‘A Few of My Favourite Things’, Number Five: A Short-Lived Ceylon Airmail Rate and a Greek God

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There are few postal history subjects as engrossing as wartime mails. Against a backdrop of carnage and despair, of military blundering and political stupidity, the mail still had to get through. The logistics were much the same for Napoleon’s *Grand Armée* in the early-1800s as they were for the combatants during World War I. Move entire armies to strategic destinations and there was a need to get mail to and from those involved. Along the way, civilian services were often severely disrupted and, in some cases, suspended altogether.

There was a period of only 19 years from the end of the Great War to the beginning of World War II − two decades of social disruption and technological advances. Among the most important and pervasive changes was the introduction of aerial services that linked the continents and moved an ever-increasing quantity of mail by ever-faster means. And as the volumes grew, so the costs fell. Britain introduced the *Empire Air Mail Scheme (EAMS)* that slashed airmail fees by up to 90%; the fee from England to any other participating territory plummeted from 1/3d per half-ounce (oz) to a mere 1½d.

The reduction in Ceylon was not as dramatic but the standard fee still fell from 1r to 20c per ½oz. Then, along came WWII, *EAMS* was suspended and rates returned to their previous levels. The War initially did not have much other direct impact on Ceylon. That was to change over the next few years and, along with those new conditions, came a variety of airmail routes and fees.

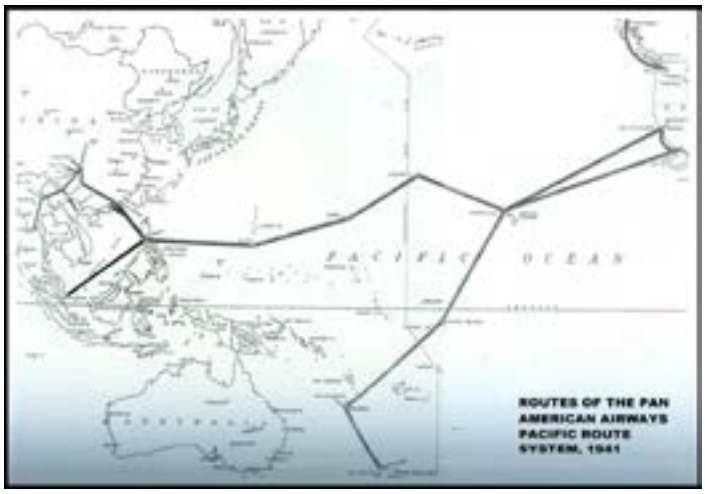
Initially, airmail from Ceylon was carried by Imperial Airways via India, Egypt and Europe to England. As noted, the rate was 1r. On 10 June 1940, Italy sided with Germany, the Mediterranean Route was severed, and the much longer and slower “Horseshoe” Route was introduced. Travel times blew out from two weeks to two months, but the cost remained the same.

To address this problem, in July 1940, a new eastbound service was introduced between Calcutta and Hong Kong via Chungking, Chiang Kai-Shek’s Nationalist capital in inland China. This was dubbed the ‘Over the Hump’ Route because it required pilots to negotiate the Himalayas.

For this reason, it was appropriately called the most dangerous air route in the world. One book speaks of “…truly a pioneering aviation operation that had just about everything working against it…[M]ilitary commanders considered a flight over the Hump to be more hazardous than a bombing mission over Europe…”. [1]

It was also one of the most expensive. A letter from Ceylon flown Over the Hump and on to England by the Pan Am services across the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans cost 6r, six times the price for the standard air route. Not surprisingly, it was little used and examples of mail from this service are very scarce.

Even more elusive are covers carried by the longer, but safer, and slightly less-expensive route via Singapore to connect with Pan Am’s FAM-14 to Manila and beyond. From May 1941, in alternate weeks, Singapore replaced Hong Kong as the FAM-14 western terminus. [2] Ted Proud’s charts reveal that the first air service from Singapore to Manila was on 9 May with the last on 29 November, and that from 1 October - with two exceptions - Singapore was the terminus for all FAM-14 flights. [3] However, as a matter of practice, it is known that from 7 July 1941, mail from Ceylon was flown by Qantas from Singapore to Sydney to connect with the TEAL service to Auckland which, in turn, hooked-up with Pan Am’s FAM-19 service to Hawaii and California. [4] The rate was again slightly lowered, to 5r per ½oz.

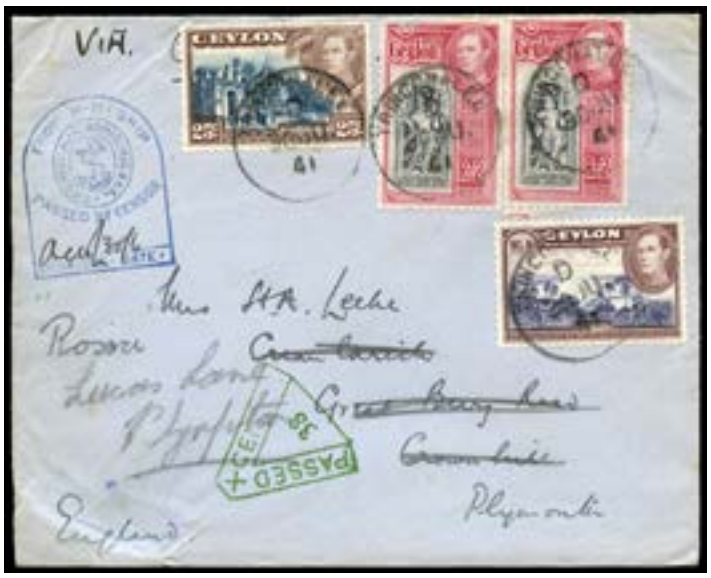


Reproduced from “Intercontinental Airmails Volume One: Transatlantic and Pacific” by Edward Proud (2008), page 490.

Our subject cover on this occasion was flown Calcutta-Singapore-Manila-Hawaii and beyond at the short-lived 5r25c rate. It was franked with KGVI Pictorials comprising 25c Temple of the Tooth (in Singhalese, the Dalada Maligawa), 1r Trincomalee Harbour and two of the 2r black & carmine Ancient Guard Stone (found in the ancient ruins at Anuradhapura). [As an aside, many years ago, one of the British magazines - *Gibbons Stamp Monthly* (?) - conducted a survey from which it was concluded that this series from Ceylon was the most attractive of all Empire pictorial sets.]

As required, the envelope was superscribed “Via S[ingapore]” but most of that endorsement was obscured by the stamps. The stamps were cancelled with a ‘TRINCOMALEE/ D /30JU/41’

cds. At this time, Trinco, as it is known colloquially, was home to Britain's Eastern Fleet. The origin suggests the sender was a serviceman. This is confirmed by the naval "tombstone" cachet 'FROM HM SHIP/…/PASSED BY CENSOR/…' struck in blue. The Indian-pattern 'PASSED X CENSOR/ 38' handstamp in green is a Forces type from a shore facility that also indicates a military sender.



There is nothing endorsed on the reverse and nothing else obvious to indicate the identity of the sender. However, the addressee's name, apparently "Mrs St A Leeke" at Plymouth provides a strong clue, to which we shall return.

It is a little-known fact that Ceylon was attacked by the Japanese during World War II, and no surprise that Ceylon was not ready for it. The Japanese naval assault on Pearl Harbor that brought the Americans into the War had been led by Vice-Admiral Chuichi Nagumo. Less than four months later, Admiral Nagumo sailed with essentially the same fleet from the Moluccas in the Dutch Indies. His target was Ceylon.

Lester Pearson, Prime Minister of Canada between 1963 and 1968, wrote of Winston Churchill that, "He considered the most dangerous moment of the war, and the one which caused him the greatest alarm, was when news was received that the Japanese fleet was heading for Ceylon and the naval base [at Trincomalee]". [5]

Fortunately, the British Navy had anticipated the Japanese intentions and the Eastern Fleet, under Admiral Sir James Somerville, departed from Trinco in the last week of March, finding safe refuge at Addu Atoll in the Maldives. Thus, it was up to a woefully under-resourced and ill-prepared RAF to deal with the Japanese threat.

At 7.30am on Easter Sunday, 5 April 1942, a time at which the Japanese knew that all good Christians would have been getting ready for church, a two-pronged airborne assault was launched against Colombo on the south-west coast of the island and at Trincomalee on the central east coast.

The results were predictable, and devastating. The Japanese laid waste to the British air defences, the naval fortifications, oil installations and anything else at which they could have a pot-shot. However, in what must be considered one of the great mysteries of World War II, the Japanese chose not to press their advantage, flew back to their aircraft carriers, and steamed back to Singapore. It is likely that destruction of Somerville's Fleet was Nagumo's prime objective. Finding his adversary had decamped; not knowing where or how far the Eastern Fleet had gone; perhaps concerned that the British were waiting in ambush in the Andaman or Nicobar Islands off the Burmese coast; and perhaps because his supply lines were stretched to the limit; the Japanese commander chose to return to the safety of Singapore rather than risk the unexpected.

Whatever the reason, for the duration of the War, the enemy never returned to Ceylon or India. However, in a very short time, they had done a great deal of damage to Ceylon's military and civilian infrastructure. One of the major casualties was the British capital ship HMS *Hermes* along with her Australian destroyer-escort HMAS *Vampire*.

Hermes had the distinction of being the world's first purpose-built aircraft carrier. Launched on 11 September 1919, she missed seeing action during the Great War and was an aging and rather outdated vessel by the time WWII rolled around. Sent to Ceylon to support the Eastern Fleet, she was undergoing maintenance when the Japanese attack was launched.

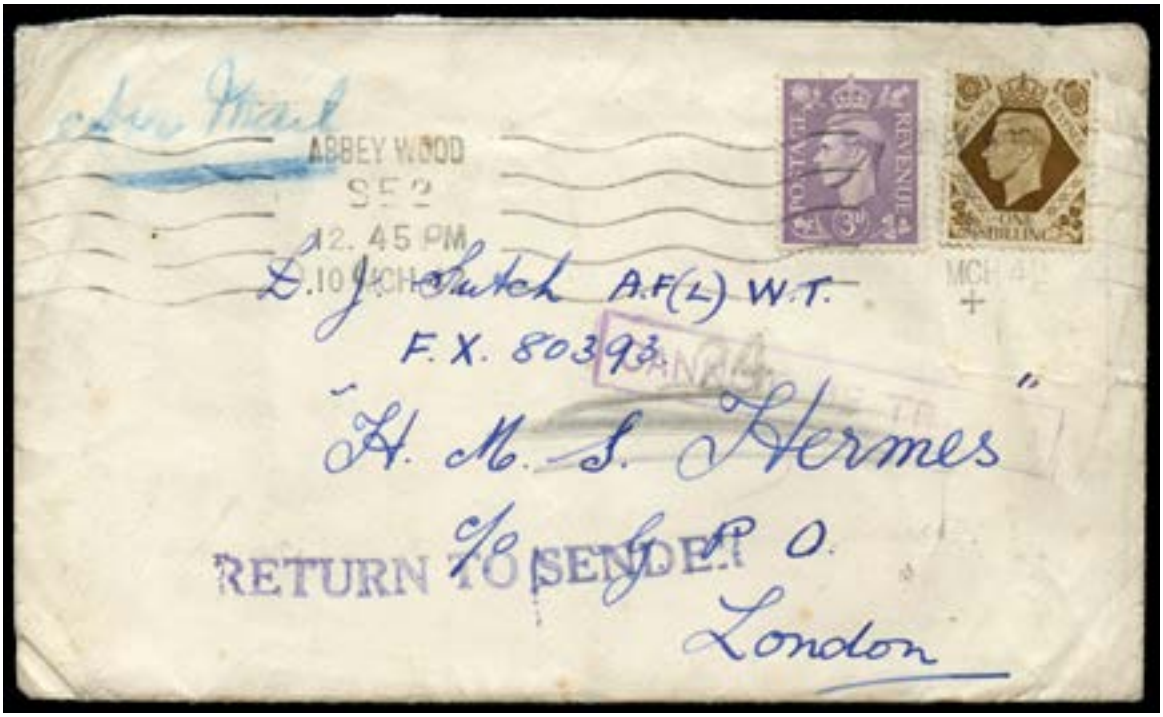
Admiral Somerville thought *Hermes* stood no chance if she remained at Trinco, and ordered the carrier to sea, with *Vampire*. Unfortunately, the Japanese spotted the ships and sank them both off Batticaloa, which is approximately 80km SSE of Trincomalee. Why they did not sail north is another little mystery.

Our featured cover is known to have been sent by an officer aboard the *Hermes* which was engaged during 1941 in patrols around the Indian Ocean, stopping regularly at Trincomalee. The addressee, Mrs Leeke, was his mother.

The sender was the Rev. ACH Leeke of the Royal Navy Volunteer Reserve who had been assigned to the *Hermes* from at least June 1940, when the ship was involved in the successful British assault on the French Navy at Dakar in the Senegal. Alan Leeke's letters are quoted at length in "The Hermes Adventure" [6] by Rex Morgan, whose father was one of the few survivors. Nineteen officers and 288 other ranks died when the *Hermes* sank. Rev. Leeke was one of them. The *Vampire's* captain and eight ratings were killed or died from their wounds.

Research into the background to a cover is what brings postal history alive. As here, the circumstances can be tragic but, for the context of the cover to be fully appreciated, they need to be examined. The more interesting the back-story, the more interesting the cover. That is certainly the case here, which is why this piece is one of My Favourite Things.

To round out the story, on 10 March 1942, an airmail letter was sent from Abbey Wood, a suburb in London's South-East Postal District, to HMS Hermes c/- the GPO at London. This



was standard operating procedure. The movements of naval ships were closely guarded secrets. Mail to sailors was processed through the London GPO and passed-on to the Admiralty which forwarded the letters as appropriate.

The addressee, DJ Sutch, was a wireless telegraphist aboard *Hermes*. He is not named in the Roll of Honour published in "The Hermes Adventure" [7] so is presumed to have survived. However, in the inevitable chaos following the loss of the ship, Sutch's whereabouts were unknown. The face of the cover was therefore struck with the boxed 'CANNOT BE TRACED' and the unframed 'RETURN TO SENDER' cachets, both in violet ink. The reverse bears the mechanical 'RECEIVED FROM/HM SHIPS' slogan with, for security reasons, a diamond-shaped device *in lieu* of a datehead, applied on return to London.

References & Notes:

[1] "Flying the Hump: In Original World War II Color" by Jeff Ethell & Don Downie (Motorbooks International, 2004) at page 7.
[2] "Hong Kong Airmails 1924-1941" by Duncan Crewe (Hong Kong Study Circle, 2000) at page 123.
[3] "Intercontinental Airmails Volume One: Transatlantic and Pacific" by Edward Proud (2008) at page 529.
[4] "The Postal History of Ceylon" by Edward Proud (2006) at page 221.
[5] "The Most Dangerous Moment: the Japanese Assault on Ceylon 1942" by Michael Tomlinson (Granada Publishing, 1979) at page 5.
From what we know of Churchill, one can be sure that he had little interest in Ceylon but was petrified that,
if the island fell, the door was open to India and its invaluable grain stores.
[6] "The Hermes Adventure" by Rex Morgan (Runciman Press, 1985).
[7] Ibid, pages 281-283.

Most of the selections for this series are from Gary Watson's collection of Australian Mail to Overseas Destinations 1901-1965. However, occasionally, Gary will share an item from his Gold Medal exhibit "Ceylon During World War II", his voluminous collection of the Datestamps of Melbourne, his award-winning "Aerogrammes of Eastern Arabia" or his Picture Postcards of Ceylon.

Early Registration Labels in Australia: New South Wales

Kevin Burt FRPSV

The earliest registration labels were issued in all six states (the Northern Territory being part of South Australia at that time) around 1 October 1908 following discussions by the Postal Authorities. No exact dates of issue are really known, and it is likely their use started as soon as they arrived at the Post Office. Initially, there was a trial period of six months at capital city GPOs, although Queensland started their use statewide.[1]