

Pan American Airways Auckland—San Francisco

Survey Flight

Introduction

During the 1930's many overseas airmail routes were set up. These routes did not include air travel to New Zealand which meant an initial trip via steamship to Australia was required. From here mail could then travel via airmail to its intended destination.

In 1935 the New Zealand Government authorised Pan American Airways to set up the first Trans-Pacific airmail service between New Zealand and the United States of America (USA). There was a time limit to this agreement and by February 1937 the service had not begun. The agreement was extended to the end of 1937 and a survey flight was conducted in March. A second survey flight from San Francisco arrived in Auckland in December 1937. Pan American Airways needed to inaugurate the route as the deadline for the contract was approaching. It was announced (at late notice) that on the return flight on 28 December mail would be carried between Auckland and Honolulu and then via another plane to San Francisco. The initial flight was to be made by the "Samoan Clipper", a Sikorsky S-42B Flying Boat.

This exhibit examines the mail carried to each destination on the survey flight and onwards to further destinations via connecting flights and surface mail. The rates applied are shown along with additional rates for registration and inland postage. The various receiving stamps are examined along with the cachets applied to the covers. Examples of various printed covers are shown throughout the exhibit.

Exhibit Plan

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The Samoan Clipper (in foreground) at Mechanics Bay, Auckland, December 1937. Alexander Turnbull Library.

References Used

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<http://www.nzstamps.org.uk/air/panam/index.html>

Destinations

The survey flight was conducted in four legs with mail deposited at three of the destinations. Starting from Auckland the plane flew to:

- Pago Pago, American Samoa
- Kingman Reef (refuelling stop—no mail delivered)
- Honolulu, Hawaii
- San Francisco, USA.

The cover below depicts the route taken from Auckland to San Francisco.



Postmarked Auckland 28 DE 37 8 PM via Samoan Clipper to Pago Pago then return NZ via surface mail to Gore.

Postage applied: 6d. Minimum Post Required: 6d letter rate. Philatelic use.

The Samoan Clipper flew from Auckland to Honolulu. It was flown by Ed Musick, an accomplished pilot. In Honolulu the remaining mail was transferred to another plane flying the weekly Pan American FAM 14 service to San Francisco. The Samoan Clipper prepared to return to New Zealand.

Initially the flight from Auckland to Pago Pago was scheduled to depart 28 December 1937. It wasn't announced until 24 December 1937 that mail would be carried on the flight and the rates for that mail. A storm the day before the intended departure date caused the flight to be delayed and it didn't take place until 2 January 1938. This allowed time for further letters to be received for the flight, eventually totalling 25,134 across all destinations.

Mail could travel via the survey flight and then on to its intended destination via additional routes. When the final destination was not one of the stopping points for the survey flight the route needed to be printed on the front of the cover. This was to indicate where the mail was to be deposited for onwards travel. This could be printed like the cover above showing 'Auckland—Pago Pago' or could be 'via Pago Pago' etc.

Rates

Letter rates were set per half-ounce based on the destination with postcard rates being half the letter rate. Onward travel via surface mail was included within the rate. Further airmail travel via existing USA and Canada routes was also included. Additional airmail travel via other routes would have to be paid in addition to the rate for the survey flight.

The rates per half-ounce were as follows:

- To Pago Pago: 6d letters, 3d postcards
- To Honolulu: 3s letters, 1s 6d postcards
- To San Francisco: 4s 6d letters, 2s 3d postcards.

The weights of the covers shown in this exhibit when flown is not known. In this exhibit the 'Minimum Post Required' will be stated which is based on the first half-ounce weight. Additional rates were required for inland airmail travel and registered articles. The registration fee was 3d at the time of the flight and this needed to be paid in addition to the postage rate.

Inland Airmail Fee

Due to the short notice that the return flight would carry mail, it was decided that mail sent from outside of Auckland had to be sent via inland airmail to connect with the flight leaving Auckland. This mail was required to pay the 1d inland airmail rate. The postcard below travelled from Christchurch and has this paid by the 1d Air Mail stamp.



Postmarked Christchurch 28 DE 37 9 AM via inland airmail to Auckland then via Samoan Clipper to Pago Pago.
Postage applied: 4d. Minimum Post Required: 3d **postcard** rate plus 1d inland airmail rate. Philatelic use.

Destination Pago Pago

Regular Mail

The first leg of the flight from Auckland finished at Pago Pago, American Samoa, covering 1850 miles. 5887 mail items were destined for Pago Pago and were taken off the plane on arrival.



Postmarked St Heliers 28 DE 37 4 via Samoan Clipper to Pago Pago.
Postage applied: $3\frac{1}{2}$ d. Minimum Post Required: 3d **postcard** rate— $\frac{1}{2}$ d overpaid. Philatelic use.

The flight departed Auckland on 2 January 1938. Due to crossing the international date line, the flight arrived in Pago Pago on 1 January 1938. Mail destined for Pago Pago was back stamped with a circular date stamp and a 7 wavy lines machine cancel.



Postmarked Pago Pago, Samoa JAN 1 1938, 5 PM. 7 wavy lines machine cancel.
Image shown 1.5x actual size.

Destination Pago Pago

Registered Mail

There were 702 registered articles that were taken off the flight at Pago Pago. The registered cover below was printed by Pan American Airways. Note how it has had 'New Zealand to America' edited to show American Samoa as the destination point on the survey flight. The use of the 1d inland airmail rate would have been for the return from Auckland to Napier.



Postmarked Auckland (Registered) 28 DE 37 7 PM via Samoan Clipper to Pago Pago then return NZ via surface mail to Auckland then via inland airmail to Napier.

Postage applied: 10d. Minimum Post Required: 6d letter rate plus 3d registration fee plus 1d inland airmail rate. Philatelic use.



Registered mail received a backstamp in purple reading "PAGO PAGO SAMOA REGISTERED JAN 1 1938". The cover above also received the 7 wavy lines machine cancel.

Rear of the cover above showing both the standard 7 wavy lines machine cancel and the registration backstamp. Shown actual size.

Destination Pago Pago

Onwards to Great Britain

Mail could continue from Pago Pago via surface mail at no additional cost. Pago Pago was serviced by the Oceanic Steamship Company, Matson Line, with regular sailings between Auckland and San Francisco. The SS Monterey and SS Mariposa travelled back and forth on this route. Mail destined for Great Britain from Pago Pago was carried by the SS Mariposa to San Francisco. From here it would have travelled via ship to Great Britain.



Postmarked Auckland 31 DE 37 via Samoan Clipper to Pago Pago then via SS Mariposa to San Francisco then via surface mail to London.

Postage applied: 6d . Minimum Post Required: 6d letter rate. Philatelic use.

The cover above lists the destinations of the flight as Tutuila, Kingman Reef, Honolulu and San Francisco. Tutuila is the main island of American Samoa and is the island that the city of Pago Pago is located on. Usually, Pago Pago is referenced as the stopping point rather than Tutuila. This cover has 'VIA PAGO PAGO' stamped on it below the address to signify it should travel onwards via surface mail from Pago Pago. The final destination for this cover was London.

The cover was extra mail as it was posted at Auckland on 31 December 1937. If it wasn't for the flight departure being delayed due to the storm this cover would not have made it onto the inaugural flight.

Destination Pago Pago

Return to New Zealand

Many covers destined for Pago Pago were then sent back to New Zealand via steamship. Mail returning to New Zealand travelled via SS Monterey to Auckland arriving 22 January 1938. The cover below travelled from Auckland via surface mail to Mititai, south of Dargaville, the same day it arrived in Auckland.



Postmarked Auckland C.I. 28 DEC 1937 5:15 PM via Samoan Clipper to Pago Pago then return NZ via SS Monterey to Auckland then via surface mail to Mititai.

Postage applied: 6d . Minimum Post Required: 6d letter rate. Philatelic use.



Rear of the above cover showing Pago Pago and Mititai receiving stamps.

Destination Honolulu

Regular Mail

From Pago Pago the Samoan Clipper flew to Honolulu, Hawaii with a refuelling stop in Kingman Reef. The flight to Kingman Reef was 1550 miles and the second flight to Honolulu a further 1100 miles. The flight touched down in Honolulu on 3 January 1938 with 3,525 mail items destined for Honolulu.



Postmarked Auckland 29 DE 37 8-PM via Samoan Clipper to Honolulu, Hawaii.
Postage applied: 3s. Minimum Post Required: 3s letter rate. Philatelic Use.

Mail destined for Honolulu received the circular date stamp and 7 wavy lines machine cancel shown below.



Dated JAN 3 1938 at Honolulu. 7 wavy lines machine cancel.

Image shown 1.5x actual size.

Destination Honolulu

Registered Mail

There were 353 registered articles for Honolulu, the smallest number of the three destinations of the survey flight. The cover below has the registration label, blue pencil cross and a registration date stamp. The registration fee has not been paid, however, the cover has not been marked as deficient for postage.



Postmarked New Plymouth (Registration) 28 DE 37 5 PM via inland airmail to Auckland then via Samoan Clipper to Honolulu .

Postage applied: 3s 1d: Minimum Post Required: 3s letter rate plus 1d inland airmail rate plus 3d registration fee—underpaid 3d. Philatelic use.



Registered mail received a backstamp in violet reading: "HONOLULU, HAWAII REGISTERED JAN 3 1938". The rear of the cover above has the 1d inland airmail fee attached using the 1d stamp from the 1937 Coronation issue.

Rear of the cover above showing the receiving registered backstamp at Honolulu 3 JAN 1938 and the 1d inland airmail fee date stamped New Plymouth Registration 28 DE 37 5 PM.

Image shown actual size.

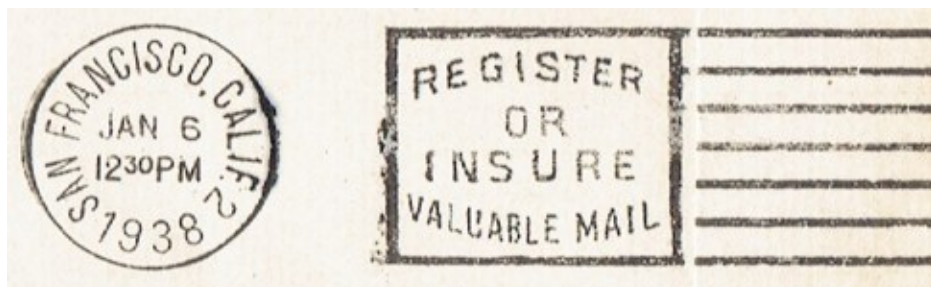
Destination San Francisco

Regular Mail

The remaining mail (15,722 pieces) were transferred to the Martin M. 130 flying boat NC-14715 "Philippine Clipper" in Honolulu. The mail was then flown to San Francisco. The flight touched down in San Francisco on 6 January 1938. A circular date stamp was applied to the back of the letters along with one of several machine cancels.



Postmarked Auckland 28 DE 37 8 PM via Samoan Clipper to San Francisco.
Postage applied: 4s 6d. Minimum Post Required: 4s 6d letter rate. Philatelic use.



The cover above is backstamped Jan 6 1938, 12:30PM with a "Register or Insure Valuable Mail" with 7 straight lines machine cancel.

Image shown 1.5x actual size.

Destination San Francisco

Registered Mail

There were 2908 registered items delivered to San Francisco which was the end of the survey flight. Mail that was to be returned to New Zealand such as the postcard below travelled via SS Niagara arriving in Auckland on 7 February 1938.



Postmarked Frankton Junction 29 DE 37 via Samoan Clipper to San Francisco then return NZ via SS Niagara to Frankton Junction.

*Postage applied: 2s 6d. Minimum Post Required: 2s 3d **postcard** rate plus 3d registration fee. Philatelic use.*

Registered mail received a double circled backstamp in purple reading: "SAN FRANCISCO CALIF. REG. SEC. JAN 6 1938". Initially the date stamp read "1338" but was corrected later in the day. It is not known how many covers had this error. A new backstamp was applied as noted by the addition of brackets around REG. SEC. and a different font for the '6'.



Registered letter backstamps at San Francisco. Backstamp on the left is from the postcard shown above—note the misspelling of "1338" for "1938". On the right is the corrected backstamp (cover shown on page 14).

Images shown 1.5x actual size.

Destination San Francisco

Onwards to Other U.S. Cities

The survey flight terminated at San Francisco. From here letters and postcards could continue on via regular airmail services to other U.S. cities at no additional fee.



Postmarked Blenheim 28 DE 37 10:45 AM via inland airmail to Auckland then via Samoan Clipper to San Francisco then via airmail to New York.

Postage applied: 4s 7d. Minimum Post Required: 4s 6d letter rate plus 1d inland airmail rate. Philatelic use.

The cover above travelled from San Francisco to New York on the first all-air connection between Auckland and New York. It has the additional 1d inland airmail rate as it initially travelled from Blenheim by plane to Auckland.

This cover printed by Pan American Airways for the flight is similar to the cover on Page 5. This cover has the 'By Air Mail' etiquette covering the text 'Via Air Mail' which can be seen on the cover on Page 5 (which does not have the etiquette).

Destination San Francisco

Onwards to Canada

Mail that continued via airmail to Canada were on the first all-air connections from New Zealand to Canada. Mail to Canada was sent between 6 and 8 January 1938 depending on the destination and route. The cover below has been overpaid 6d as the connecting flight to Canada was free of charge.



Postmarked Auckland 28 DE 37 8 PM via Samoan Clipper to San Francisco then via airmail to Canada.
Postage applied: 5s. Minimum Post Required: 4s 6d letter rate—6d overpaid. Philatelic use.



This letter was sent on to Canada on 8 January 1938. Receiving backstamp at Victoria 8 January 1938.

Destination San Francisco

Onwards to Great Britain

Mail that terminated in San Francisco could continue on to Great Britain and Europe via surface mail with no additional fee. Onward travel to Great Britain or Europe by airmail required additional payment. The Australia-Singapore-England airmail route was in place at this time and letters could be flown on this route from New Zealand to England for 1s 6d. This would include an initial surface trip via steamship from Auckland to Sydney. The much higher rate to fly via the Samoan Clipper route and then via airmail to England meant that most letters bound for England took the surface mail route after San Francisco.

Mail such as the cover below would travel from San Francisco to New York via surface mail to then travel via sea to Great Britain. Note that the cover is missing the required 'By Air Mail' etiquette.



Postmarked Dunedin C.I. (Registered) 27 DE 37 8 PM via inland airmail to Auckland then via Samoan Clipper to San Francisco then via surface mail to London.

Postage applied: 4s 10d . Minimum Post Required: 4s 6d letter rate plus 3d registration fee plus 1d inland airmail. Philatelic use. Note rear receiving stamp shown on page 11.

Cachets

All mail was meant to be sent with the cachet shown below applied. It was 5cm wide and 2cm high and had three lines of text. It shows the expected departure date of December 1937 which in fact became January 1938.



Flight cachet.
Images shown actual size.

Some covers did not receive the cachet. Occasionally the cachet was applied twice. In most cases the cachet is in red however some were applied in purple. These were mostly at Auckland and Wellington although a few have been noted from Timaru.

The postcard below was sent via inland airmail from Wellington to Auckland to connect with the Samoan Clipper. It has an additional 2d paid which could be for the inland airmail rate—1d for the flight from Wellington to Auckland and a second for the return flight from Auckland back to Wellington. This along with the purple cachet make for an interesting piece.



Postmarked Wellington C. I. 28 Dec 37 11 AM via inland airmail to Auckland then via Samoan Clipper to Pago Pago then return NZ via surface mail to Auckland then via inland airmail to Wellington.

Postage applied: 5d. Minimum Post Required 3d postcard rate plus 1d inland airmail plus another 1d inland airmail rate. Philatelic use.

Tragedy and Aftermath

The Samoan Clipper refuelled in Honolulu and left to return to New Zealand. In the morning of 11 January 1938 it departed from Pago Pago. Shortly after take-off it experienced engine trouble. The captain Ed Musick radioed to say he was going to jettison fuel and prepare for landing. They were not heard from again and a day later pieces of the wreckage were found. There were no survivors.

The loss of the Samoan Clipper meant that Pan American Airways did not have enough aircraft to continue with the regular service between Auckland and San Francisco. This route was put on hold and it wasn't until July 1940 that the service was to begin as F.A.M Route 19. This route travelled from Auckland to Noumea, Canton Island, Honolulu, Los Angeles and San Francisco. It was flown by the "American Clipper".



Image by Mark Cornell, The-Press.

The cover below was flown on the initial leg of the new F.A.M Route 19 between Auckland and Noumea on 19 July 1940. The company the cover is addressed to specialised in providing mail flown via Clipper Airmail.



Postmarked Auckland C.I. 19 JUL 1940 via American Clipper to Noumea.
Postage applied: 1s. Minimum Post Required: 1s letter rate to Noumea.