Tracking a censored WWII airmail cover from Pawling to England

By Charles J. DiComo, PhD

I recently came across the censored airmail cover shown as part of my ongoing quest for international postal letters mailed from the quaint town of Pawling, in the southern Berkshires of Dutchess County, where my family and I resided for nearly a decade.

This cover originated in Millbrook, as shown in the return address on the reverse flap, yet entered the mail stream about 21 miles to the south in Pawling at 3 p.m. August 8, 1941, as determined from the two circular date stamps on the obverse. It is addressed to Mrs. Max Toop, at Little Dawley, Hillcrest Waye, Gerrards Cross, Bucks (short for Buckinghamshire), England.

A 30-cent dull blue, Winged Globe airmail stamp, is affixed and tied at upper right, and to the left of the stamp there was (now missing) a small (definitive) stamp, apparent from the remnant glue stain and missing cancellation ink.

The questions I had upon receipt of this cover were many. What was the rate? What stamp would have been used to make up the rate? On which airmail flight did this fly to reach its destination?

Additionally, the cover was opened by a postal examiner and the contents (no longer with the cover) examined, as denoted by the strip of tape at left re-sealing the envelope, with "P.C. 90, Opened by Examiner 776" printed on it.

It is worth mentioning that this cover was posted to England at the start of World War II, though the U.S. had not yet entered, and was subject to examination.

As I have done in the past when trying to determine routes and rates from this era, I reached out to my good friend and postal historian, Hal Klein.

I shared images of the cover and requested Hal's expert insight and diagnosis. What he shared with me (and now with you) is incorporated below.

Let us first examine the Foreign Air Mail (F.A.M.) rate of this era. The F.A.M. rate from April 28, 1939 through October 31, 1946 was 30 cents per half ounce to Europe, and air within Europe. This cover was most likely overweight and bore an additional 30-cent stamp.

By the gap to the left of the Winged Globe stamp, it was most likely a Presidential (Prexie) issue – the 30-cent Theodore Roosevelt – as opposed to an earlier issued 30-cent Fourth Bureau Issue American Buffalo (Scott 569 or 700). The Roosevelt stamp was issued December 8,

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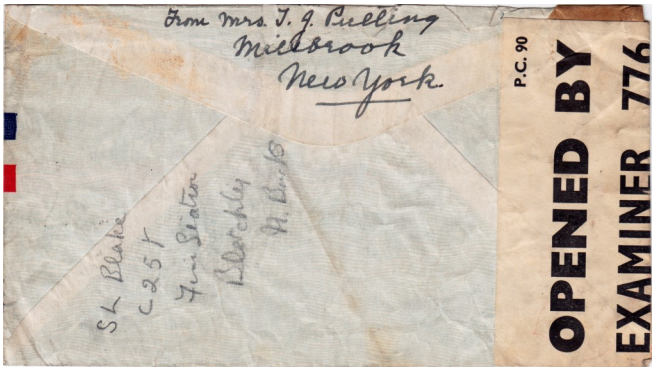
A cover postmarked August 8, 1941, from Pawling to war-torn England went through British censors on Bermuda and likely flew on a Pan American Clipper. It is franked with a 30-cent Trans-Atlantic Winged Globe airmail stamp (Scott C24). A regular postage stamp that was applied to the left of the airmail stamp, fell off sometime.



The reverse of the cover carries a return address from a prominent family at an address in Millbrook, 21 miles north of the Pawling post office. It is a mystery as to why the cover was not mailed, or postmarked, in Millbrook, which had a post office from 1869.

A 30-cent Theodore Roosevelt stamp (Scott 830) from the 1938 Prexie series was likely the stamp that fell off the cover shown.

An image of a Boeing Clipper airplane of the type that likely carried the cover over the Atlantic Ocean.

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1938, and would have been available nationwide, as opposed to the Buffalo stamps, issued first in 1923 and reissued in 1931.

The next question is on which flight might this cover traveled during its journey from the U.S. to England?

The nearby table denotes the three possible Pan American Airways (Pan Am) Clipper flights on which this cover could have been carried, for the first leg of its journey, to Bermuda, which is where the British censors were stationed. Shown is a photo of a Pan Am Clipper Boeing 314 of the era.

However, it could have been on a later flight, based on the tape. Following examination, the cover was sent on its way to England.

Can the postal examiner tape tell us something about the cover's transit? The tape on the cover (shown below) reads "P.C. 90, Opened by Examiner 776." This is tape type C15-1A, with an earliest known use of September 7, 1940 and latest known use of June 4, 1943.

As Hal shared with me, this is the only reported existence of the Examiner 776 / P.C. 90 usage to date. The earliest reported closest number (778) was September 1940. It is worth noting that 3,177, or about 40.45 percent

A close-up of the censor tape. The Examiner 776 / P.C. 90 markings on cover may be rare, according to an expert who studies the area.

Eastbound Flight No.	Clipper Name	From	Date In Bermuda
385	Dixie	New York	Aug. 9, 1941
387	Atlantic	New York	Aug. 12, 1941
389	American	New York	Aug. 14, 1941

Who was Mrs. T. J. Pulling?

Internet searching tells us that the cover's sender – Mrs. T.J. Pulling, of Millbrook – is most likely Lucy Leffingwell Pulling (1907-1979), wife of Thomas John Edward Pulling (1898-1991), who went by "Edward." Edward was born in England and served in the British Royal Navy.

Lucy, daughter of a partner at J.C. Morgan Co., and Edward, a graduate of Princeton and Cambridge universities, married in 1928. Edward Pulling in 1931 founded and served as the headmaster of the Millbrook School for Boys in Millbrook, in the Hudson Valley. (Today the school is co-ed.) He retired in June 1965.

The graduates of Millbrook include conservative voice William F. Buckley (commentator, National Review); his brother, Senator James Buckley; Robert Wood Johnson IV (Johnson & Johnson Co., CEO of N.Y. Jets football team); film screenwriter/director Nicholas Kazan; conservation biologist Thomas Lovejoy (World Wildlife Fund); and musician Rufus Wainwright.

From snippets on the internet, it appears that Lucy was a socialite, very involved in the workings of the school, a patron of the arts and a loving mother to two daughters.

There is a slim chance the cover is instead from Elizabeth (Douglass) Pulling, who was Edward's mother. Elizabeth and her husband, Thomas J. Pulling, lived in California when he died April 1, 1941. So, it's possible that the elder Mrs. Pulling came east at the time this letter was mailed.

of all reported PC Bermuda examiner tapes are this type.

The amount of time for mail censoring was dependent on mail volume, labor available, mail backlog, etc. A best estimate of censorship mail processing time would be plus or minus one week.

Clipper mail traveling to Europe, censored in Bermuda, had a flight path designated as the transatlantic route. After the mail was censored, it was placed in sealed mail pouches and routed, continuing its journey on a new Pan Am Clipper flight.

Pan Am was legally restricted from flying into combat zones under U.S. Neutrality Acts after the beginning of World War II. Consequently, Pan Am's southern Trans-Atlantic Clipper Route went from New York/Baltimore through Hamilton, Bermuda and the Horta, Azores to Lisbon, Portugal, which served as the neutral European terminus.

The estimated transatlantic Clipper journey from Bermuda to Europe took between two and four days, depending on headwinds, weather conditions over the Atlantic Ocean, layovers and final destination.

This postal history find is a keeper, and my search for interesting and unique artifacts from Pawling, New York continues.

Acknowledgments

The author wishes to thank Hal Klein for his invaluable insight into the rates and routes of this era. Any error and/or omission are the author's responsibility. He can be reached at charlesdicomo@gmail.com.

References

"Intercepted In Bermuda: The Censorship of Trans-Atlantic Mail during the Second World War" (2006), by Peter A. Flynn, M.D., published by Collectors Club of Chicago.

Map of Pan American Airways routes, courtesy of "Americans in a World at War: Intimate Histories from the Crash of Pan Am's Yankee Clipper" (2023), by Brooke L. Blower, Oxford University Press.

About the Author

Charles is a lifelong philatelist, postal historian and award-winning author and editor. He enjoys researching, restoring, writing, publishing and presenting on a broad array of philatelic, social and postal history topics.

A map shows the main east-west routes of the Pan Am Clipper service.

Charles is president of the Empire State Postal History Society; president of the Philatelic Society of Lancaster County (Penn.); editor-in-chief of the U.S. Philatelic Classics Society's award-winning The Chairman's Chatter and life member; on the board of the Pennsylvania Postal History Society; immediate past board president of the North Museum of Nature & Science and the Millport Conservancy; and an emeritus member of the Council of Philatelists of the Smithsonian National Postal Museum.

Stewards unload mail bags from a Pan American Clipper in this undated photo, likely from the late 1930s.

Excelsior!

The Journal of the Empire State Postal History Society

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The journal is published April and October by the Empire State Postal History Society. Articles for the Excelsior! are solicited and remain the property of the authors and the ESPHS. Please contact the editor and the author to inquire about reprint rights or for use in another publication.

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Holy Cow, What a Cover!

The World Series looms, so it seems appropriate to show this baseball cover.

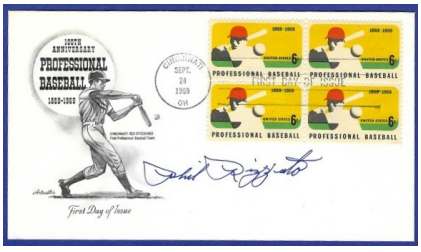
It's an Artmaster first day cover with a block of 6-cent Professional Baseball commemoratives issued September 24, 1969 in Cincinnati.

The cover is signed by Phil "the Scooter" Rizzuto (1917-2007), who had a two-level baseball career connected with New York.

Born in Brooklyn of Italian immigrants, Rizzuto grew up in Queens. Despite standing but 5-foot-6, scouts saw real spark in Rizzuto, especially as a defensive player.

Rizzuto spent 13 seasons, his entire Major League career, as a shortstop with the New York Yankees. He played from 1941 to 1956, only interrupted when he served from 1943 to 1945 in the U.S. Navy.

Rizzuto was part of the Yankees' glory years, when the team won seven World Series. Rizzuto was named an all-star five times and in 1950 was named the American League's most valuable player.



Former New York Yankees shortstop and broadcaster Phil Rizzuto signed this 1969 first day cover.

Upon retirement, Rizzuto entered the broadcasting booth and spent 40 years as the voice of the Yankees.

His broadcasting style has been described as everything from "rambling" and "conversational" to "eccentric" and he often punctuated a moment of excitement with a loud, "holy cow!"

Rizzuto was inducted in the National Baseball Hall of Fame in 1994.

Jeff Stage, Editor