letter or return it to the sender. But they didn’t. The contents must have been innocuous enough to arouse no suspicion that they would aid an enemy war effort, so, amazingly, it was held for at least six months and then somehow sent on to the addressee. (There must have been some procedure for exchange of mail of this sort between countries at war, and if anyone knows how this letter passed from Italy to some point where it could be sent to India, I’d like to know what that was.)



The letter did not reach the Rawalpindi Refinery until April 2, 1941, by which time the addressee must have returned to New York. There are Rawalpindi back stamps dated April 14 and 15, as well. The envelope did not retain its letter when I came into possession of it, but it did contain one sheet of paper explaining, “This letter was detained in Italy for approx. six months.” The enclosure slip was apparently added by the Indian censor so the recipient

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“DEPT. RULING No. 2 COMPLIED WITH”

by Louis Fiset



materials.

To prevent U.S. businesses from providing credit to any belligerent country, financial institutions were required to file a declaration under oath that all rights, titles, and interests pertaining to articles or materials being shipped had been transferred to foreign ownership. Isolationists in Congress had feared extending credit would allow businesses to invest in the success of any belligerent, and would eventually draw the nation into participat-

The two covers shown in this article both have rubber stamp markings on their fronts bearing similar wording; “Department ruling #2 complied with.” I have seen this marking applied in various formats on a number of wartime covers sent to international destinations that originated at financial institutions throughout the United States. Until now, the meaning of this text has remained unclear. A recent search on the online version of the *U.S. Postal Bulletin* using the search term, “Neutrality Act”, has now clarified its meaning.

In September 1939, after the invasion of Poland, Great Britain and France declared war on Germany. President Roosevelt was barred by the existing Neutrality Acts from selling arms to the Allies now in desperate need of them. So, he asked Congress to lift the ban. The resulting Neutrality Act of 1939 allowed belligerents to purchase arms on the same cash-and-carry basis that the earlier Neutrality Acts had established for the sale of nonmilitary

ing in the war.

For purposes of administration, mailing postmasters required senders to certify on the address side of the cover “**DEPT. RULING No. 2 COMPLIED WITH**” so the contents would not be held for inquiry by the Post Office Department. However, no such articles or materials were allowed to be dispatched by transatlantic air transport, only by ship or transpacific air transport.

The cover shown above, sent by transatlantic air service to occupied Czechoslovakia, seems to fly in the face of the airmail ban. However, the contents would have been too lightweight to contain banned legal or contractual documents. Alternatively, the letter might simply have been referencing such materials sent by ship. Stamping the cover with the required marking would have alerted P.O.D. inspectors the correspondence was in compliance and the letter therefore should be allowed to pass.



The second cover, to the Dutch East Indies, illustrates another aspect of Department Ruling No. 2 requirements. The declaration was not required on articles or materials dispatched by the transpacific air service, presumably because no country in the Pacific was yet at war with the Allies nor subject to the cash-and-carry limits imposed by the Neutrality Act. It has \$2.95 postage affixed, paying four times the 70 cents per half ounce rate, plus 15 cents for minimum indemnity registry service. The two-ounce weight and registry service demanded suggest the contents would have been banned if sent to a European country via transatlantic air service.

The compliance markings, designed to avoid inspection by P.O.D. inspectors and certain delay in mail transmission disappeared once the U.S. entered the war in December 1941. But the markings did not protect the contents from inspection by Allied or Axis censors.

German censors intercepted the cover to Czechoslovakia at Frankfurt who subsequently sent it on to its final destination. In Prague, the letter received within-city service by pneumatic mail and has a receiving mark dated January 15, 1941. The transit time was 50 days.

The cover to the Dutch East Indies, bearing a \$2 Prexie stamp, was posted at New York on October 20, 1941, with a transit marking applied at San Francisco two days later. On Wednesday, October 22, the letter was carried by the *China Clipper* on FAM 14 to Singapore where it was off-loaded on November 4 and passed through Singapore censorship. The last leg of the journey, from Singapore to Medan, likely occurred on one of KNILM's scheduled flights. A Medan backstamp dated November 23 appears on the back, approximately a month after this business correspondence was posted.

Since prewar transit times from San Francisco to the Dutch East Indies averaged 9-11 days, a delay of approximately three weeks ensued for this correspondence. Having passed through censorship both at Singapore and in the Dutch East Indies, this likely contributed significantly to the cause of the delay.

Evidence of censorship may be seen on the face of the cover. The purple circled D and circled 16 are routing markings placed by Singapore censorship. It appears the letter was passed, but not examined there. However, censors at Medan opened the letter, as seen by the transparent resealing tape, which covers the censor's identification mark (DEV. 14).