



THE YOUNG COLLECTOR

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UNUSUAL POST

The extraordinary stories of mail delivery are perhaps one of the most intriguing aspects of philately. It has always been a matter of pride that the mail is delivered.

The ancient Greek writer, Herodotus, remarked about the Persian King Xerxes' couriers: "Neither snow nor rain nor heat nor gloom of night stays these couriers from the swift completion of their appointed rounds."

This phrase is commonly referenced to the United States Postal Service. Although it has no official motto, a modified translation of Herodotus' tribute was inscribed on the 1912-built General Post Office Building in New York City, which was renamed the James A. Farley Post Office Building.

By the start of the 20th century, most worldwide mail routes were established and the processes were expedited. However, mail delivery has taken many different, unusual, and oftentimes amusing forms.

The many islands of Tonga, a Polynesian country and archipelago of 269 islands in the South Pacific Ocean, which became a Protected State of Great Britain in 1900, presented numerous geographical impediments when it came to delivering mail. Its story is one of the most unique in philatelic history and serves as a great example of postal ingenuity and persistence.

Reaching Niuafō'u, Tonga's most northerly island, was difficult because there are no beaches and its shores are surrounded by steep cliffs. This naturally made mail delivery next to impossible.

To solve this problem, authorities in the latter half of the 19th century tried to send mail to the island by rocket, an idea conceived in 1810 by Heinrich von Kleist, a German author. Unfortunately, the Congreve rockets were unreliable. Some exploded into flames in the air while others were lost in the lake located in the centre of the doughnut-shaped island.

After this experiment, it was agreed that crewmen aboard a steamship with mail destined for the island would send a signal and drop a sealed tin can into the ocean (Figure 1). A swimmer was then sent out to retrieve it. The Tongans were amazing swimmers, yet sometimes it could take them hours to fetch the tin because of the ocean's heavy wave action, not to mention that the waters were also infested with sharks!

In 1921, Charles Ramsay, a plantation manager, started collecting the mail from the ocean. By 1930, he had retrieved 112 packets in all kinds of weather, often at night, guided safely to shore by a bonfire.

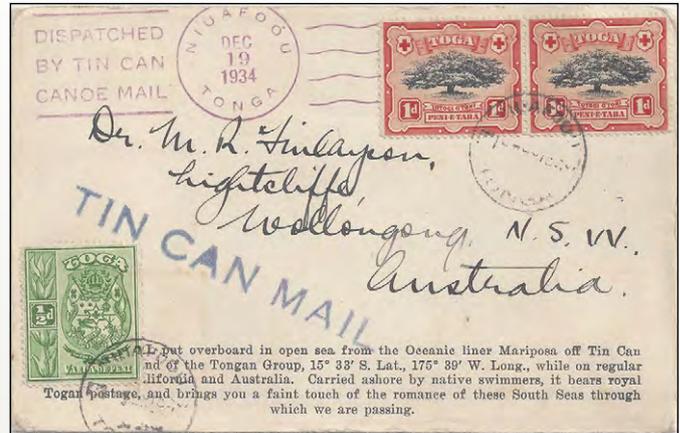


Figure 1. 1934 Pacific Tonga Tin Can Mail, Kennedy Stamps Australia. <https://www.kennedystamps.com.au/pacific/tonga/1934-pacific-tonga-tin-can-mail.html>

Shockingly, in April of 1931, another tin can mail swimmer, named Folau, was attacked by a shark, later succumbing to his wounds. The Queen of Tonga, Salote, disturbed by the poor man's fate, controversially outlawed the practise, even though many swimmers still wanted to collect mail.

The swimmers argued that Folau was not collecting mail when he was attacked and that swimming for the purpose of fishing was still legal, but to no avail. Instead, a canoe would be lowered off the cliffs into the ocean, followed by the crew jumping in after it. This method of mail delivery continued until 1983, when the island's first airport was built.



Figure 2. Michel Sieger type 57M. May 18, 1930 cover by Graf Zeppelin. <https://jf-stamps.dk/en-GB/lot/13534/germany-1930-lz-127-graf-zeppelin-sudamerikafahrt-1930-friedrichshafen-18-5-30>

Figure 3. By Sam Shere (1905-1982) - Zeppelin-ramp de Hindenburg / Hindenburg zeppelin disaster, Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=19329337>



During Tonga's famous era of tin can mail, many philatelists found just how interesting and collectible peculiar forms of mail transportation could be.

Another unique method of postal transportation was by Zeppelin, which began in 1908. During the First World War, the German army used the airships named after Count Ferdinand von Zeppelin to scout and bomb enemy sites, but before and between the World Wars these massive airships were used to transport civilians and mail (Figure 2).

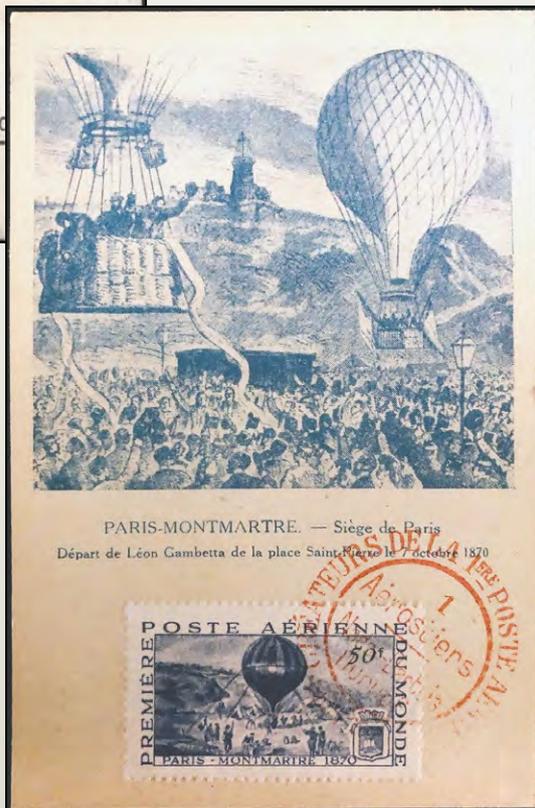
The infamous Zeppelin, the Hindenburg, known for its tragic and much scrutinized fire on May 6, 1937 (Figure 3) at the Naval Air Station Lakehurst, in the Manchester Township of New Jersey, United States, carried mail on many of its voyages. Its loss hastened the demise of such airships. Letters that survived its fated voyage are rare and worth a vast sum of money (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Hindenburg crash cover. Smithsonian National Postal Museum <https://postalmuseum.si.edu/collections/object-spotlight/hindenburg-crash-mail.html>

Balloon mail also interests me greatly. During the siege of Paris, France in 1870 during the Franco-Prussian war, Parisians had to find a new way to contact other parts of the world because of the encircling Prussian Army. To remedy this, the French launched mail-filled balloons (Figure 5). For 20 Centimes per letter, a Parisian could send his dispatch over the walls of their soon-to-be overrun capital city.

Figure 5. 1946 Paris France Maxi Postcard Cover Commemoration of the First Balloon Mail. eBay item number 401649460021.



These balloons also carried homing pigeons out of Paris for what became known as "Pigeon Post." (Figure 6) At first, only official mail was carried by the birds, but later on citizens could send a letter by pigeon at a much higher rate.



Figure 6. Pigeon post. <https://markweinguitarlessons.com/forums/threads/just-got-a-carrier-pigeon.75155/>

Pigeon Post is an age-old practice that dates back to ancient Persia. In modern times it has been used in France, Canada, India and the United States on Catalina Island. This type of flying mail service was also specifically used in New Zealand on Great Barrier Island from 1897-1908, for which special stamps, now of considerable value, were printed.

In Canada, pigeon post was used to keep contact between lighthouses and the mainland in Nova Scotia between 1891 and 1895. The casualty rate for the birds was high, and when one died en route, the letter was lost.

Also collectible is 'Dogsled Mail' which once had a functional purpose in northern Canada, Alaska, and Russia. In Canada during the 1920s and 1930s, it was used as a common method of mail transportation in the Yukon Territory (Figure 7).



Figure 7. Canada Scott 2469.

Many people find great interest in the various forms of unusual post. While I was conducting research for this article, my father, who had not yet found his philatelic interest, became fascinated with Zeppelin mail.

My first introduction to the subject of unusual postal services was a marvelous presentation given by Dr. David Foote on Australian rocket mail. His well-attended lecture at the West Toronto Stamp Club generated much enthusiasm.

My hope as a young collector is that my articles also capture imaginations and inspire others to broaden their collecting interests. ✉