

TIN CAN MAIL

by R.A. Rostron

NIUAFO'OU is the most remote island in the whole Tongan group, being much closer to Samoa and Fiji than it is to the main Island of Tongatapu. It is a 109 miles West N. West of its nearest neighbour Niuatoputapu and 211 miles N. West of Vava'u, the closest of the three main groups that make up the Kingdom of Tonga.

Tin Can Island as it is sometimes called is almost circular and is 19 sq miles in area, including the lakes which cover 6 miles. Rising nearly 600ft out of the S Pacific Ocean the regular eruptions are proof of its volcanic origin, in fact the Island is really nothing more than the rim of a crater with the central lake being the very crater itself. Violent eruptions have occurred in 1853 (when 25 people were killed), in 1867, 1886, 1912, 1929, 1935, 1936 and 1946. The village of Ahau was destroyed in 1853 and Futu in 1929, both these sites have remained abandoned.

1931 Shark Fatality

Because of the violence of the 1946 eruption, Queen Salote decreed that the Island would have to be abandoned and it was not until 1962 that the Island was reinhabited. However, it is not the ferocity of the volcano that made Niufo'ou so famous but the unique mail service that the inhospitable terrain makes necessary for the isolated Island.

It was in 1882 that trader William Travers working on Niufo'ou for the firm of Osterman Dervy & Company based in Sydney, Australia, arranged with the Tongan Postal Officials for the use of kerosene cans or biscuit tins as a form of water-proof mail containers. In this manner mail was transported from the Island to passing steamers and vice-versa. Sailor W Hetting on the T S Opolu worked with a soldering iron to make the tins waterproof and when Captain Crosshaw slowed the ship near the Island and dropped these cans overboard, the Tin Can Mail service was born. In those days little was known of this unique service. There were no announcements in the philatelic press of the day, as necessity rather than gimmickery was the reason for the introduction of this most unusual service.

Other methods have been used to get mail to the Island including rockets, but these were unsatisfactory as more mail was lost due to the mail over-shooting its destination or catching fire, than was recovered. The earliest Tin Can Mail was transported to and from the Island by swimmers. This swimming Tin Can Mail lasted until 1931, when a shark took one of the swimmers. From then on the mail was brought in by native outrigger canoes.

Colourful Cachets

Two Europeans who were at that time living in Niufo'ou played a big part in

the Tin Can Mail service. Walter George Quensell a copra trader from Burns Philips is probably the most associated with Tin Can Mail, because he was the one who began applying the numerous colourful Tin Can Cachets, which the later covers were adorned with (Figs 1 & 2). However, an English man named Charles Stuart Ramsey also a copra trader, but with Morris Hedstrom Ltd. actually swam for the mail during his long stay on the Island. In his book *Tin Can Island*, he claimed to have landed over 120 mail despatches. Whilst these covers did not have the numerous colourful cachets, they invariably had a message written by Ramsey and signed and dated by him. In his book he stated that although it was only one mile to the ship, the swim back was over 4 miles, due to the strong currents.

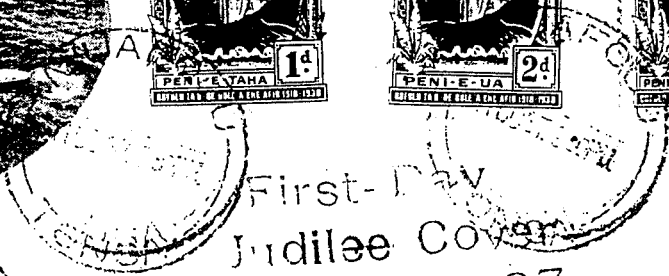
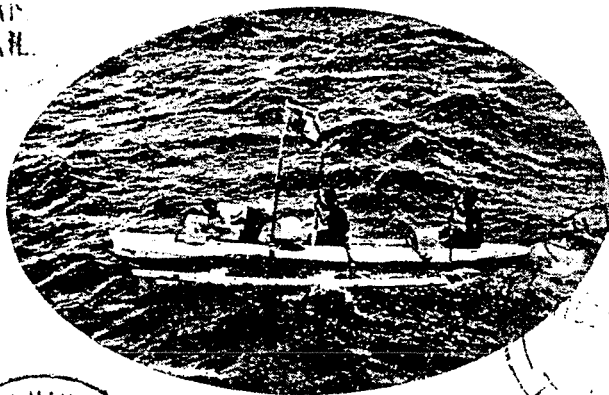
In the mid-1930s Tin Can Mail was much publicised when cruise ships added Niuafo'ou to their itinerary. The cruise line would encourage the passengers to send mail via the unique Tin Can Mail system, canoes would come out and collect the mail and then once back on the Island Quensell would apply his cachets. The mail was then sealed in tins where it would await the next ship's call. It was not unusual for six months to lapse between the time sent and the time received. This cruise ship tradition is still in force.



Tin Can - Canoe Mail: Island

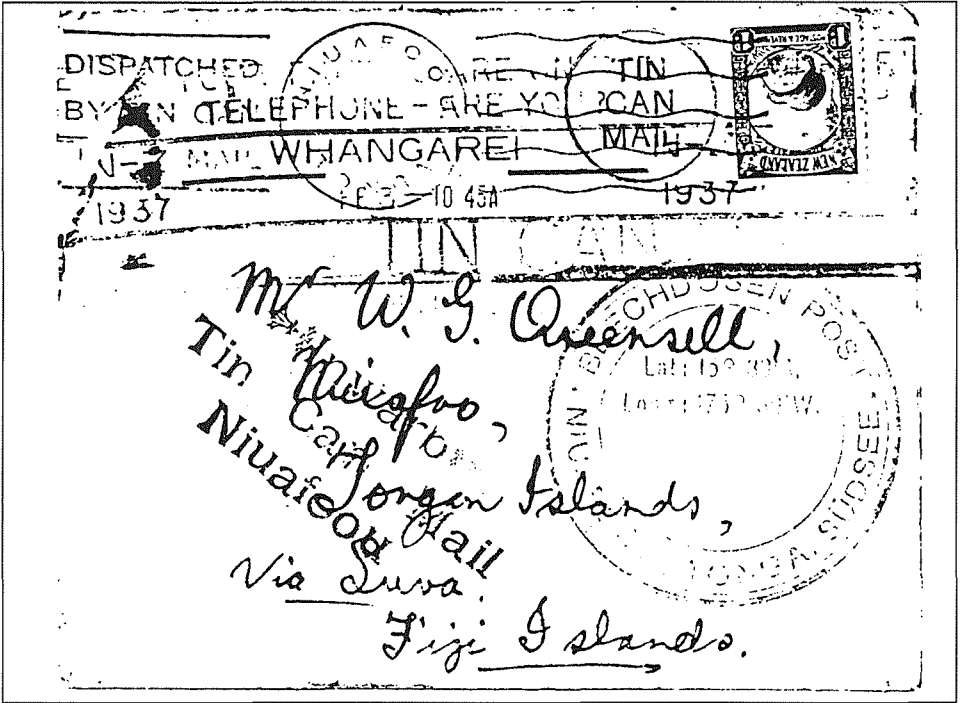
ORIGINAL TIN-CAN CANOE MAIL: ISLAND COVER

TIN
CAN
MAIL

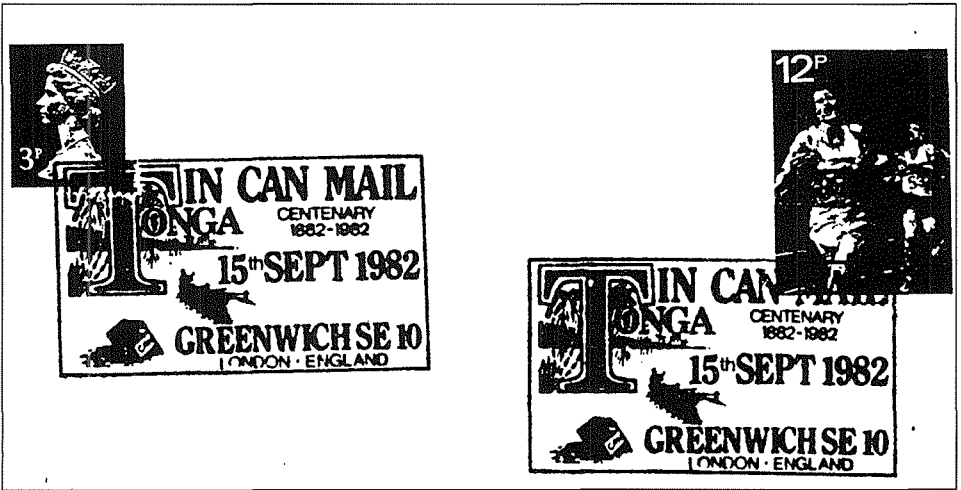


Jubilee Cover,
Niuafuou, Tonga,
11, Oct, 37
H M Quisenberry
WALT GEO. QUENSELL
T.C.C.M.

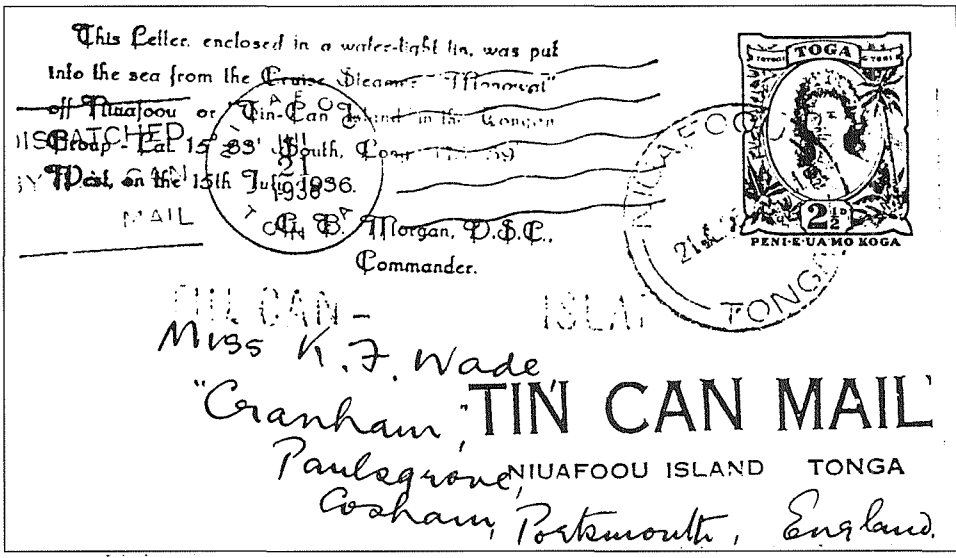
FDC Commemorating 20th Anniversary of Queen Salote accession to the throne. It is of special interest because the stamps were issued officially on 12 October 1938 and this cover is dated 11 October 1937. The picture shows the canoe system of transporting the mail in sealed 40lb biscuit tins. The canoe system was introduced after a swimmer was killed by a shark in April 1931. The ships can only get to about 1 mile from the shore due to reefs and strong currents. Due to these currents being so strong, it was only possible to launch the canoes for about 6 months per year.



1937 "TIN CAN" COVER came from N.Z. to NIUAFOOU, TONGA but still received Quensell's colourful & numerous cachets.

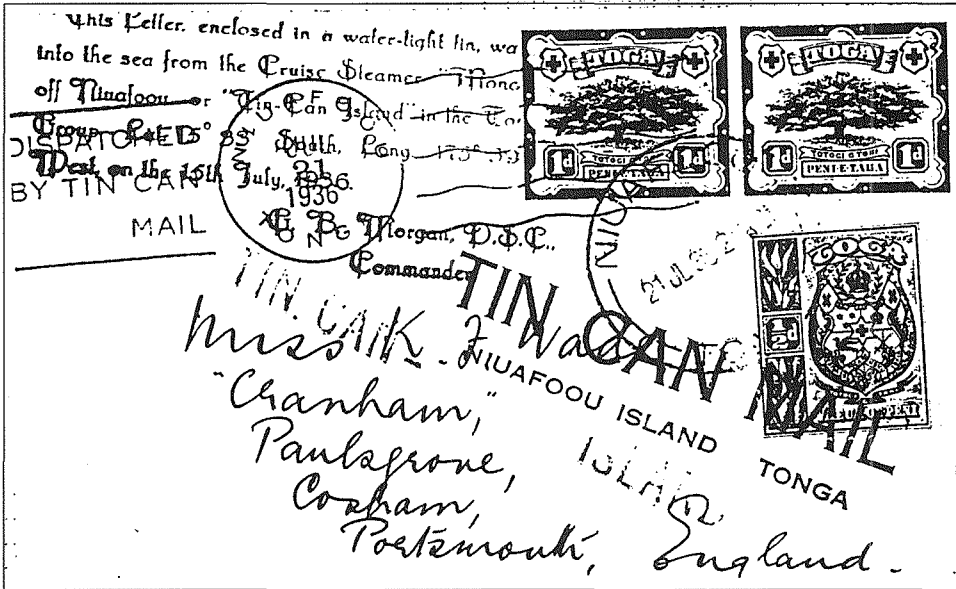


Commemorating a Hundred Years of TIN CAN MAIL. The opening of an Airport in 1983 will have dramatically altered the need for a TIN CAN MAIL service.

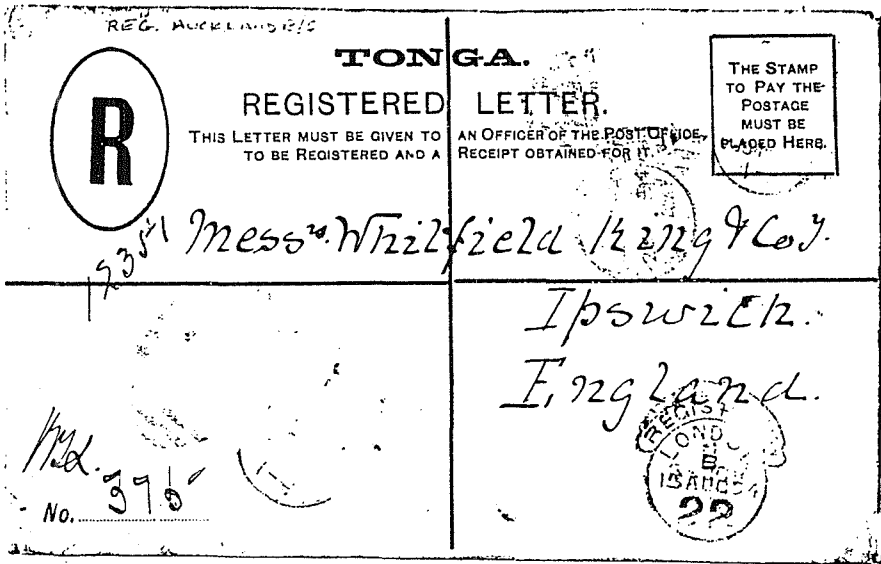


The inscription on the top left hand corner of these covers describes what happens to TIN CAN MAIL. It says:

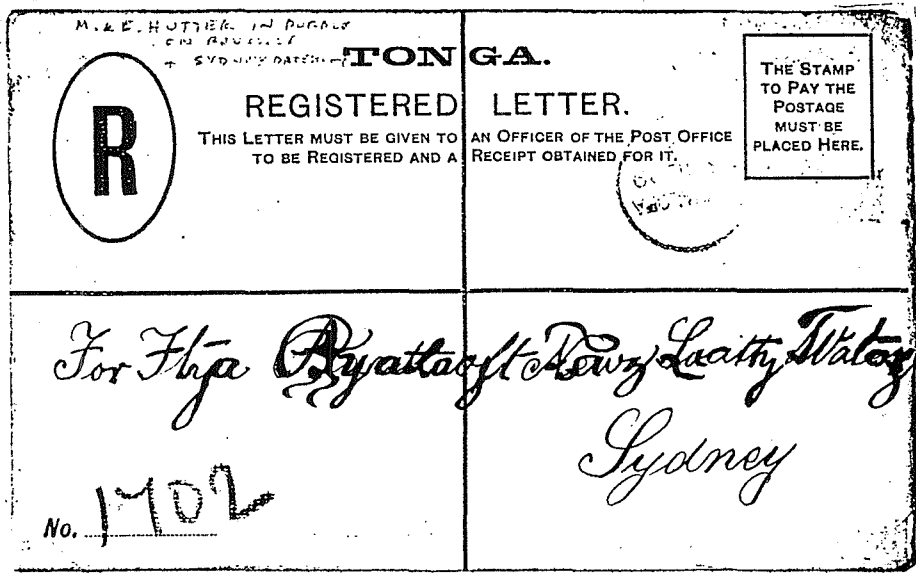
"This letter enclosed in a water-tight tin was put into the sea from the cruise steamer Monowai off Niuafuoo or Tin-Can Island in the Tonga Group, Lat. 15°33' South, Long 175°39' West on the 15th July 1936."



The postmarks are dated 21st July 1936, 6 days after placing in the sea.



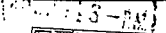
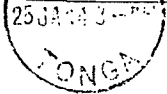
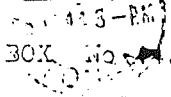
1894 Early registered cover (No. 375) to Ipswich – no doubt to do with philately. Stamp removed but shows Auckland & London transit marks.



1899 By now registered cover No. 1702, to wherever in Sydney. M.E. Hutter (in purple on reverse) could have been a dealer in philately. Stamp missing unfortunately.



POST OFFICE
NUKUALOFA.



226 Second,
FIRST DAY COVER
SILVER JUBILEE
1918-1943

*F.D.C. Inscribed S.J. 1918-1943, but F.D.I. 25.1.1944
N.B. Not much mail to & from Tonga during W.W.2.*