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## LOOKING BEYOND THE CATALOGUE DESCRIPTION - RARE AIRMAIL FROM COCOS TO AUSTRALIA 1945.

By Ronald. M. Lee.

An air mail item to Australia in 1945 originating from the Cocos (Keeling) Islands and carried by a little known RAF service to Ceylon and thence by air to Australia was recently auctioned in Melbourne. The catalogue description appeared to be comprehensive but made no mention of the covers airmail credentials. The description read:

*“1945 cover to Sydney with Ceylon stamps tied by ‘RAFPOST 301/30SEP45/+’cde endorsed on the flap ‘Flt PWBrowning/RAF’ with the enclosed letter that states”... here on Cocos Island...We are trying to talk our way into a trip to Singapore... but I don’t think we will be very successful...”The vendor states only 3 covers from RAF PO 301 with Ceylon stamps are recorded. [A number of Australian aircrew and former POW’s were repatriated to Australia from South-East Asia via Cocos. Only RAF personal could send mail free of charge so postage was required.”*

I was familiar with this cover having researched it some years ago with two others from the same correspondent.

Number 1	cancelled	July 1945
Number 2	cancelled	11 July 1945
Number 3	(this cover)	cancelled 29 September 1945.

All covers were franked with Ceylon stamps and cancelled RAF PO 301 used on Cocos from 3 April 1945 to 31 March 1946.

In preparation for British attacks on Japanese held territory in Burma and Malaya construction began on airstrips on Cocos in March 1945. The airstrips were operational from 26 April 1945. Most airforce personal stationed on Cocos were RAF but there were a few RAAF members serving there within the RAF squadrons. With letters being sent to Australia over a period from July 1945 to end September 1945 one would assume they were from one of the RAAF members stationed on the island.

The letter, however, were written by 423052 Flight Lieutenant Paul Browning of Number 23 RAAF squadron which was never stationed on the island. On 10 July 1945 this Liberated bomber squadron moved from Darwin to Morotai to take part in the assault on Balikpapan which took place on 19 and 25 June 1945. As the Japanese were pushed back enemy targets became increasingly out of range.

Why was Browning on Cocos on at least three occasions between July 1945 and September 1945? My guess is that attacking distant Japanese targets could only be accomplished by flying on to Cocos for refuelling before returning to base. The squadron was a bomber squadron and at the time of the correspondence, still engaging the enemy. It seems therefore unlikely that it would have been used to transport POW from Singapore as suggested in the catalogue description. This is supported by the letter enclosed which mentions that they were *“trying to talk our way into a trip to Singapore”*

I think, too, that the catalogue description was wrong in claiming *‘only 3 covers from RAF PO 301 with Ceylon stamps recorded’* As far as I know these covers are the only ones to Australia franked with Ceylon stamps. There were, however, considerable numbers of British personal stationed on the islands and it is reasonable to assume there is British mail franked with Ceylon stamps. Getting the mail to Britain was the priority, and as there was

no regular shipping service from Cocos, Number 205 RAF Squadron based in Ceylon operated, on a reasonably regular basis, a ferry service with Sunderland Flying Boats. There were too few Australians on the island for the provision of a special service to Australia. Thus any mail for Australia was first carried to Ceylon where airmail items were carried by air and any surface mail sent by sea.

The reference in the catalogue description that 'only RAF personal could send mail free of charge' is puzzling to say the least as both RAAF and RAF personal could send letters home by surface free of charge. If there were no shipping transport available surface mail could have been sent to Ceylon by air free of charge.

The important aspect of this cover to Australia, not mentioned in the catalogue description, is the unusual airmail route - Cocos to Ceylon to Australia.

Catalina and Liberator aircraft had been operating a civil service across the Indian Ocean. In July 1945 the slow Catalina aircraft were withdrawn from the service and Lancastrian aircraft introduced which significantly increased the speed of airmail between Australia and England. BOAC flew from Hurn London (England) to Karachi. QANTAS flew Karachi/Colombo/Learmonth (W.A) Gawler (SA) to Sydney. The first east bound service departed 31 May 45. the first westbound service began from Sydney on 2 June 1945. It would seem likely that this airmail cover would have been carried Cocos to Ceylon by RAF Sunderland and Colombo to Sydney by QEA Lancastrian service.

(QANTAS Lancaster called at Cocos only between January and March 1946).

This is a cover of considerable interest to Australian airmail collectors.

I wish to thank Dr. William Cochrane who assisted me in my research and Andrew Brockett of Sydney who drew my attention to the auctioning of the cover.

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OFFICER'S MESS  
 GROUP ONE 1/2  
 ROYAL AUSTRALIAN AIR FORCE  
 DARWIN, N.T.  
 29-9-45

3

Dear Mr. Booth,

Here begins the final instalment! This is silly, isn't it? To get back to this flying business - reference letter no. 2. Our crew has spent a very interesting week commencing on yesterday week - Friday at it, on which they aloft in Darwin on Saturday night they flew to Sydney, spent Sunday night in Sydney, Monday night in Chardonnay, Tuesday night in Darwin, Wednesday night in Darwin, Thursday night in Darwin.