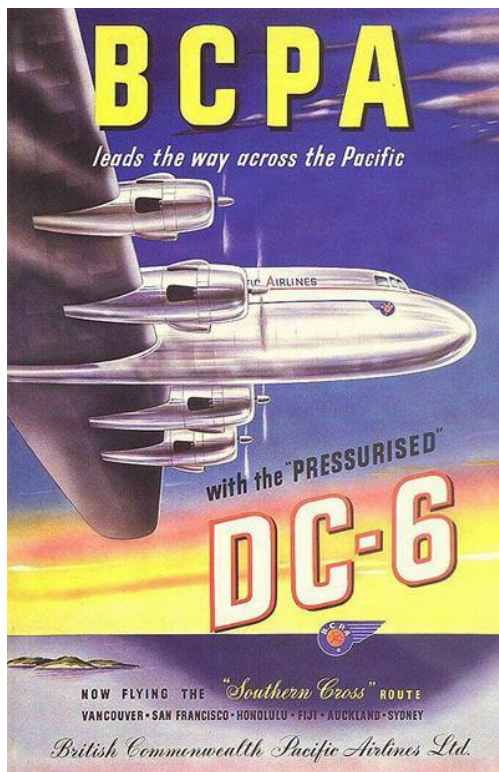


1953 CRASH OF BCPA DC-6 ON KING'S MOUNTAIN CREATES CACHET MYSTERY



Formation and History of BCPA

British Commonwealth Pacific Airlines (BCPA), was an airline formed by the governments of Australia (50%), New Zealand (30%) and the United Kingdom (20%) to operate 'British' trans-Pacific air services linking Australia and New Zealand with Canada, principally in competition with American airline Pan Am. BCPA was registered in New South Wales in June 1946 with headquarters in Sydney. Its original route was Sydney-Auckland-Fiji-Canton Island-Hawaii-San Francisco and Vancouver. Services included Melbourne from 1953.

Initially BCPA had no aircraft of its own and so chartered all flights from Australian National Airways (ANA), which used its Douglas DC-4s. The inaugural service departed from Sydney on 15 September 1946. In late 1948 BCPA took delivery of the first of four Douglas DC-6s, fitted as sleepers. Each aircraft was named for one of the four vessels of Captain James Cook: *Resolution* (VH-BPE), *Discovery* (VH-BPH), *Adventure* (VH-BPG) and *Endeavour* (VH-BPF). The DC-6s enabled BCPA to introduce pressurised services on the Pacific ahead of

rival Pan Am.

The Flight

Flight 304/44 was flown by a Douglas DC-6 named *Resolution* and registered VH-BPE, on a flight from Sydney, Australia, to Vancouver, British Columbia in Canada, with scheduled stops at Nadi (Fiji), Canton Island, Honolulu and San Francisco. It crashed during its initial approach towards San Francisco International Airport on 29 October 1953, killing all 19 people on board, including the American pianist William Kapell.

The aircraft was flying the Honolulu - San Francisco leg with a crew of 8 and 11 passengers (10 adults and 1 child). Captain Bruce N. Dickson (aged 34) and his crew took over the plane in Honolulu



as scheduled. The estimated flying time was 9 hours and 25 minutes. Dickson and his First Officer, Frank A. Campbell (aged 28), each had several thousand hours of flight time in a DC-6. Both pilots had made more than 100 approaches into San Francisco Airport, many of which were actual instrument approaches. The weather in the San Francisco area presented no adverse flight conditions; however, visual reference with the ground was precluded by the overcast foggy conditions and an instrument approach was required

The Crash

As the flight neared the California coast, the aircraft contacted San Francisco Air Route Traffic Control (ARTC). At 08:07 Pacific Standard Time, it was cleared to descend in accordance with Visual Flight Rules and to maintain at least 500 feet (150 m) on top of clouds, which the flight acknowledged. At 08:15, the flight reported that it was starting descent and at that time was given the San Francisco weather report. Just after 08:21 ARTC cleared the flight to the San Francisco Instrument Landing System (ILS) Outer Marker beacon via the Half Moon Bay Fan Marker direct to the San Francisco Outer Marker, with instructions to maintain at least 500 feet (150 m) above all clouds and to contact San Francisco Approach Control after passing the Half Moon Bay Fan Marker. At 08:39, the flight called San Francisco Approach Control and advised that it was over Half Moon Bay, 500 feet on top of clouds. Approximately three minutes later, the flight reported "Southeast, turning inbound". At 08:45, a call to the flight was unanswered as were all subsequent calls.



Recovering a Body from the Crash Site – *San Mateo Times* 29 Oct

Crew And Passengers

Crew:

CAPT BRUCE N DICKSON, 34, Pilot in command.
FRANK A CAMPBELL, 28, First officer.
GEORGE R MURTAGH, 28, Navigator.
CHARLES N CATTANACH, 31, Flight engineer.
WALTER B "WALLY" KNIGHT, 34, purser.
VERNON A WALKER, 32, radio officer.
MISS JUNE F ELDER, 27, hostess.
MISS AMY K LEWIS, 32, hostess.

Passengers:

REGINALD F "GEORGE" EASTOE, 50, an engineer from England.
WILLIAM J COX, a shopfitter from Sydney.
JANOS FEHER, 39, a watchmaker from Hungary.
JOHN A FEHER, 7, son of JANOS FEHER -- flying to the United States for polio treatment.
JOHN W BUTTERWORTH, 52, an engineer from Melbourne.
CYRIL G McDONALD, 60, an engineer from Melbourne.
BERNARD R TISCHLER, 31, a clerk from Adelaide.
CAPTAIN PAUL OLUF OLSEN, 39, an Australian sea captain.
JOHN K BRISCOE, 45, an insurance executive from England.
WILLIAM KAPELL, 31, a world-renowned concert pianist, of New York City.
MRS JEAN AIK CHIVERTON, 65, en route to her home in Vancouver.

Investigation and Probable Cause of the Crash

The Civil Aeronautics Board investigated the accident. The investigation began immediately after locating the wreckage in the mountainous area southwest of San Francisco, about seven and a half miles southeast of the town of Half Moon Bay. The aircraft was almost entirely destroyed by impact and ensuing fire (see above aerial photograph from *San Mateo Times* 29 Oct). It had initially topped several large redwood trees, shearing off one of its landing gear and leaving it hung-up in an oak, continued across a narrow ravine and crashed against the side of a steeply rising slope approximately half a mile beyond the first tree strike. The main wreckage area was at about 1,950 feet (590 m) above sea level.

The landing gear was down and locked at impact. There was no evidence of mechanical or structural failure prior to the impact. The accident site was between the Half Moon Bay Fan Marker and the ILS Outer Marker and it appears that the flight did not maintain at least 500 feet (150 m) on top of clouds between these points but had descended in weather conditions which precluded reference to the ground. In addition, the flight had reported being over the Half Moon Bay Fan Marker at 08:39 and then "Southeast, turning inbound" at about 08:42. In this time interval it would not have been possible for the flight at normal speed to have flown from the Half Moon Bay Outer Marker to the ILS Outer Marker, make the required turn and return to the site of the crash in accordance with Civil Aeronautics Authority approved instrument approach procedure. Thus it was likely that when the pilot reported he was "Southeast, turning inbound", he was in fact southwest of the airport. The investigation then stated that it was probable that the captain, after reporting that he was over Half Moon Bay, either saw the terrain momentarily through an unreported break in the overcast foggy conditions or because of a radio navigational error became convinced that his position was farther northeast and started to descend over what he believed was the proper area.

It was therefore concluded that the probable cause of the crash was the failure of the crew to follow prescribed procedures for an instrument approach



Douglas DC-6 Registration VH-BPE *Resolution*

The Mail and the Mystery Cachet

Only 9 lbs 5 oz of mail was recovered. This comprised 344 articles of which 136 were undamaged and 208 were damaged and treated at the San Francisco Post Office.

In 50 years of collecting crash mail, the author had not seen an example of mail from this incident until the cover illustrated below turned up on e-bay. There are other crashes where the mail has been

undamaged and no example of a surviving cover is recorded. That is understandable. However, 208 covers were allegedly struck with a boxed cachet and not one has apparently survived. This is not credible based on other incidents where far smaller numbers of covers were recovered and so marked. Human nature is to save the envelope bearing a cachet as a memento.

The three-line boxed cachet, allegedly used on mail from this crash, has been illustrated in a range of catalogues and books including the *American Air Mail Catalogue* (*AmericanAMC*) and Henri Nierinck's *Courrier Recupere* (*Recovered Mail*) Vol 2.

In 2008 the author placed an advertisement in the *Airpost Journal*, the organ of the American Air Mail Society, the premier aero-philatelic society in the USA. The query in the advertisement was:

I am looking for examples of covers from this 1953 crash. I believe mail was loaded at Sydney, Fiji and Honolulu. Although I am particularly interested in any items from Australasia I also wish to obtain copies of mail loaded at Honolulu.

The response was zero. Not only did no-one have a cover from this crash; no-one had seen one, nor knew of an example of the cachet illustrated in the *AmericanAMC*.

Damaged due to Air Mail
Interruption near Half Moon
Bay., Calif. - Oct. 29, 1953

Cachet illustrated in the *American Air Mail Catalogue*

How did the illustration of the cachet find its way in to published literature? The author's explanation is that a strike of the cachet lies in the San Francisco Post Office (SFPO) archives, or did so 50 years ago, and this was taken as evidence that it was used. I suspect that the cachet was prepared but not used for some reason – maybe it could not be found when the mail arrived at the PO or the 'damaged' mail turned out to be not so badly damaged.

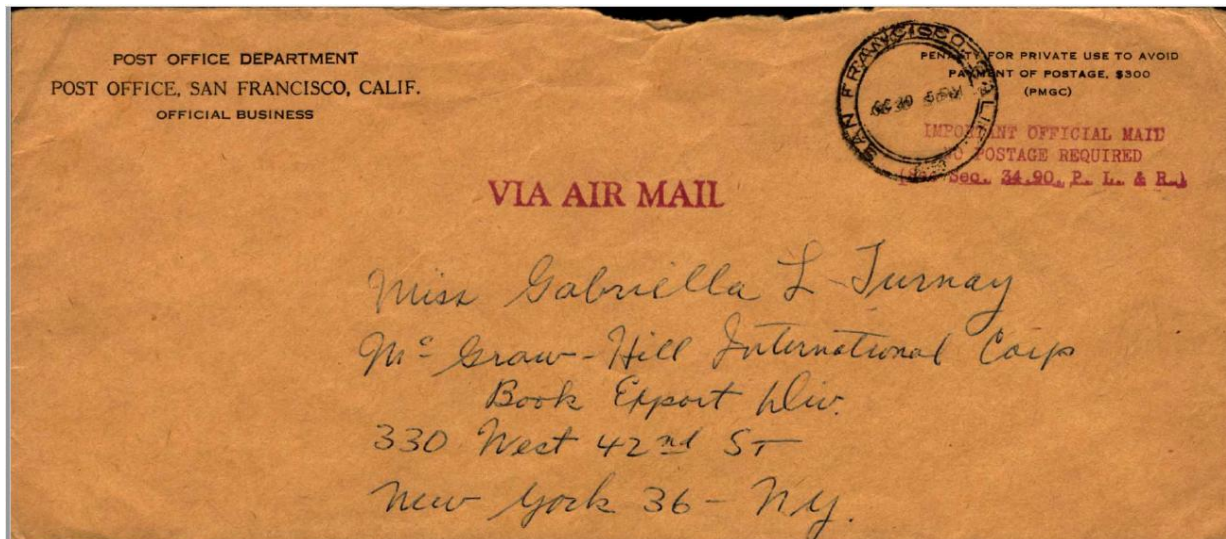


One of two recorded covers from the Crash

In 2012, 59 years after the crash, the cover illustrated above appeared on Ebay. Not only does it not have the cachet stated to have been applied to mail, it has a completely different cachet. The author suspects this was applied at the SFPO as that is certainly where the mail was treated.

Cancelled at Brisbane 4⁴⁵PM 27 OCT 1953, and addressed to Boston Mass, this is now one of only two recorded items of mail from this tragic crash.

The second recorded example is in the collection of Don Lussky (USA) and is accompanied by a reforwarding envelope from the San Francisco Post Office. It bears the same cachet as the first cover.



Forwarding envelope cancelled **SAN FRANCISCO CALIF OC 30 5-PM**

The first surviving example from this crash was recorded in 2012. It was from Brisbane QLD, cancelled 28 October and addressed to Boston MA. The second example, from Sydney NSW, bears the same cachet.



Cancelled **SYDNEY 10-PM 27 OCT 1953**

There is always a possibility that further examples will emerge.