

END OF A DREAM: KINGSFORD SMITH'S 1935 TRANS-TASMAN FLIGHT PART 1

By Neil Donen and Peter Gilmour

This two-part study by Neil Donen and Peter Gilmour revisits Kingsford Smith's ill-fated 1935 Silver Jubilee Trans-Tasman flight, a pivotal episode in Australasian aerophilately. Drawing on newly uncovered archival lists and contemporary press reports, it clarifies mail numbers, routes, rates and surviving covers – especially concerning the 'saved mail' that reshaped understanding of covers from the Silver Jubilee Trans-Tasman flight.

Previously in *Gibbons Stamp Monthly*, Neil Donen had highlighted the range of collecting options and interests associated with the King George V 1935 Silver Jubilee issue. In this two-part article we will cover another area, the first associated with the end of one person's dream to acquire the rights to carry airmail between Australia and New Zealand, the second involving the heroic achievements of an individual and finally, the unlocking of an 90-year-old postal history story.

The articles also serve the purpose of assisting new and regular collectors of Trans-Tasman mail in identifying numbers mailed from points of origins and their destinations. As most of the information contained in these two articles comes from archival and newspaper sources, we have chosen to list key archival references, all available online from the National Archives of Australia (NAA) and the digital newspapers of past issues provided by the National Libraries of Australia and New Zealand. We believe that accessing these sources of information provides an opportunity for either selecting or confirming areas of collection. This may include such possibilities as one-way mail, return mail, mail from or to specific destinations, etc. Finally, we hope it will provide a perspective on advertisements for so-called 'rare Silver Jubilee Trans-Tasman flight covers'.

Background and context

In June 1928 Charles Kingsford Smith, the Australian aviator, achieved international fame with the first Trans-Pacific flight in his tri-motor plane, the *Southern Cross* (Fig 1). He subsequently undertook a number of notable flights, including the first flight across the Tasman Sea from Australia to New

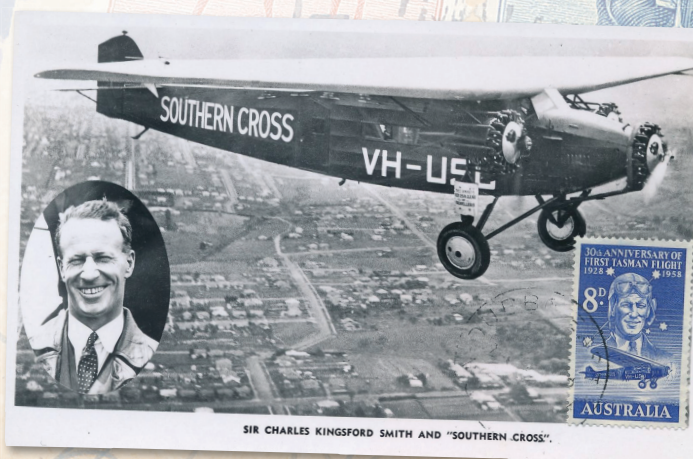


Fig 1 A blank postcard with an 8d. 30th Anniversary of first Trans-Tasman flight stamp. The postcard shows the *Southern Cross* with Sir Charles Kingsford Smith in the inset (Reduced)

Zealand in September 1928. Between 1928 and 1934 he undertook six further flights between the two countries. He was knighted for his services to aviation in 1932.

In early 1935 a British delegation met with the two governments to discuss the extension of the Imperial Airways All-Empire Air Mail scheme to include the Australia-New Zealand section using flying boats. Lobbying both governments to support an Australian initiative for this leg, Kingsford Smith was able to obtain permission in late April 1935 for a special bi-directional Trans-Tasman flight in recognition of King George V's Silver Jubilee. This was to be the seventh Trans-Tasman flight for the *Southern Cross*. For the flight Kingsford Smith was to be paid 4d. per mail item (parcels were not included in the proposed mail). A number of additional arrangements were put in place, including some potential philatelic 'firsts'. These will be discussed in this and the subsequent article.

Flight preparation

Planning for the flight began immediately following approval.

a) Postage: Special arrangements were put in place. For mail going only one-way, stamps from the originating country had to be used. Either Australian or New Zealand stamps were eligible for postage use for mail to be returned in either direction. This included mail from New Zealand which was to be flown from Australia.

Table 1 provides a detailed breakdown of the postage rates. Note the differences in the calculation of the total airmail rate applied by the two postal administrations. There was also a different surface mail rate. Additionally, a separate 3d. registration fee was applied for each direction of the mail routing, as well as an internal 3d. per ½ ounce (oz) Australian airmail fee.

Table 1: Applicable postage rates

Descriptor	Rate
Trans-Tasman: Australia to New Zealand air	Air fee = 5d. per ½oz plus 2d. per oz surface rate
Trans-Tasman: New Zealand to Australia air	7d. per ½oz inclusive fee
Surface Mail (per oz)	New Zealand-Australia 1d.; Australia-New Zealand 2d.
Internal airmail/per ½oz (Australia)	3d.
Airmail to Britain – per ½oz	1s.6d (Australia and New Zealand rates the same)
Registration Fee	3d. (additional fee applied for each leg of flight)

Routing restrictions were placed on returning mail that had originated in Australia. Surface mail could be forwarded to any destination. However, forwarded airmail had restrictions placed on their routings and destinations. Airmail could be forwarded either to anywhere in Australia, routings along the Australia-Singapore-London route or the Papua-New Guinea air service.

b) New Zealand Airmail stamps: On 4 May 1935, the New Zealand Post and Telegraph Department (NZP&T) issued a new set of airmail stamps (the Australian 1935 Silver Jubilee stamps were issued two days earlier, i.e., 2 May). Initially they were only available for sale at major centres in the country. Concomitantly, the set was also issued in Australia. This marked the first occasion that New Zealand (NZ) had placed stamps on sale on their first day of issue in a foreign country's post offices (in 1934 New Zealand stamps were sold through the New Zealand Government offices in Melbourne and Sydney for Charles Ulm Trans-Tasman flight of 11 April). Departing Wellington on 30 April, the stamps arrived in Sydney via the SS *Maunganui* on 4 May. The number of stamps sent were 1d. (30,000), 3d. (15,000) and 6d. (30,000). Half of the number of each value were assigned to the New Zealand Tourist Bureaus in Sydney and Melbourne, the other half to AP&T. Table 2 provides details of their use by AP&T.

c) Envelopes: As part of his publicity campaign, Kingsford Smith designed a special lightweight (airmail weight) envelope. These were distributed free at post offices in Australia and New Zealand. Some 50,000 envelopes were produced in Australia and were coloured either white, blue or old gold (Fig 2). An additional 25,000 were produced in New Zealand. These were slightly larger and heavier with a different coloured script i.e., chocolate or blue, on a cream cover (Fig 3). They were printed in Australia and delivered to New Zealand on the SS *Wanganella*, arriving in Wellington on 8 May.

d) Special Melbourne-Sydney flight: On Sunday evening 12 May, the Melbourne GPO discovered that two mail bags from Hobart had not been included with the Jubilee mail that left on the afternoon railway express to Sydney. Arrangements were made



Fig 2 One of the specially designed blue coloured, lightweight airmail envelopes produced for the 1935 Trans-Tasman Jubilee air flight. This example was mailed from Geelong, near Melbourne to Christchurch, New Zealand. The two stamps pay the special one-way airmail rate of 7d. per ½ oz. The cover has the special Wellington receiving cancel on the back



Fig 3 Jubilee airmail covers such as this were made available free at post offices in New Zealand. The chocolate script covers were slightly larger and heavier than the Australian lightweight covers. The applied postage pays the special 7d. one-way airmail rate to Australia and 2d. surface return rate back to Christchurch. Note the cancellation of stamps by the respective postal authorities (Reduced)

Table 2: A summary of sale of New Zealand airmail stamps in Australia – 1935

	New South Wales	Victoria	Queensland	South Australia	Tasmania	Totals
1d.						
Number provided	9000	3750	1000	1000	250	15,000
Number sold	6317	1568	527	1000	181	9593
3d.						
Number provided	4500	1875	500	500	125	7500
Number sold	2709	856	271	500	96	4432
6d.						
Number provided	9000	3750	1000	1000	250	15,000
Number sold	5295	148	363	861	125	7792
Total sales (£)	£192 11s.2d.	£45 18s.8d.	£14 13s.2d	£31 18s.10d.	£5 1s.7d.	£290 3s.5d.

for a special flight to carry these articles to Sydney, leaving the next morning. Taking advantage of this arrangement, the Melbourne postal officials also flew an additional locally mailed 239 items (229 ordinary and 10 registered) that had been received after the departure of the Sunday train. The items would have been cancelled either on 12 or 13 of May and are much sought after. These were included in their respective Melbourne 'destination' bags in Sydney. Thus, some of these items survived the

flight. Finally, a decision was also made to include, on the special flight, 33 other mail items on which New Zealand stamps had been used to pay postage for the Trans-Tasman flight.

The flight

On the morning of 15 May 1935, the *Southern Cross*, departed from the Sydney Mascot aerodrome bound for New Plymouth in New Zealand. Piloting the plane was Kingsford Smith. Accompanying him was Patrick Gordon Taylor (co-pilot and navigator) and John Stannage (wireless operator). Originally it was planned to use two aircraft to carry the mail to New Zealand. However, because the mail load was less than expected, it was decided to use a single plane.

A total of 28,279 mail items, in 21 mail bags and weighing 398lbs 8oz were officially carried on the departing flight. Another six covers, from Ernest Crome, the well-known Australian aerophilatelist were given personally to Kingsford Smith to be carried on the flight. Kingsford Smith was to be paid 4d. per mail item carried i.e., £471 6s.4d and, despite the abandonment of the flight the AP&T still authorised the payment which Kingsford Smith described as an 'act of grace'.

Approximately eight hours into the flight and over the Tasman Sea the starboard engine propellor was damaged and the engine had to be shut down. Kingsford Smith was forced to turn back and jettison most of the mail (14 mail bags) and freight to lighten the load for the overheated engines. Taylor, in one of the most dramatic events in aerophilatelic history, saved the plane and crew by climbing out on to the wing struts and transferring oil from the dead starboard engine to the overheated port engine. He received the Empire Gallantry Medal (called the George Cross today) for this act of bravery.

Landing successfully in Sydney, it was discovered that seven small mailbags, with 1277 mail items had been overlooked by Stannage and were still on board. These items were transported by ship to New Zealand, receiving a specially prepared cancel on arrival (*Fig 4*). New Zealand mail items scheduled to be on the return flight to Australia (approximately 13,000), were sent to Australia by sea. All of these items, except those that were to be carried onwards by air, were cancelled on arrival in Sydney (*Fig 5*).

The saved mail

On return of the *Southern Cross* to Sydney, the Director-General of Australia Posts & Telegraphs (AP&T), Harry Brown, took the unusual step of listing the names and addresses of the recipients of the



Fig 4 A special Wellington relief receiving cancel was applied to all saved mail from the Trans-Tasman flight, except to airmail forwarded beyond Australia where all stamps are Australian. This postmark is the gold standard used to confirm the cover was actually on the flight

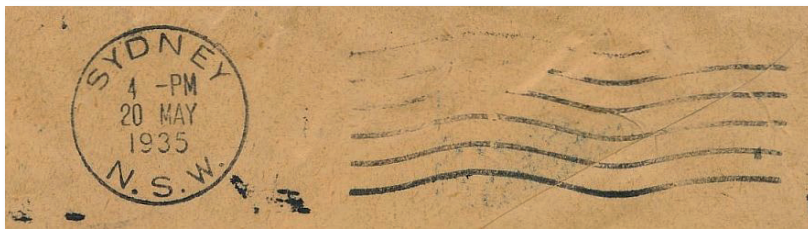


Fig 5 A Sydney receiving machine cancel of 4p.m. 20 May. It was applied to mail leaving New Zealand on 17 May and carried on the SS *Monowai* and SS *Monterey*. The mail items had been expected to be flown on the return flight of the *Southern Cross*. It was not applied to those items which were to be forwarded by airmail beyond Sydney

Table 3: Details of the Trans-Tasman Mail

Dispatched From	Mail Lost		Mail Saved (7 bags)	
	Unregistered	Registered	Unregistered	Registered
Sydney (New South Wales) + NZ*	21,927	977	0	0
Melbourne (Victoria)	2269	408	344	19
Adelaide (South Australia)	810	218	86	8
Brisbane (Queensland)	157	2	641	87
Perth (Western Australia)	124	18	0	0
Hobart (Tasmania)	88	4	0	0
Launceston (Tasmania)	0	0	58	34
Total	25,375	1627	1129	148

* = It is estimated that approximately 7000 mail items from New Zealand were included in the Sydney mailbags.

Total mail items: 28,279 (Ordinary mail 26,504, Registered mail 1775)

Table 4: Destinations of 1277 Saved Mail Items by City of Dispatch

To/From	Brisbane	Melbourne	Adelaide	Launceston
Australia				
- Queensland	343 / 51			
- Capital Territory	- / 3			
- New South Wales	8 / 1			
- Victoria	1 / 1	5 / -		
- South Australia			- / 1	
- Tasmania				13 / 11
New Zealand				
- North Island	225 / 14	7 / -	86 / 7	31 / 1
- South Island	11 / -	332 / 19		11 / 22
Great Britain	32 / 16			3 / -
USA	14 / -			
Elsewhere	7 / 1			
Total	641 / 87	344 / 19	86 / 8	58 / 34

Note: Mail numbers are listed as unregistered/registered items in this table.

saved mail. This list (found in the first listed reference) together with the saved mail was despatched to New Zealand via the SS *Wanganella*. The list, which was only recently uncovered, opened the door to a more detailed analysis of destinations of the mail on this special flight. This is the only commemorative flight we know of where there is a list of the addressees and one can identify the final destinations of the covers, i.e., it is unique.

The mail was transported overnight from Auckland to Wellington, arriving there on 23 May, where a special relief (skeleton) receiving cancel was applied (*Fig 4*). This cancel is the only documentation on the cover that the mail item was carried on the aborted flight. Note the special cancel was not applied to those mail items being forwarded to the United Kingdom or elsewhere, where all the stamps on the cover were Australian (see *Fig 8*). NZP&T followed up by mailing each of the locally delivered items in an OHMS envelope accompanied by a letter from either the Director-General or the Chief Postmaster of the District.

Table 3 provides information on both the lost and saved mail from the flight. Note that all mail carried in Sydney mailbags were lost. This included an estimated 7000 mail items from New Zealand that had either travelled from New Zealand in closed mail bags on the SS *Wanganella* or had been mailed directly under cover to the General Post Office in Sydney. The mail bags from Perth and Hobart were among those thrown overboard, each weighing less than 3lbs. It should be noted that there were in fact a total of 33 mail bags on the flight, with 12 bags placed in one of the Sydney or Melbourne bags.

We have included additional information on the destinations of the saved mail as well as their dispatch cities. This is shown in Table 4. Note that all mail destined to the United States of America and 'Elsewhere' originated in Queensland. The eight items to 'Elsewhere' comprised mail to Czechoslovakia (2), Egypt (2), South Africa (1/1), Canada (1) and Peru (1). Figure 2, Figure 6 to 8, and Figure 10 are all examples of mail flown originating in Australia. The figure descriptions provide information on the various postage rates applied.

Approximately one-sixth of the mail saved was addressed to just six people (see Table 5). The bulk of the covers were contained in the two Brisbane-Wellington bags with two addressees, Mr B J Grace and Mr B Blumenthal, responsible for 163 of the 216 covers. All 75 of Mr Grace's New Zealand bound covers were addressed c/o S. Curtis & Co, Ashhurst, near Palmerston North (Fig 8). The list of saved mail generated by APT identified a further 13 covers sent to the company (six from Brisbane and seven from Launceston). It appears that Mr Curtis was well known in Australian aerophilatelic circles as someone to whom first flight covers could be sent to.

Mailed too late

Not all mail items were mailed in time for the flight, which departed from Sydney just after midnight on 15 May (the mail bags were actually delivered to the *Southern Cross* the previous evening). To date we have identified 13 articles that received the two purple-coloured cachets that were applied in Sydney i.e., 'RECEIVED TOO LATE FOR/ JUBILEE AIR MAIL' (85mm×13mm) and 'DELIVER AS ADDRESSED BY/ORDINARY MAIL' (93mm×13mm) respectively (Fig 9).



Fig 6 A 'boomerang' cover paying the airmail rate of 7d. per 1/2oz. each way. Note the Brisbane cancellation of 11 May 1935 on the Australian 1935 Silver Jubilee stamps and the special Wellington cancel used on the New Zealand stamps. The New Zealand airmail stamps were probably purchased in Brisbane. The back of the cover has the Wellington receiving cancel of 23 May and a Brisbane receiving cancel of 28 May (Reduced)

Fig 7 A registered cover mailed on 10 May from Brisbane to Chelmsford, England. The back cover has a Chelmsford receiving cancel of 10 June but no Wellington or Sydney receiving cancel. The letter is listed in the saved mail list provided to NZP&T and AP&T. It was flown on IW344, departing Brisbane on 29 May and arriving in London on 10 June. Postage applied as follows: 3d. registration for each leg of flight (1s.); 1s.2d. for bi-directional Trans-Tasman flight (7d. each way); 1s.6d. for airmail to United Kingdom. Total postage paid 3 shillings and 8 pence (Reduced)



Fig 8 One of 75 covers mailed to B J Grace c/o Curtis & Co, Umutoi, New Zealand, paying the one-way airmail rate 7d. per 1/2oz. It has a Wellington skeleton cancel on the back cover. All items were numbered (see the top left corner)

Table 5: Destinations of 'Bulk Mailings'

Bag	Addressee	Country	City	Unregistered	Registered
Brisbane-Wellington	Mr E Andre	Australia	Brisbane	11	
	Mr B Blumenthal	Australia	Brisbane	29	31
		England	London		12
	Mr B J Grace	Australia	Brisbane	16	
		New Zealand	Umutoi	75	
Melbourne-Dunedin	Mr W Tregoe	New Zealand	Dunedin	8	2
Launceston	Mr G Dunsford	New Zealand	Napier	12	
	Mr F L McFarlane	New Zealand	Lawrence	4	16
			Total	155	61

Table 6 shows the dates of mailing, origins and destinations. None of the seven covers mailed to New Zealand have receiving cancels. As the 'Too Late' covers were not part of the saved mail, they received no special recognition on arrival in New Zealand.

The lost mail

The loss of mail from the *Southern Cross* generated enough correspondence that a separate file at the NAA was opened. Much of the public anger generated was due to the fact that AP&T refused to compensate individuals who had registered their airmail items. A total of 1627 registered mail items were lost. It seems that many of these individuals used either high value or rarer stamps on their covers (Figure 10 is an example of a saved mailed item where more than twice the required postage was applied to the envelope). The APT's argument was based on Article 57a of the UPU regulation i.e., 'Administrations shall be relieved from all responsibility for the loss of registered articles: (a) In circumstances beyond control:'

Comments and observations

We have used this article to provide a brief overview of the flight and its philatelic implications. The references enable those who wish to pursue the topic, and their collecting interest, at a much greater depth. Even though our specific interest in the subject extends beyond ten years, we continue to find new and more fascinating covers.

Article 2 will focus on mail from New Zealand and a look at other potential areas of collecting.

Below: Fig 10 An over-paid registered cover mailed from Scottsdale on 9 May. It has a return mail cancel at Wellington dated 23 May 1935 and a Launceston receiving postmark dated 29 May (Reduced)



Fig 9 A 'boomerang' cover mailed from Melbourne on 14 May paying 1s.4d. The cover was conveyed by overnight train to Sydney where it received the two cachets as too late for the flight. Sydney receiving postmark of 11a.m. on 15 May on the back cover

Table 6: Australian mail items with special 'Too Late' cachets

Date Cancelled	Origin	Number	Destination
14 May	Melbourne	2	Australia
	Melbourne	3	New Zealand
	Sydney	1	Australia
	Sydney	2	New Zealand
	Albery (NSW)	1	New Zealand
15 May	Melbourne	1	Australia
	Sydney	1	Australia
	Sydney	1	New Zealand
16 May	Sydney	1	Australia

Selected references

1. National Archive of Australia (<https://naa.gov.au>) – Use advance search and enter the item ID.
2. National Archives of Australia. *Australia to New Zealand – Jubilee Air Mail*. NAA: MP273/1, 1935/8581. Item ID: 10458184. Melbourne.
3. National Archives of Australia. *Compensation for mail jettisoned from Southern Cross Jubilee Airmail to New Zealand*. NAA: MP273/1, 1936/2843. Item ID: 10534996. Melbourne.
4. National Archives of Australia. *Sir Charles Kingsford Smith Pacific flights Australia – NZ flight 1935 accident to VH-USU 'Southern Cross.'* NAA A705 21/1/61 Part 6. Item ID: 397214. (Inquiry into accident. Summary report pages 69-73)
5. Trove - National Libraries of Australia (<https://trove.nla.gov.au>) – dates between 29 April and 28 May, 1935. Major sources: *Adelaide Advertiser*; *Courier Mail* (Brisbane); *The Argus* (Melbourne); *Sydney Morning Herald*; *Daily Commercial and Shipping List* (Sydney).
6. National Libraries of New Zealand (<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers>) – dates between 29 April and 25 May 1935. Major sources: *Auckland Star*; *New Zealand Herald* (Auckland); *Evening Post* (Wellington); *Northern Advocate* (Whangarei).

