

7THE 1974 HI-JACK OF BRITISH AIRWAYS' VC10 AT DUBAI



G-ASGR on the tarmac at Tunis with hijackers on board

In January 1974 senior British Airways Captain Jim Fulcher was in command of the Vickers Super VC10 (registration G-ASGR) which took the Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh from Heathrow to Christchurch for the Commonwealth games in New Zealand. Later the same year he was again in command of the same aircraft when it was hijacked.

The Hijack

On the evening of Thursday 21 November 1974 Fulcher was at Dubai airport to meet inbound Flight 870 from London. After refuelling he and his crew were to take over for the continuing flight to Calcutta, Singapore and Brunei. During the stop four men disguised as airport workers left the passenger lounge and ran towards the aircraft firing guns. An Indian stewardess, Nirmala Subba, standing by the aircraft steps was shot in the back but survived. Once the hijackers were on board, they realised there was no pilot so they threatened to shoot passengers if one was not sent immediately. Captain Jim Fulcher did not hesitate and boarded the aircraft.

The Demands

The VC10 took off with 25 passengers, 13 Dubai ground staff (who had been cleaning the aircraft) and 11 crew, a total of 49 excluding the hijackers. The four hijackers, members of the *Abu Nidal Organisation* (ANO) a split from the PLO, ordered Fulcher to fly to Beirut but the authorities had closed the airport. They diverted to Tripoli, Libya where they refuelled on 22 November, continuing to Tunis where the aircraft was immediately surrounded by troops. The hijackers then set out their demands:

1. The release of fifteen Palestinian terrorists, thirteen of whom were held in Cairo
2. The release of two jailed Palestinian terrorists held in Holland, and
3. An admission by the UK that the setting up of Israel was 'a crime'

They said if their demands were not met within 24 hours, they would shoot one passenger every two hours. On 23 November a spokesman for the PLO went on board, shook hands with the passengers and crew and said: *You can go*. There was an argument between the PLO spokesman and the hijackers following which they took a 43-year old Swiss bank official, Werner Gustav Kehl, from his seat, shot him in the back and dropped his body out of the rear door.

Negotiations and Threats

Intense negotiations followed and five terrorists from Cairo were brought to the aircraft resulting in the release of seven passengers. The following morning the two terrorists from Holland arrived and the remaining hostages were released leaving only the cockpit crew Fulcher, Engineer Officer Frank Sharples and First Officer Michael Wood on board. All Arab governments and the PLO condemned the action and the increasingly desperate hijackers first sought political asylum in Tunisia, which was refused, then threatened to blow up the aircraft by 07:00 the following day with explosives they had placed in the cockpit.



Frank Sharples, Michael Wood, Josse Bruckshaw and Captain Jim Fulcher

Fulcher attempted to persuade the terrorists not to blow up the aircraft, pointing out that if they blew themselves up together with the crew that would be condemned by the world. However, if they released the crew and then blew themselves up, they would be martyrs. For whatever reason, at 07:00 on Monday 25 November the terrorist leader approached the cockpit and told Fulcher they had decided to surrender. All eleven terrorists were released by the Tunisian authorities.

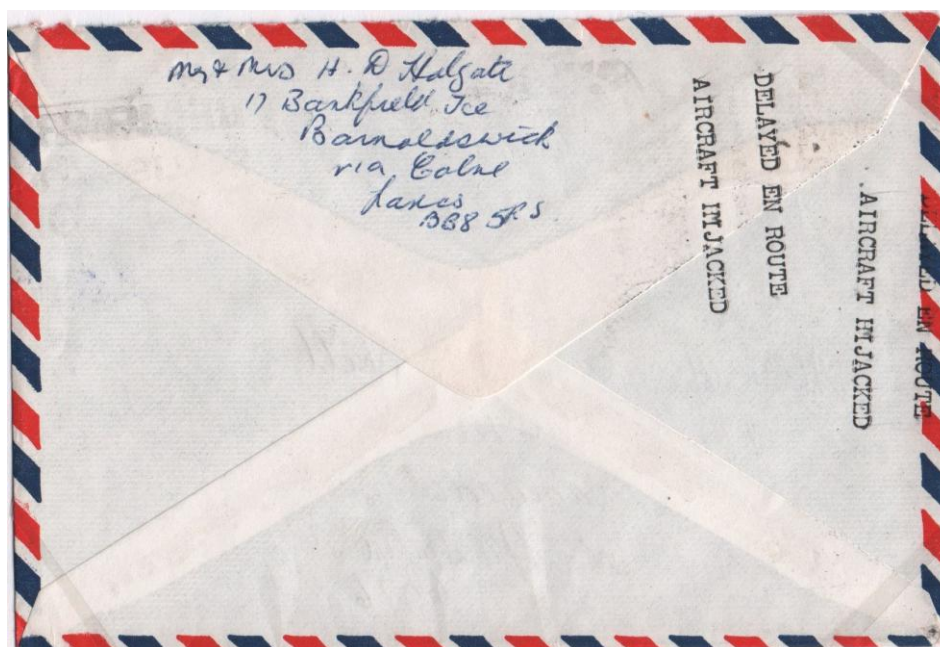
Awards for Jim Fulcher

Fulcher received the Queen's Gallantry Medal, the Founder's Medal by the Guild of Air Pilots and Air Navigators, the British Airline Pilots' Association Gold Medal and a Certificate of Commendation from British Airways. In February 1979 he was in command of a Royal Flight when he took the Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh to Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States. He retired one month later and died on 10 May 2008 aged 86.

The Mail

Fulcher, his cockpit crew and seven cabin crew flew to London on 26 November in G-ASGR, the 2.5 tonnes of mail still being on board. The mail was undamaged and was re-forwarded by the UK Post Office on board the next available British Airways flight.

All the mail had originated in the UK between 16 and 20 November 1974, those cancelled on the 20th generally being from London and the home counties, and was for Australia and the Far East. The UK Postal Authorities informed their counterparts in recipient countries that the mail would be delayed, but upon receipt only one postal authority, that of Perth WA, applied an instructional marking to explain the delay.



Reverse of cover from Burnley cancelled 2-PM 19 November addressed to Kalamunda WA

British
airways

PO Box 10
Heathrow Airport (London)
Hounslow TW6 2JA
Telephone: 01-759 5511

Mr D Gage
Customs & Excise Philatelic Society
HM Customs & Excise Welfare Branch
Adelaide House
London Bridge
London
EC4R 9DB

CA.1.3.135

23 November 1978

Dear Sir

Your letter of 21 November 1978 addressed to the Manager, British Airways London refers.

I can confirm that mail carried on board the VC10 hijacked to Tunis in 1974 was returned to London and reforwarded to destination by the British Post Office on the next available British Airways flight.

Letter from British Airways confirming that mail was returned to London before being forwarded

There were covers from this incident addressed to other parts of Australia. With one exception they can only be identified by the despatch cancellations. An arrival date stamp of 29 November or later would confirm that the item was on the hijacked VC10. The exception is a letter to Howrah, Tasmania 7018, illustrated below. which was apparently mis-sorted and received the Type 2 cachet.

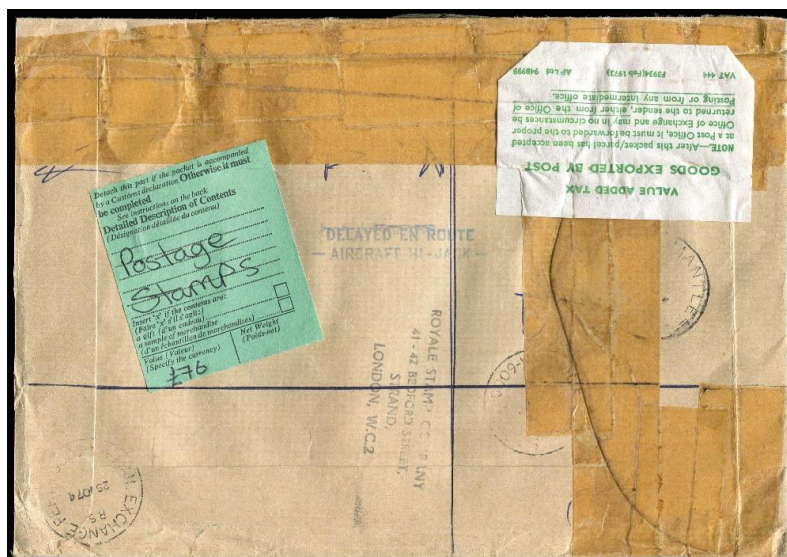


Cancelled CREWE CHESHIRE 18 NO 74. Franked 18½p Printed Paper reduced rate. Ex Kibble

Mail to Western Australia was generally delivered to the General Post Office, Perth, on Friday 29 November 1974. This date is confirmed in 2013 when a registered cover appeared in the Phoenix sale of the Rod Perry collection of air mails. Delivery of letters to addressees generally occurred on Monday 2 December after being processed at the Perth GPO. This statement is supported by the existence of four covers each bearing a receipt stamp or a manuscript endorsement stating that it was received on the 2nd.



Registered cover from The Royale Stamp Company, London to Fremantle 6160



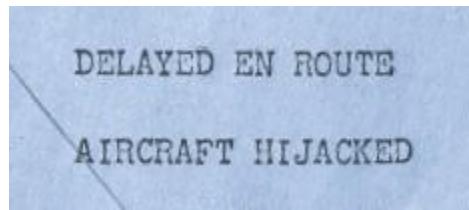
The only registered cover recorded; arrival date-stamp 29 November 1974



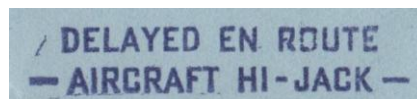
The Cachets

Two types of markings were applied. Type 1 is a two-line unboxed cachet 35 x 12mm overall made up with serified upper case letters 2.5mm high. It is struck in black and appears to have been applied using an Addressograph or similar machine which used embossed metal plates and an ink ribbon to

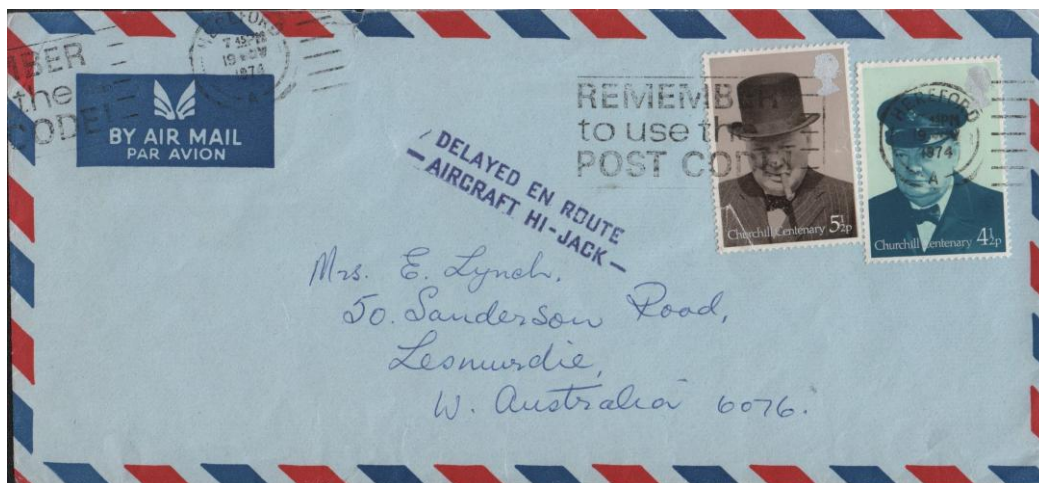
create a print. Many of the recorded examples bear a mirror impression of the cachet on the front indicating the ink used with the cachet did not dry quickly. Second Officer Michael Wood retrospectively signed two airletters bearing the type 1 cachet.



Type 2 is a two-line unboxed cachet 50 x 8mm overall made up with sans serif upper case letters 3mm high. This cachet incorporates a hyphen at each end of the second line and is struck in purple.



It appears Type 1 was used initially with Type 2 being substituted to preclude mirror images appearing on the front of adjacent covers due to the ink not drying quickly. A preliminary census confirms that at least 54 examples are recorded (13 Type 1 and 41 Type 2) and the author estimates that in total at least 75 examples have survived.

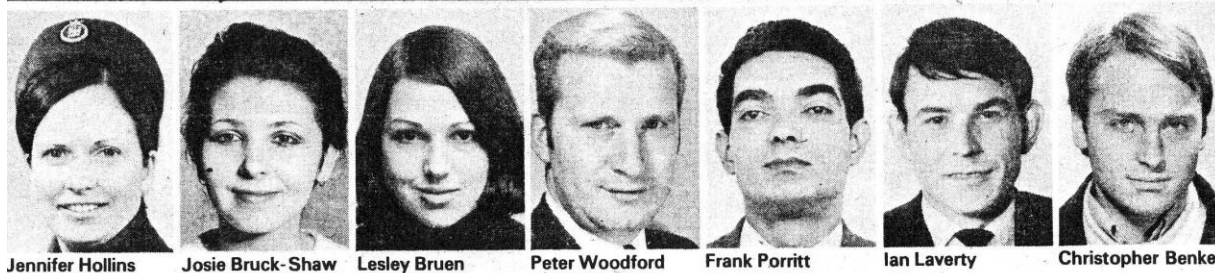


Type 2 cachet on cover cancelled **HEREFORD 7⁴⁵ PM 19 NOV 1974**

The Aircraft and Crew



The cabin crew who shared the peril



Seven of the eight cabin crew on board G-ASGR when it was hijacked



G-ASGR at Tunis during Hi-jack



Indira Milton, Cabin Crew. It was only her third flight

This Super VC10 Type 1151, registration G-ASGR, construction number 867, was the last of seventeen built for BOAC. It saw no subsequent RAF service and was scrapped in 1993.

Postscript

On 8 December 1974, Tunisia freed 11 Palestinian guerrillas, including four who hijacked the British VC10 airliner. The guerrillas left immediately, saying they wanted to put themselves at the disposition of the Palestine Liberation Organisation. The PLO had stated previously that it would put the guerrillas on trial for acts damaging to the cause of Palestine. The hijackers were formally freed after they wrote a letter expressing their thanks to President Bourguiba, to the Government and to the Tunisian people for their 'noble attitude'.