

The Mail Must Go Through Versus Geopolitics!

The Pony Express motto of *The Mail Must Go Through*¹ is usually adhered to by most postal administrations despite the vagaries of the weather, earthquakes, floods and fires etc., but there are various instances due to geopolitics where this motto was dispensed with entirely. The consequences of which may result in interesting philatelic items, some of which are discussed below.

1) 1916 – The Salonika Front

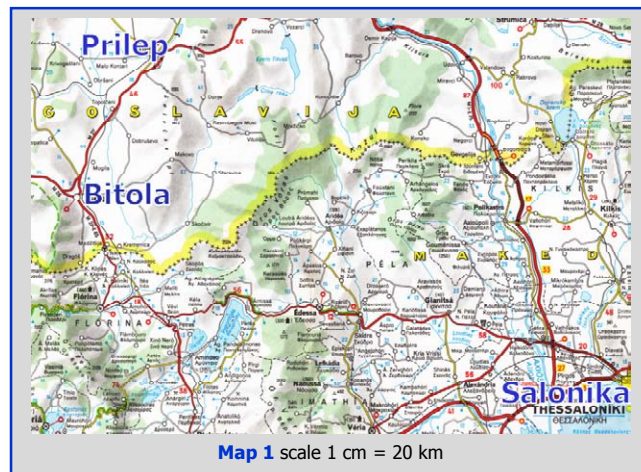


Fig 1 1916 Greek delayed mail

The 10 lepton Greek postal stationery postcard in figure 1 was cancelled on 7 October 1916 at Athens Central Post Office and was delivered to London having had the two line **PART OF A MAIL CAPTURED / BY GERMANS AND DELAYED** explanatory rubber stamp applied in Britain.

The Greece-Serbia/Bulgaria border was essentially the limit of the Central Powers' (Bulgaria, Germany and Austro-Hungary) advance in World War I. The German 11th and Bulgarian 1st Armies tried to avoid crossing in to Greece; that would have brought Greece into the conflict on the Anglo-French side. The French having landed troops at Salonika (or Thessaloniki as it is now called) had nine divisions serving along the Salonika Front under General Sarrail and in mid September 1916 launched an attack in Macedonia – then part of Serbia following the 1913 Treaty of Bucharest.²

The French and Serbians captured the Macedonian town of Monastir (or present day Bitola – see Map 1) by 19 November, just 14 kilometres across the border from Greece and only 46 kilometres South-South-West of the Germans that were based in Prilep,³ see map 1.



World War I and hostilities formally ended with the signing of the Armistice on 11 November 1918 and it is likely that the postcard was eventually delivered in late 1918.

Pony Express 1 Geopolitics 0

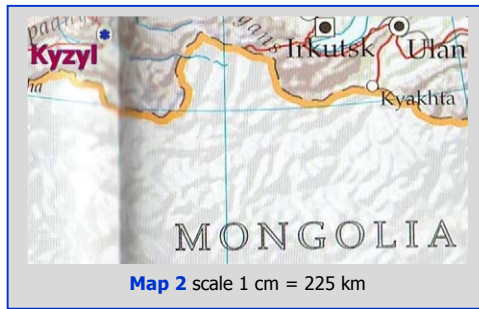
2) 1936 – Outer Mongolia Civil Disorder and Banditry

The cover illustrated in figure 2 was mailed from Christchurch in mid-1936 to the Postmaster, Krasny, North Mongolia, but unfortunately it never reached its destination. The cover bore a 1d kiwi stamp and was underpaid by 1½d [2½d was the surface mail letter rate to many overseas non UPU member countries]. Mongolia joined the UPU many years later – on 24 August 1963.⁴



Fig 2 refused 1936 New Zealand mail

At the time of mailing Krasny was part of Tuva and probably the sender was ordering some attractive stamps from the postmaster. It is now part of the Russian Federation situated on Mongolia's northern border. See Map 2. The population of Tuva according to the 2002 census comprised 235,313 Tuvans (77%) and Russians 61,422 (20.1%). The capital (of Tuva) was founded as Belotsarsk in 1914, the administrative centre of Uriankhaisky *krai* (region) in 1918, then Krasny (Russian for *red*) in 1920, and it became Kyzyl (Tuvan for *red*) in 1926. Krasny/Kyzyl is approximately 1000 kilometres North West of the Mongolian capital Ulan Bator and some 680 kilometres almost due West of Irkutsk in Russia,⁷ see map 2.



The cover reached only as far as Wanchuan on 24 July 1936 some 14 kilometres south east of Kalgan. Kalgan, (now known as Zhangjiakou) is about 160 km northwest of [Beijing](#) – see Map 3.



It was the point at which the main caravan route from Beijing to Inner Mongolia and beyond passed through the Great Wall of China at the foot of the escarpments reaching up to the lower Mongolian Plateau. Kalgan's importance, however, was always primarily commercial as the terminus of the principal caravan route to Mongolia and Russia, bearing most of the vast Siberian tea trade.

In 1860, under the Sino-Russian Treaty, it was opened to Russian trade, and in 1902 it was opened to international trade. In 1911 the railway from Beijing reached Kalgan, and it was then steadily extended to the northwest.

This was, however, the zenith of Kalgan's international trade, when the city contained some 7,000 commercial firms and when the caravan traffic employed hundreds of thousands of camels, great numbers of ox wagons, and many thousands of men. After 1920, trade slumped because the Russian Revolution of 1917 and because political changes in Outer Mongolia had drastically reduced the importance of the caravan traffic. Civil disorder and banditry were rampant in the area north and west of Kalgan, while the extension of the railway to Hohhot in Inner Mongolia meant that Kalgan itself was no longer a railhead.

In 1937 the Japanese occupied the area and established an autonomous government at Kalgan.⁶

This explains the red **REBUT** (refused) and black 3-line **SERVICE TEMPORARILY / SUSPENDED / RETURN TO SENDER** instructional marks applied as well as a PEIPING (now known as Beijing) bilingual cancel in red on the reverse.

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3) 1936 – Japanese Occupation of Manchuria



Fig 4 "Via Siberia" cover to England

The above cover addressed to Mrs Henry Everall, is endorsed Via Siberia and bears a "RECEIVED FROM / H M SHIPS" London 28 January 1937 slogan cancel on a British 1934 King George V 1½d photogravure stamp. The question is: how did the cover travel to England?

Henry Everall is included in the 1904 *Who's Who* – an alphabetical list of foreign residents and Hong Kong employees in Shanghai and outports – on page 279 where he is noted as residing in Newchwang (an international Treaty Port in China) and working for the American Trading Company. Similar covers sighted showed that Henry was living in Newchwang in the late 1920s. Henry was an Englishman and sold American goods to the Chinese government.⁷

At the time there were several foreign post offices operating in China – their principal place of operation was Shanghai but there were other (mainly British) foreign postal agencies operating elsewhere in China. Hong Kong stamps overprinted CHINA were used in these agencies from 1917. The British Post Offices in the Treaty Ports closed by agreement with the Chinese on 30 November 1922, but the Hong Kong CHINA overprinted issues continued in use at the Wei Hai Wei offices until they in turn closed on 30 September 1930. Under the terms of the Convention signed with China the Royal Navy continued to use the base at Wei Hai Wei until the mid-1930s.⁸

On 7 July 1937, the Japanese, who had seized Manchuria in 1931 and the province of Jehol in 1933, launched an invasion of the rest of China. On 22 September, agreement was reached between the communists and Chiang Kai-Shek to co-operate against the Japanese.⁹

The recently reformed Manchukuo Imperial Army replied with a major campaign with 16,000 men from October 1936 to March 1937, against the Northeast Anti-Japanese United Army: 1st Route Army in the Tungpientao region.¹⁰

The distance as the crow flies from Newchwang (or Yingkou as it is now known) to Jehol (or Chengde) is approximately 350 km and is about the same distance as to Wei Hai Wei – see Map 3.

Mail between Europe and China probably would have travelled more quickly by train than by ship in the 1930s. Whilst this was the time of airmail expansion across the world mail by train over vast distances would probably have been quicker than by air.

The area was well served by railways and the South Manchuria Railway ran from Dairen (Dalian) through Newchwang and on to Harbin approximately 650 km north East of Newchwang. The Trans Manchurian Railway (at Harbin) connected the South Manchuria Railway to the Trans-Siberian Railway at Chita, in Russia.¹¹

How did the cover travel from Newchwang? Unfortunately there are no contents within the illustrated cover. This writer surmises that Henry Everall wrote to his wife in late October/early November 1936 that he was leaving Newchwang as soon as possible and that he intended his letter would travel from China to England via the Trans-Siberian Railway.

This would have meant using the Chinese postal service which at the time would have been chaotic especially with occupied Manchuria nearby and fighting going on near Anshan.

The situation probably meant that there was no rail service to Harbin for mail. It is probable that Henry left Newchwang before the end of 1936.

It is possible that Henry either took this letter with him or arranged for one of his associates to take it, travelling to Wei Hai Wei. Henry ensured that his letter to his wife headed back to England most probably via Hong Kong on a Royal Navy vessel where the 1½d postage was paid. The postage stamp on the cover was cancelled when it arrived in London in late January 1937 and delivered to Henry's wife shortly thereafter.

Pony Express 2 Geopolitics 1

4) 1940 – German Occupation of Jersey



Fig 5 1940 undeliverable Jersey cover

The cover depicted in figure 5 bears a British 2½d stamp featuring Queen Victoria and King George VI to mark the centenary of the postage stamp. Additionally, it bears a boxed two line **UNDELIVERED FOR REASON STATED / RETURN TO SENDER** instructional purple hand stamp and a pencilled notation **no postal service**. As may be seen the envelope has been opened and officially resealed by the post office in Jersey.

The illustrated cover cancelled 11.45 PM 1 JLY 1940 bears on the rear flap in blue ink *P.N. Richardson, La Colline, Gorey*. This was postmarked on the first day of the German occupation in Jersey during World War II.

The War Cabinet in London had decided to demilitarise the Channel Islands given the rapid advance of German troops through France in early 1940. All British regular forces were withdrawn by 21 June 1940 and many civilians were evacuated to Britain by 23 June.

The first German troops flew into Guernsey on the evening of 30 June 1940 and the main force arrived during the following day. On 1 July Jersey was occupied and Alderney the next day.

The immediate result of the arrival of the Germans was that communication with the British mainland abruptly ceased. Attempts were made by the islanders to make contact, but very few messages can have survived; there are only three known at present [1991] that did. The method adopted was to send such letters in a cover addressed to the British Vice-Consul in Lisbon (Portugal was a neutral country at the time) for forwarding.

From October 1940 communication with the islands via the Red Cross organisation was established. No replies or messages from the Channel Islands could be sent until 13 January 1941.¹²

Lieutenant Commander Hugh Nicholas Aubyn Richardson to whom the illustrated cover was addressed was born in Gorey, Jersey, on 23 August 1903. After a 24 year naval career he retired in 1948 and died on 30 October 1978 in St. Martin, Jersey.¹³

HMS Shikari was a destroyer on which Hugh Richardson served as commanding officer for almost 2 years from November 1939, and in January 1940 she was involved with escorting coastal convoys. Shikari was the last Royal Navy warship to leave Dunkirk in June and in July continued her convoy escort and patrol duties in the Channel area.¹³

Two other Richardson covers were also found with this cover. One, postmarked 21 January 1937, was addressed to him at his family home: *La Colline, Gorey, Jersey, Channel Islands*. The other was addressed to a V.R. Richardson in Willington, county Durham. The latter was postmarked 9 AM 29 JUN 1940. Like the illustrated cover it bore an officially sealed label and a purple boxed **UNDELIVERED ...** instructional hand stamp. Additionally, **no service** was inscribed in red pencil on the front. On the rear again inscribed in red pencil "*Mother*", *La Colline, Gorey, Jersey*.

The 1940 Richardson covers were unable to leave Jersey; the first was probably mailed on Friday 28 June, and the second mailed on Monday 1 July would probably have included some comments about the day's invasion. Unfortunately no contents were contained in these covers, so we shall never know what Hugh Richardson's family endured in late June 1940, but, we do have a genuine, non philatelic, first day of invasion cover.

Pony Express 2 Geopolitics 2



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5) 1945 – Chinese Civil War

The cover illustrated in figure 6 was mailed from Karachi (then part of India) sometime in 1945 to Manchuria. Unfortunately, the oily postmark does not show any clear date.



Fig 6 1945 Indian cover to Manchuria

5 different back stamps were applied throughout December 1945 at Karachi during the Chinese Civil War.

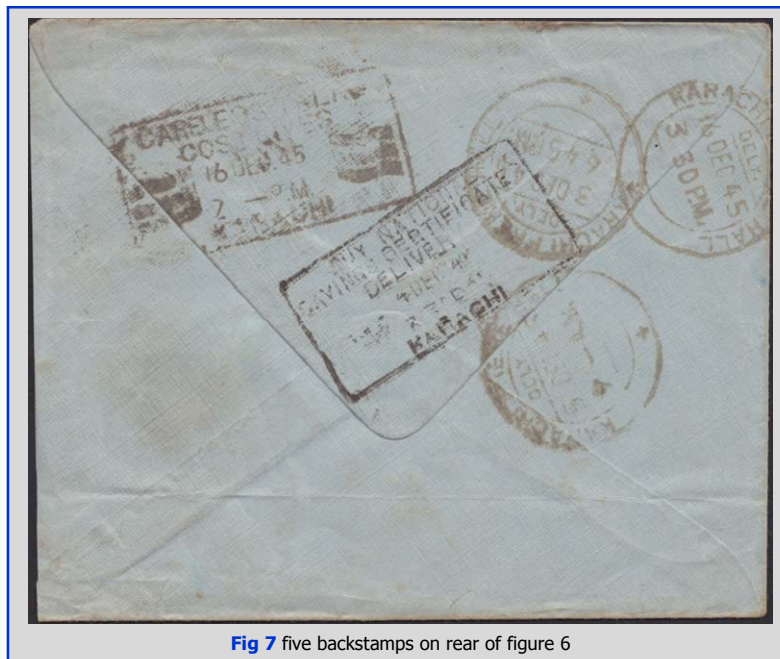


Fig 7 five backstamps on rear of figure 6

After checking via *Google Maps* the distance from Karachi to Beijing is approximately 4900 km as the crow flies, in a north easterly direction and Beijing to Harbin is approximately another 1050 km in the same direction.

Chronologically, the applied back stamps appeared to be:

- 1 **KARACHI FRERE HALL / DELY. / 3 DEC 45 / 9 – A.M.**
- 2 **KARACHI FRERE HALL / DELY. / 3 DEC 45 / 6.45 P.M.**
- 3 **BUY NATIONAL / SAVINGS CETRTIFICATES / DELIVERY / 4 DEC 45 / 3.30 PM / KARACHI**
- 4 **CARELESS TALK / COSTS LIVES / 16 DEC 45 / 2 - PM / KARACHI**
- 5 **KARACHI (...) HALL / DELY. / 16 DEC 45 / 3.30 P.M.**

The Karachi post office applied the boxed two line **SERVICE SUSPENDED / RETURNED TO SENDER** purple cachet on the cover's front.

After Japan surrendered on 15 August 1945, there were many Japanese troops still in China. The two factions on opposing sides in the Chinese Civil War – the communists led by Mao Tse Tung and the Kuomintang or Nationalists – led by Chiang Kai Shek had been fighting the Japanese since 1937. The Nationalists were seen by most of the Western World as the legitimate government of China; they had support from the USA and the Communists had support from the USSR.

The Nationalists were the strongest in the North of China. In Chungking in October 1945 there was an agreement between the Communists and the Nationalists to set up a democracy have a united military force and hold elections for a national assembly. However, they could not agree on who should lead the combined army and local government areas.

After World War II the Soviet Union retrieved 100,000 guns and artillery pieces from Japan in Manchuria and gave them to the Communist Chinese Party. This enabled the Communists to move into Manchuria. In November 1945 US and Kuomintang troops occupied Beijing and moved into Manchuria whilst the Soviet Union ordered the Chinese communists to give up Manchurian cities. In December 1945 US President Truman sent George Marshall to China to preserve peace and in January 1946 a ceasefire was signed.¹⁴

It is unknown whether this cover travelled the 6000+ km to Manchuria, though it is unlikely as it bears no arrival or transit back stamps. It is possible that the cover was mailed in late November or early December 1945 in the hope that George Marshall would be able to effect an earlier ceasefire, which in turn would enable the mail service to Manchuria to be resumed.

Pony Express 2 Geopolitics 3

6) 1990 – Papua New Guinea Panguna Mine Conflict

The undelivered cover depicted in figure 8 was mailed on 16 August 1990 from Christchurch, New Zealand to Arana, on Bougainville Island in the North Solomon's Province of Papua New Guinea. It bears a large purple boxed **RTS / POSTAL SERVICES TO BOUGAINVILLE ISLANDS / SUSPENDED DUE TO CIVIL UNREST** rubber stamp. In addition, a blue felt pen was used to cross out the address and R.T.S. applied.



Fig 8 1990 New Zealand cover to Papua New Guinea

The cover was erroneously addressed to Arana, instead of Arawa, on Bougainville Island almost 1000 km in a North Easterly direction from the country's capital of Port Moresby. On the rear is an arrival cancel: MAIL EXCHANGE / BOROKO / 5PM 22 AU 90 / PAPUA NEW GUINEA. In Map 4 the islands below the dashed line are recognised as being part of the Solomon Islands.



A Constitutional Planning Committee, which was set up in 1972 toured the country to gather the views of the people on independence. There was no resistance from any group except for Bougainville who wanted to secede from the rest of the country.

On 28 May 1975, the Interim Provincial Government in Bougainville agreed to secede from Papua New Guinea. This caused a three-way impasse between the Government of PNG, the legislature in PNG, and the authorities in Bougainville. The PNG government made attempts to resolve the situation through June and July, but these failed, and the interim government announced that they would declare independence on 1 September, ahead of Papua New Guinea's own independence on 16 September.

On 1 September 1975, the Interim Provincial Government issued the *Unilateral Declaration of Independence of the Republic of North Solomons*.

They sought international recognition through the United Nations, but were unsuccessful. They also failed in an attempt to be united with the Solomon Islands. In early 1976, the Bougainvillean government realised that they would have to accept Papua New Guinean sovereignty. This was supported by the *Bougainville Agreement*, signed later that year, which gave Bougainville widespread autonomy within Papua New Guinea. Independence was promised in 5 years, but was never granted. For the remainder of the 1970s, and into the early 1980s, relations between the two remained tense, but relatively peaceful.

However, in 1981, disputes re-emerged over the status of the mine, and this would form the basis of the conflict which turned violent in 1988.

The copper mine at Panguna (some 13 km from Arawa) had been perhaps the major sticking point between Bougainville and the mainland. The mine was the largest non-aid revenue stream of the Papua New Guinea government from the nation's independence in 1975 to the mine's closure. The national government received a 20% share of profit from the mine of which the Bougainvilleans received 0.5% - 1.25% share of the total profit. It was vitally important to the economy of Papua New Guinea, but the people of Bougainville were seeing little benefit from it. Bougainvillean leaders alleged that the mine had devastating environmental consequences for the island. These grievances led to the decision in late 1988 of two cousins and local leaders to take up arms against the Papuan government. One had worked for Bougainville Copper, and had witnessed the effects the mine was having on the landscape of the island.

In November 1988 one of the leaders stormed out of a meeting with the company after a report by a New Zealand company claimed that the Jaba River was not poisoned. He resigned his job, went into the jungle, and formed the Bougainville Revolutionary Army. They held up the mine's magazine, stole explosives, and committed numerous acts of arson and sabotage as well as cutting the power supply to the entire mine by blowing up power pylons.

As a response to the continuing violence, the national government called a state of emergency, and placed the island under the administration of the Police Commissioner, who was based in Port Moresby. The allegations of human rights abuses continued and a survey in late 1989 indicated that at least 1600 homes had been destroyed. The conflict showed no signs of ending, and in January, 1990, Bougainville Copper (the mine's owners) announced the mothballing of the Panguna mine. In May 1990, Papua New Guinea imposed a blockade on Bougainville.

Papua New Guinea's policy towards Bougainville hardened after the defeat of the incumbent government at the 1992 elections. In August 1994 Prime Minister Chan announced his intention to find a peaceful solution to the conflict. By 1996, Chan was beginning to get frustrated at the lack of progress. Chan decided to abandon attempts at peace, and on 21 March 1996, he gave the go-ahead for an invasion of Bougainville.

Since 1997, a ceasefire has largely held on the island. Most of the leaders of the Bougainville dispute entered into peace talks with the government of Bill Skate in Christchurch, New Zealand. This culminated in the signing of the *Lincoln Agreement* in January 1998. Under the terms of the agreement, PNG began to withdraw its soldiers from the island and a multinational Peace Monitoring Group was deployed.¹⁵

It is unlikely that mail services from Papua New Guinea to Bougainville Island were resumed until well after this letter was mailed due to the ongoing conflict.

Pony Express 2 Geopolitics 4

Geopolitics (i.e. often conflict of some sort) in philately is usually observed when countries are created and/or disappear. This is when a stamp issuing entity commences (e.g. West Berlin) or ceases (e.g. Yugoslavia). However, philately encompasses more than mere stamps, and collecting examples of mail and its treatment at the time of the conflict is most interesting. The six covers featured in this article, may at a quick glance appear to be merely old envelopes. Their background stories have been explored, and their likely outcomes indicate that geopolitics often wins at the expense of the adage of the *Pony Express* – that the mail must go through.

David Smitham

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- Map 1** Michelin Greece guide book number 980
- Map 2** Dorling Kindersley *Compact Atlas of the World* pp 92 & 93.
- Map 3** *ibid*, p 106
- Map 4** United Nations Map No. 4089, March 1999



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