



Figure 1: A printed matter wrapper from the United States postmarked Nov. 12, 1941, that was returned via Vancouver, British Columbia, and showing Canadian censorship.

Transpacific Ship Mail on the Eve of Pearl Harbor

By Louis Fiset

On the eve of the Pacific War, two means of transport existed for transpacific mail dispatched to and from the United States and Asia.

Mail sent by air flew on established routes connecting San Francisco and San Pedro, with terminal points at Manila, Macau, Hong Kong, and Singapore. Transit time averaged six to ten days.

A less expensive, but much slower, alternative required anywhere from eleven to twenty-three days, longer to more distant outposts.

Ship mail plodded outward from Seattle, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Vancouver to the Asian ports of Kobe, Yokohama, Osaka, Shanghai, and beyond.

A single, United States-owned carrier, Pan American Airways, provided the only airmail service.

However, multiple competing shipping lines had government contracts with the United States, Japan, and Canada to carry surface mail in both directions. During this time, the primary transpacific ship mail carriers were Japan's Nippon Yusen Kaisha (NYK), and the American President Lines (APL).¹

Suspension of transpacific airmail service beyond Honolulu has been pinpointed to December 7, 1941, and is well documented in both the historical and philatelic literature.

The story of suspended outbound transpacific ship mail remains poorly documented, with surviving postal evidence often confusing and difficult to interpret.

For example, returned ship mail bears postmarks as early as the third week of October 1941 and all the way through the end of November. Some of it bears Canadian and/or United States censorship, while other returned mail may be found bearing just "RETURN TO SENDER/SERVICE SUSPENDED" markings applied by the Post Office Department.

Figure 1 illustrates some of this confusion. This wrapper, addressed to Manchuria, contained a publication weighing 10 ounces (1.5 cents per two ounces times five). It received a Cleveland, Ohio, postmark on November 12, 1941. It bears the Canadian censor marking, "PASSED BY CENSOR," applied at Vancouver (DB/260), and a bilingual "RETOUR-RETURN" handstamp.

Canada began censorship operations at the outbreak of World War II in September 1939. Finally, a March 11, 1942, date has been applied, likely documenting the return date to the sender.

This essay, which draws on contemporaneous reporting and postal evidence, attempts to clear up some of this confusion by shedding new light on returned ship mail in the wake of the attack on Pearl Harbor.

Background³

By the beginning of 1941, NYK was playing a dominant role in passenger and cargo transport between Asia and the United States, including carriage of mail in both directions. APL, the U.S. carrier, provided NYK with its stiffest competition from the other side of the Pacific.

Beginning in the mid-1920s, NYK ran biweekly transpacific passenger and cargo service between Hong Kong and the West Coast employing four ships that called regularly at Shanghai, Kobe, Yokohama, Honolulu, Los Angeles, and San Francisco. These vessels were the *Asama Maru*, *Chichibu Maru*, *Tatuta Maru* and *Taiyo Maru*. Figure 2 shows an NYK-produced picture postcard of *Tatuta Maru* on the high seas. It was posted aboard ship on November 8, 1940, by a returning U.S. citizen recently evacuated from Swatow (Shantou), on China's east coast.

NYK also provided biweekly service between Kobe and Seattle, with ports of call at Osaka, Nagoya, Yokohama, and Vancouver. Three ships made frequent visits into Puget Sound waters: the *Heian Maru*, *Hikawa Maru*, and *Hiye Maru*.

In all, on the eve of World War II, NYK operated thirty-six passenger ships named after Shinto shrines, provinces, mountains, and cities. Only one, the *Hikawa Maru*, would survive the War.⁴

During this time, APL (the Dollar Steamship Company until 1938) committed at least four merchant vessels to transpacific mail transport: the *President Fillmore*, *President Cleveland*, *President Taylor*, and *President Coolidge*.⁵

Treasury Department Freeze on Japan's Assets

By mid-1941 American cryptographers had broken Japanese diplomatic codes enabling U.S. intelligence to eavesdrop on heated, ongoing deliberations in Tokyo focused on whether to join Germany in the Third Reich's new war against the Soviet Union or move southward into French Indochina in preparation for an attack on British Malaya and the Dutch East Indies.

In response to Japan's ultimate decision to plunge southward, on July 26 President Roosevelt declared an immediate freeze on all Japanese assets in the United States⁶



Figure 2: A picture postcard of the *Tatuta Maru* on the high seas. It was posted on board ship on November 8, 1940, by a returning U.S. national evacuated from coastal China.

Meant to be a temporary freeze, the abrupt action quickly evolved to a total embargo of trade with Japan. Increasing international tensions resulting from Japan's incursion into Manchuria in 1937 had already caused a decline in passenger travel. But this latest move brought a death knell to transpacific passenger and cargo shipping for NYK and other Japan-held shipping companies.

The impact came quickly. The *Asama Maru* was en route to San Francisco on July 26 after calling at Honolulu, but turned back before reaching the West Coast. The *Heian Maru*, en route to Seattle, was forced to spend two days sitting 150 miles off Cape Flattery while the Treasury Department and NYK officials worked out guarantees the ship's cargo of raw silk for a New Jersey mill would not be seized once entering U.S. territorial waters. The ship sailed from Seattle for the last time on August 4, 1941, with ballast in her hold.

Meanwhile, the *Tatuta Maru*, scheduled to dock at Los Angeles, arrived instead at San Francisco four days behind schedule. There, passengers disembarked and the cargo of mail was offloaded.

Then, on July 30, NYK owners received a license from the Treasury Department to withdraw funds needed to purchase fuel for the voyage back to Japan. This proved to be the last official oil export from the United States prior to the start of the Pacific War. Japanese tankers moving along the West Coast turned homeward with their tanks empty.

However, unloading of *Tatuta Maru*'s \$3,000,000 shipment of silk was held up until August 4 when the Treasury Department freed the cargo, and libel suits brought by American importers demanding its release were dropped. The government later took possession of the cargo because of its value to the military.

This visit also would be the last commercial voyage of the ship with Asia-bound mail onboard.⁷

The Last NYK Ships to the West Coast

The *Tatuta Maru* subsequently completed one last voyage to the West Coast, this time, however, as a repatriation vessel. The ship arrived at San Francisco on October 30 with 608 allied nationals with a scheduled return to Yokohama on November 2 with 860 repatriating Japanese nationals.⁸

Cargo space was allocated for 60 tons of mail for Asian destinations. But, midway through loading, a last-minute order from postal officials scuttled the process.

The Treasury Department had asked the Customs Service to thoroughly inspect parcel post packages for export and foreign funds control violations that included money, jewels, and other valuables. Thus, the mail was offloaded, resulting in a two-hour delay in the ship's departure.

Customs agents also inspected passengers for similar violations, since each was allowed only \$200 in cash or securities in their personal possession. At the last minute, three pounds of diplomatic correspondence was rushed on board. But the offloaded mail remained behind.⁹

In the meantime, on November 2 the *Hikawa Maru* entered Seattle's Elliott Bay via Vancouver with U.S. repatriates aboard and was tied up at the Great Northern awaiting a scheduled departure for Yokohama on November 4 with 400 repatriating Japanese nationals.¹⁰

Although the ship was to take on no cargo, the mail offloaded from the *Tatuta Maru* had just arrived in Seattle and was loaded in time to avoid a delayed departure.

The *Hikawa Maru* reached Yokohama on November 18, concluding her 74th and final peacetime voyage. Not only was this the last Japanese ship to carry passengers from the West Coast, it was the last Japanese ship in peacetime to carry mail to Asia. The vessel, which later became a hospital ship, was the only NYK ship to survive the war.¹¹

APL Ships to Asia

Although no other Japanese commercial vessel entered U.S. territorial waters after the *Hikawa Maru* departed Seattle, this did not mean ship mail to Asia from the West Coast came to a complete halt.

In fact, a June 1942 article in the *New York Times*, citing postal authorities, reported that the last ship carrying mail for the Philippine Islands left San Francisco on November 25, 1941.¹²

Likely an APL vessel, the ship's name was never revealed publicly. However, the *San Francisco Chronicle* confirmed a sailing for Japan, China, and Korea on that date.¹³



Figure 3: A registered letter from Victoria, posted November 3, 1941, too late for transport on the *Hikawa Maru*.



Figure 4: Mail posted November 10, 1941, for ship transport to Japan, with additional postage for airmail within Japan. It was in transit when the Pacific War began and returned from San Francisco.

This unnamed ship, as well as other Asia-bound vessels departing the West Coast earlier in the month, would each learn of the attack on Pearl Harbor while en route. Ship captains received orders to return immediately to the United States. Thus, mail having set sail for Asia after November 4 never reached their destinations. Mailbags were offloaded upon the return to port.

Philatelic Evidence

The events from July through November described here provide clues to an understanding of ship mail returned to senders even though postmarked as long as a month before the attack on Pearl Harbor.

Figure 3 shows a November 3, 1941, registered letter from Victoria, British Columbia, addressed to Malaya.



Figure 5: Mail from an interned Italian merchant seaman, possibly carried on an APL ship departing San Francisco on November 25, 1941.

It was received back by the writer sometime after May 12, 1942. The cover bears Vancouver postmarks dated November 4 and 5, no doubt resulting from delays by censorship. This made reaching Seattle in time for carriage aboard the *Hikawa Maru* impossible. The cover provides no evidence of ever leaving Canada. In fact, the letter appears to have taken a circuitous journey to Ottawa in attempt to locate the sender who had failed to provide a visible return address.

Another early cover, this one to Japan, may be seen in Figure 4. The letter was postmarked on the East Coast on November 10, 1941, and arrived on the West Coast days later.

The letter was franked to cover the five-cent UPU rate plus an additional nine cents for domestic airmail service within Japan. After reaching San Francisco, it likely was placed aboard an APL ship later ordered to return to port after the attack on Pearl Harbor. A civil censor (1462) at the San Francisco field censor station opened the correspondence after its arrival.¹⁴

Figure 5 shows a later cover, postmarked November 17, 1941. Given this date, it possibly was carried on the ship that sailed from San Francisco on November 25. Here the writer, an interned Italian merchant seaman at the Fort Missoula internment camp, attempts to correspond with a fellow countryman aboard a ship at Kobe.¹⁵

Upon its return to the West Coast, the letter underwent censorship at San Francisco (1580) before being returned to the writer. The censor station began opening letters on December 13.

The cover shown in Figure 6 never left the U.S. mainland. The correspondence originated in New York on November 29, 1941. Postage included domestic air service to the Pacific Coast with onward transmission by ship to China. The writer has written, "By first steamer from Pacific Coast," perhaps in recognition that names of vessels were no longer being published.

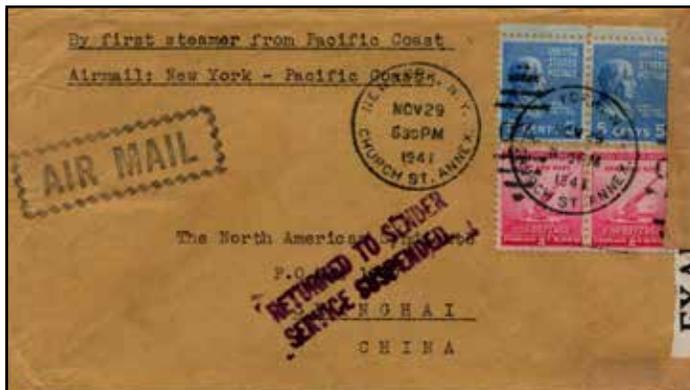


Figure 6: Postmarked November 29, 1941, it was too late for transport on an Asia-bound ship and returned without ever leaving the U.S. mainland.



Figure 7: This returned letter, postmarked October 20, 1941, was in the mailstream sufficiently early for transpacific carriage to its China destination.

By the time the letter reached San Francisco, the last APL ship had departed. Thus, after censorship at San Francisco (1608) postal authorities returned the letter to the mail stream after stamping it with a "RETURN TO SENDER/SERVICE SUSPENDED" notification.

The final cover illustrating outbound mail to Asia may be seen in Figure 7. The letter received a Seattle postmark on October 20, 1941, the earliest date known to me on returned ship mail prior to the Pacific War.

Had it been carried aboard the *Hikawa Maru* on the November 4 sailing, likely it would have reached its China destination. That it bears no indication of censorship, either at San Francisco or Seattle, is curious. The diagnosis of this cover remains incomplete.

The Last APL Sailing

One of the ships leaving San Francisco in early November was the APL's *President Coolidge*, which reached Manila on Thanksgiving Day while under naval escort. Five days later, on November 25, the U.S. Navy declared the North Pacific Ocean a "Vacant Sea," ordering all United States and allied shipping out of the area.

This order was based on deciphered Japanese radio messages detailing the southern movement of large

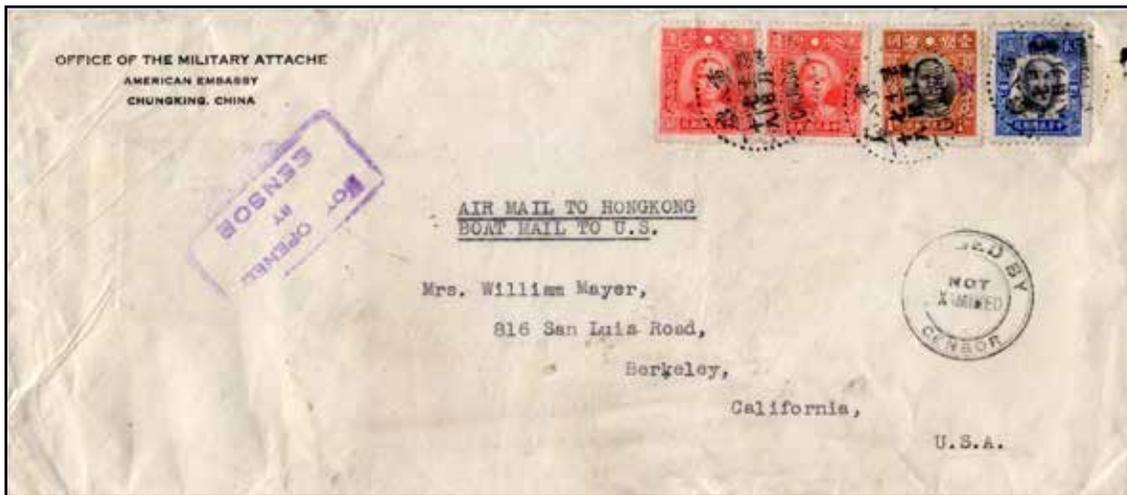


Figure 8: Postmarked Chungking, China, November 7, 1941; this letter was transported on the *President Coolidge* to San Francisco, arriving Christmas Day. It was likely the last successful ship mail transmission prior to the beginning of the Pacific War.

numbers of Japanese naval vessels headed toward the Philippines, Dutch East Indies, Singapore, and Hong Kong. By clearing the area, such a move enabled this potential invasion force to be more easily tracked.¹⁶

Thus, on November 27, the *President Coolidge* headed south from Manila in a two-ship convoy, picking up a Naval escort two days later off East Borneo. The troika continued south toward Port Moseby before turning eastward, then northeastward, to Hawaii, a detour adding four days to a voyage ordinarily requiring seventeen days. The convoy reached Pearl Harbor on December 17, where damaged and sunken ships from the attack still smoldered.

The two ships departed Pearl Harbor on December 19, joining a larger convoy off Diamond Head under destroyer and cruiser escort. Together they carried 180 wounded patients. The convoy arrived at San Francisco on Christmas Day. The wounded disembarked under the care of Embarcadero medical personnel.

Bags of mail in the ship's hold were handed over for civil censorship by Office of Censorship personnel who had opened for business just two weeks earlier.¹⁷ All of this correspondence was generated prior to the beginning of the Pacific War.

Figure 8 shows private correspondence originating at the American Embassy in China and carried to San Francisco aboard the *President Coolidge*. It received a Chungking postmark on November 7, 1941. China National Aviation Corporation (CNAC) then flew it to Hong Kong, where it was backstamped on November 9. A Hong Kong censor passed the letter without opening, perhaps in deference to the writer's perceived status as an embassy employee.

From there, the letter reached Manila by shuttle steamer, in time for loading onto the APL ship that left Manila on November 27. Upon arrival in San Francisco on December 25, the letter was turned over for censorship. Again, it avoided censorship as seen by the double-circled "NOT EXAMINED" censor marking. Important to diagnosis of the cover, this provisional

handstamp was used only in San Francisco, and only during the month of December, that is, December 15-31, 1941.¹⁸

Likely, this and similar correspondence carried on the *President Coolidge*, constitute the final ship mail to reach the United States from Asia following the outbreak of the Pacific War.

Conclusion

Airmail service between the United States and Asia came to an abrupt halt with the attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941.

Transpacific surface mail service by Japanese carriers became a casualty earlier when military planners in Tokyo decided to push southward into French Indochina.

APL ships were in transit when war broke out, thus mail service continued until they were ordered to return to port. Historical events occurring from July through the beginning of December help explain the early interruption of ship mail across the Pacific and offer collectors of interrupted mail some clarity in diagnosing covers in their collections.

Seasoned collectors of World War II postal history know all too well how the chaos of war interferes with transmission of the mail—in scheduling, routing, and censorship.

Ship mail on the eve of the Pacific War offers no exception. No doubt covers exist for which logical explanations remain elusive or that cannot be confirmed. For example, since war fever increased following the July embargo, mailbags containing correspondence for North America and beyond may have been thrown on the first available ship heading eastward.

It is possible, for example, the cover in Figure 8 headed from Hong Kong by steamer for Australia rather than on the established shuttle route to Manila and was carried on the Matson Line's S.S. *Mariposa* that left Sydney on December 17. The ship reached San Francisco on December 30 in time for the provisional

ensor marking to be applied. With other relevant markings lacking, this routing cannot be confirmed.¹⁹

Another problem faced by collectors is the disparity between scheduled and actual departures. Newspapers such as the *Los Angeles Times*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, and *Seattle Times*, continued to publish scheduled listings for Asia-bound ship departures into December. Most of these sailings, of course, never took place.

Questions remain. How late did mail carried on APL ships to Asia reach final destinations? What other shipping lines, United States and Canadian, enlisted cargo ships to carry the mail? What impact did the loss of Japanese shipping have on the ability of North American shippers to move the mail in both directions? Which countries contracted with transpacific mail carriers and what provisions did they contain, both in regulations and incentives?

Hopefully, this primer will stimulate interest in the subject of transpacific ship mail during November 1941 and lead to answers to these and other questions.

Acknowledgments

Thanks to Ken Lawrence, Dann Mayo, and Richard Martorelli for helpful comments on an earlier version of this article.

Endnotes

- 1 Other shipping lines also had mail contracts, such as Japan's Osaka Shusen Kaisha and the U.S. Matson Line. However, the focus here is on the two major carriers.
- 2 Louis Fiset, *Japanese Canadians in World War II: Censored Mail from the Uprooting in British Columbia*. (Ottawa: British North America Philatelic Society, 2018), pp. 125-128.
- 3 For details on the history of transpacific shipping see E. Mowbray Tate, *Transpacific steam: the story of steam navigation from the Pacific Coast of North America to the Far East and the Antipodes, 1867-1941*. (New York: Cornwall Books, 1986); and Carl E. McDowell and Helen M. Gibbs, *Ocean Transportation*, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1954.)
- 4 NYK also operated less frequent cargo service between Kobe and New York; and Kobe and Central and South America ports with West Coast calls at San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Portland. Its chief competitor was then Osaka Shosen Kaisha Lines. See the Nippon Yusen Kaisha website: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nippon_Yusen#1900-1945 Accessed October 1, 2019
- 5 American President Lines website: <http://www.apl.com/history/timeline/stat6.htm>

<http://www.apl.com/history/timeline/stat6.htm>

Accessed October 1, 2019

- 6 David M. Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 509-511.
- 7 *Washington Post*, July 31, 1941, p. 7;
New York Times, August 3, 1941, p. 22;
New York Times, August 5, 1941, p. 5.
- 8 *San Francisco Chronicle*, November 3, 1941, p. 3.
- 9 *Seattle Times*, November 3, 1941, p. 12;
Seattle Times, November 4, 1941, p. 19;
Seattle Times, November 5, 1941, p. 16;
- 10 *Seattle Times*, November 3, 1941, p. 18.
- 11 "IJN Hospital Ship *Hikawa Maru*: Tabular Record of Movement."
http://www.combinedfleet.com/Hikawa_t.htm
Accessed September 30, 2019
- 12 *New York Times*, June 28, 1942, p. 10.
- 13 *San Francisco Chronicle*, November 25, 1941, p.8.
- 14 The most detailed information available on U.S. civil censorship during World War II may be found in: Wilfred N. Broderick, and Dann Mayo, *Civil Censorship in the United States During World War II*. (Kansas City, Missouri: War Cover Club and Civil Censorship Study Group, 1980).
- 15 Louis Fiset, *Detained, Interned, Incarcerated: U.S. Enemy Noncombatant Mail in World War II*, (Chicago: The Collectors Club of Chicago, 2010), pp. 9-30.
- 16 For much greater detail on transpacific shipping on the eve of World War II and information about the APL and the final sailing of the *President Coolidge*, see: Richard Martorelli, "Trans-Pacific Mail at the Beginning of World War II," *The Congress Book* (St. Louis: American Philatelic Congress, 2003), pp. 61-94.
- 17 Broderick and Mayo, pp. 23-27.
- 18 Dann Mayo and Bill Broderick, "Update I to Civil Censorship in the United States during World War II," *Civil Censorship Study Group Bulletin*, Volume 9 (December 1981), pp. 41-46.
- 19 Dann Mayo, "Censorship & Mail Routing—From The Mundane to the Magnificent," *Civil Censorship Study Group Bulletin*, Volume 44 (October 2017), pp. 156-160.

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