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Browsing the Web: **The China Clippers, Part 1**

by John F. Dunn



(This “Browsing the Web” article started as a study for our United States Reference Manual, then developed into a two-part article in the September-October and March-April U.S. Stamp News. In preparing it for publishing as a “Yesterday in USSN” feature here I found so many additional images at various sites on the web that I decided to expand it and use it as a “Browsing the Web” article. JFD.)



Map showing the Trans-Pacific route of the Pan-American Airways (PANAM-14 and PANAM-19)

If a collector wants to make the transition from stamp collecting to covers and postal history, the Transpacific “China Clipper” stamps are an excellent point of departure.

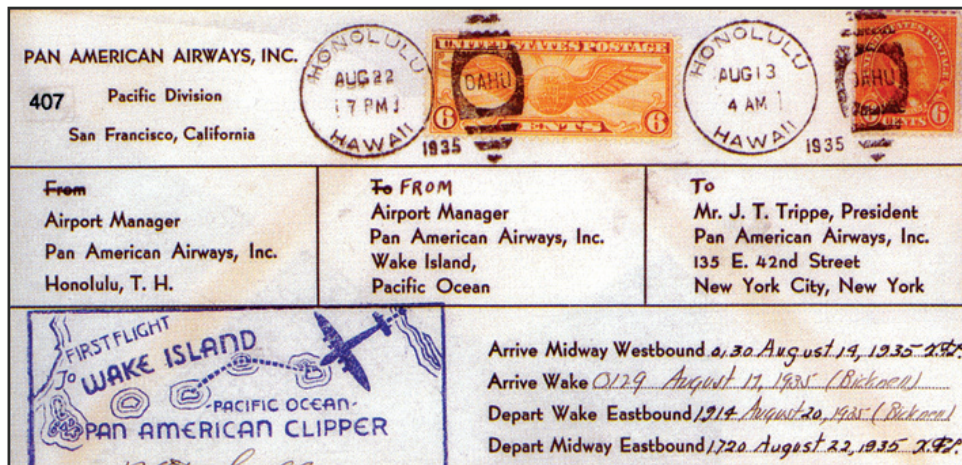
Not only is it a small, manageable unit, but there also is a direct connection between the stamps and their usages.

You will notice, for example, that the Scott Catalogue editors treat this issue differently from the first airmail issue. Where C1-C3 are grouped together in order from lowest to highest denomination (6¢, 16¢, 24¢) instead of chronologically—so that the first airmail is numbered C3—the Transpacific issues are listed chronologically, with the 25¢ value, which was issued November 22, 1935 (C20) preceding the 20¢ value, which was issued February 15, 1937 (C21).

For the cover collector or postal historian, this is more useful than numbering the China Clippers based on their denominations, because it keeps the sequence of events intact. Those events began with the following announcement in *Mekeel's Weekly* of October 28, 1935:

“NEW AIR STAMPS LIKELY

“A lone bid for the contract for transPacific [sic] air-mail service was handed Postmaster General Farley last Monday at noon, the hour set for opening the proposals. It was submitted by The Pan American Airways Co. and demanded the maximum rates allowed under the law for



An August 17, 1935 Pan American Airways Wake Island survey cover addressed to J. T. Trippe, President of Pan Am. The survey flight departed Honolulu August 13 on a flight to Wake Island. The filled in spaces for arrival and departure times show that it arrived at Wake Island on August 17 (after an August 14 stop at Midway Island on its westbound flight). The return flight departure from Wake is Aug. 20, with an Aug. 22 Honolulu arrival postmark at the top center of the cover.

the route... Reduced to ounces the cost to the Government would be \$1.25 per ounce for the first 800 pounds and 50 cents for each additional ounce carried to Canton, China from San Francisco.

“Having already made several survey flights (see cover photo, p. 2) over the hardest part of the 8,000 mile route, officials of the airline company indicated that they are prepared to start service by the middle of November if awarded the contract. The mails will be flown once a week each way via Honolulu and Manila. It is expected that the postal rate to Canton will approximate \$1 per ounce. A new series of airmail stamps probably will be issued for this service.”

* * * * *

One week later, on November 4, 1935, Mekeel’s announced:

“NEW 25¢ AIR MAIL STAMP

“TransPacific Airmail Service

“Will Be Inaugurated November 22

“...That the service would start by the middle of November was forecast in the last issue of *MEKEEL’S*, however, the announcement [that a stamp would be issued] came as the major surprise of this year to those who have not followed the activities of the Pan-American organization....

“Postmaster General Farley has authorized the issuance of a new 25¢ air mail stamp to be used on mail carried over this new route. The postage rate will be 25¢ to Hawaii, 50¢ to Guam and 75¢ to the Philippines. No announcement was made as to the rate to China.

“The new stamp will be placed on first-day sale at the San Francisco and Washington post offices Friday, Nov. 8.... Stamp collectors desirous of obtaining first-flight cancellations on the new transPacific air mail service may send any desired number of envelopes...indorsed in the upper left corner, ‘By first contract trans-Pacific flight’ to the postmaster, San Francisco...These covers should be received at San Francisco no later than November 7....

“Collectors desiring to mail covers bearing the new stamp on the return flight may send self-addressed en-

velopes, under separate inclosure to the postmaster at Guam and Honolulu, Hawaii...In order for such covers to reach Guam in time to be returned by the eastbound flight it will be necessary to send them by air mail to the postmaster at Guam....

“Stamp collectors desiring first-day covers from Washington on November 8 may send any desired number of self addressed envelopes to the postmaster...It should be understood, however, that first-day covers from Washington will not be carried on the Trans-Pacific flight.” [See photos, below.]

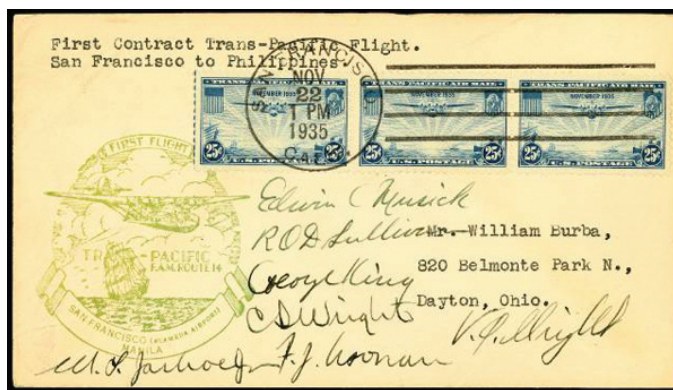
* * * * *

Given the timing, collectors justifiably complained that they could not possibly get their covers prepared and mailed in time to reach the required points in time for the scheduled flight

departures. Even before the November 8 first day date had been announced in philatelic publications, word came that the first flight and the first day



Top Notch C20 Washington, D.C. FDC cachet. Note that it was not carried on the flight.



C20 San Francisco Nov. 22, 1935, carried on FAM14-1, signed by pilot Captain Edwin C. Musick and entire crew of six.

of issue of the stamp had been postponed until November 22, and that news was added as a “Flash News” banner within the article in the November 4 Mekeel’s.

The November 9, 1935 *STAMPS Magazine* gave the story of the release of a stamp similar treatment, complete with a “Stop Press” banner. That article also fills in such blanks as the fact that the November 22 flight would terminate in Manila, that the route would later extend to Canton, China (this explains the lack of a rate to China in the initial announcement), and that the new stamp would be placed on first day sale in San Francisco as well as in Washington, D.C.

Details on the stamp design also were provided: “It will be blue in color and the same size and shape as the current special delivery stamp (the 1931 15¢ orange, Scott E16).... The central design will depict the sun rising from the shores of America, while in the air over the water appears a seaplane. [The “seaplane” was the China Clipper.] In the upper lefthand corner will be the United States shield, and in the upper right-hand corner the shield of the Philippine Islands. On the lower right side of the stamp is a reproduction of a portion of a modern ocean liner while to the left is a Chi-



Another San Francisco to Philippines Nov. 22, 1935 first flight cover, with hand-stamped flight cachet and a printed pictorial cachet.



An artist's rendering of a China Clipper and China junk

nese junk vessel. On the water in the distance is a three-masted sailing vessel, also a reproduction of a ship of the mid-nineteenth century period, both being symbolic of early water transportation. The four vessels and seaplane shown on the new stamp represent the development in the methods of transportation employed in bridging the Pacific....” [For a closer look at the stamp design, use your pdf magnifier function on the photos on page 1. JFD.]

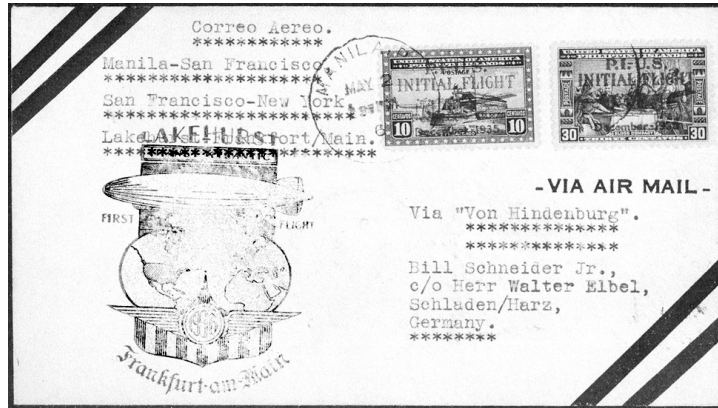
The November 16, 1935, *STAMPS Magazine* provides information that was too late for most collectors to use at the time, but which is of value to postal historians: “The Director of Posts, Manila, Philippine Islands, advises that covers will be accepted for dispatch on the Eastbound Trans-Pacific Air Mail flight, to Guam, Hawaii and points in the United States (mainland) at the same rates specified for the Westbound flight, except that an extra surcharge of three cents per cover, not in excess of one ounce will be charged. Therefore, remittances to the Postmaster at Manila for the carrying of covers on the return flight should be 28 cents for each cover to Guam, 53 cents for each cover to Hawaii, and 78 cents for each cover to the United States.

“The new issue of Philippine stamps will be used on the covers prepared to Manila and...neither the new U.S. 25-cent air mail stamp, nor other United States stamps, will



Cover flown on the first flight of the Manila to San Francisco Pan-Am Clipper, postmarked in Manila December 2, 1935, with a Dec. 6 machine receiver mark applied at San Francisco.

I was unable to locate a new color photo of this cover, first published in our Sept.-Oct. 2000, USSN, but it is definitely worth showing here. The Philippines Transpacific overprint stamps



are shown here on one of only four known Philippines postings for any Zeppelin flight, this being the 1936 First North American flight of the Hindenburg. (There are two more stamps on the reverse.) The cover was flown on the China Clipper from Manila to San Francisco, then to New York for connection with the Zepp flight to Germany.

be valid for use in the prepayment of postage on covers to be carried on the return flight.”

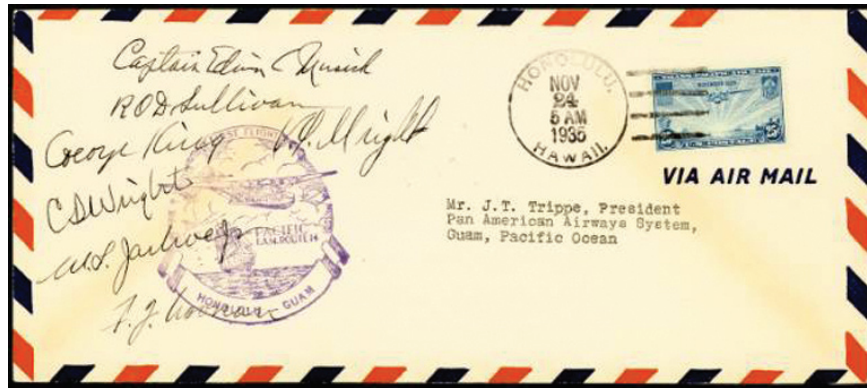
The “new” stamps referred to were the 1935 overprints on the 10¢ and 30¢ issues of 1935 (Sc. C52-C53, on Philippines Scott 387, 392). The overprint on the stamps was printed in gold ink, and shows an illustration of the China Clipper with the inscription “P.I.-U.S. / Initial Flight / December - 1935.” The stamps were issued on December 2, 1935, the same day the first flight departed Manila for the eastbound flight to San Francisco.

The December 7, 1935 issue of *STAMPS Magazine* provides information on the results of the flight:

“The China Clipper Completes Trans-Pacific Flight

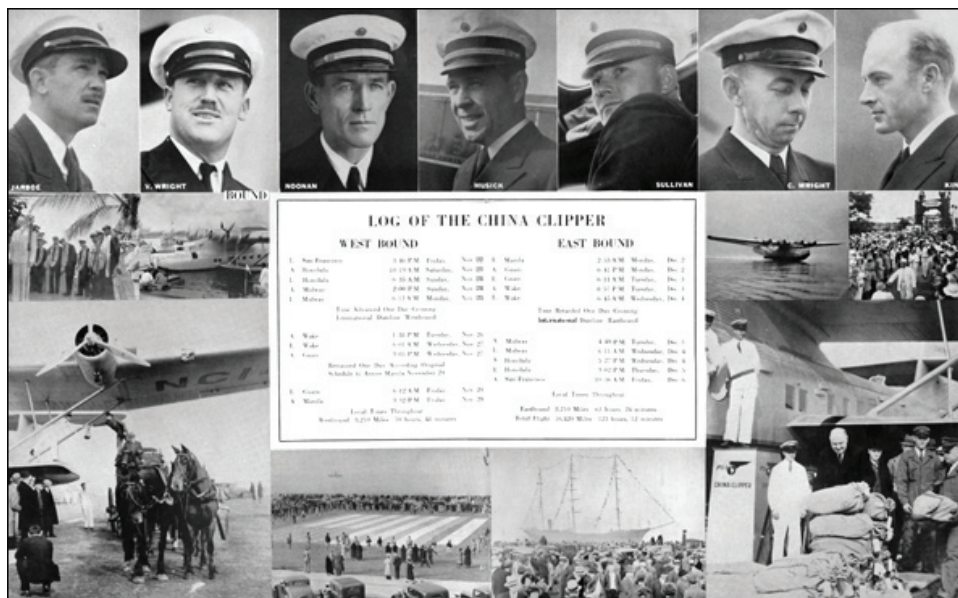
“Shortly after 5 P.M. on Thanksgiving Day the China Clipper came gracefully to a stop on Manila Bay, completing the last leg of its 8,000 mile initial flight. The flight of the Clipper has been eagerly watched by the eyes of the world as it winged its way across the Pacific. Leaving the Alameda (California) Airport at 6:47 P.M., E.S.T., or 3:47 P.M. Pacific Coast Time the giant ship dipped under the new Golden Gate bridge and quickly disappeared in the distance to arrive nineteen hours later at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, 2,400 miles away.

Leaving Hawaii on Sunday (November 24) the Clipper



FAM 14-2a, Nov. 24, 1935 Hawaii to Guam flight cover with cachet, signed by the pilot and crew, addressed to Pan-Am President Juan Trippe.

easily flew the 1,323 miles to Midway Islands in about nine hours. On the flight to Guam the Clipper rested overnight at Wake Island, 1,191 miles from Midway Island and continued the remaining 1,536 miles to Guam on Wednesday (November 27), arriving there at 3:07 P.M. Maintaining an average speed of approximately 200 miles per hour the ship flew the remaining 1,700 miles to Manila in thirteen and a half hours arriving there at 3:31 P.M. Friday, November 29th.



Photos of the crew (pilot Ed Musick in upper left) and events surrounding the Nov. 22, 1935, first flight of the Pan-Am Clipper and December 2 return trip arrival, also showing the log of the round trip.

“The China Clipper carried 1,837 pounds or about 110,000 covers when it left the Alameda Airport on its way to Hawaii...A few letters were picked up at the various stops. Many collectors took advantage of the return flight and of course their covers were left at the way-stops to be picked up again on the return flight of the Clipper. Captain Musick, skipper of the Clipper, carried a letter in his pocket from President Roosevelt to President Manuel Quezon and which he presented to the newly elected President of the Philippines at the reception accorded the fliers.

“A new first-day sale record has been set by the new 25¢ trans-Pacific airmail stamp...The total amount of sale reported by the Postal Authorities is \$69,432.00. At San Francisco 220,000 of the new airmail stamps were sold, at the Washington, D.C. Post Office 11,018, and at the Philatelic Agency, 46,680. 10,910 first-day covers were mailed from Washington. (The San Francisco FDC count missing from this account was later given as 15,000.)

* * * * *

The return flight of the China Clipper was given equal coverage in the December 14, 1935 issue of STAMPS:

“Trans-Pacific Airmail

“The first Trans-Pacific voyage of the China Clipper is now a matter of history. The flight was successful from start to finish. Leaving Manila Bay at 2:52 A.M. December 2nd (1:52 P.M. Sunday E.S.T.) it flew the 1,700 miles to Guam in 10 hours and 50 minutes. The first half of the 1,536 miles to Wake Islands was rather rough through squalls and rain, the leg being made in thirteen hours and forty-seven minutes. The 1,191 mile flight to Midway Islands was completed in nine hours five minutes and the 1,323 miles to Honolulu in nine hours and forty-five minutes. The Thursday overnight hop of 2,400 miles to the Alameda Airport was made in close to eighteen hours, flying south of the regular course to avoid a storm.

“The Clipper carried [903 pounds] of airmail picked up at Manila, Guam, Wake Islands, Midway Islands and Honolulu on its return flight. Mail aboard...consisted of 49,800 pieces.

“On December 6th the Philippine Clipper left the Alameda Airport to fly the same route as the China Clipper. The return flight from Manila is scheduled for December 16th. A third Clipper, the Hawaii Clipper will be the next ship to be added. First flight mail on these ships will be interesting additions to the Trans-Pacific collections even without the ornamentation of cachets.”

* * * * *

The prominent attention accorded the flights of the Pan-Am Clippers also can be gleaned from this article by Don J. Kapner in the February 29, 1936 issue of *STAMPS*:

“China Clipper Flight

The inauguration of airmail service from the United States to the Philippine Islands was of equal importance in American philatelic circles this past year with the issuance of the Farley imperforates. Both events received wide publicity, not only in the philatelic press, but also in daily papers throughout the nation.

“The initial contract airmail flight is one that is certain

— TABLE OF INFORMATION —
FIRST CONTRACT TRANSPACIFIC AIR-MAIL FLIGHT - NOV 22, 1935.

		SYMBOLS USED: Short Bar Handstamp		Machine Cancellation, Wavy		Small Circle Handstamps		COMPILED BY DON J. KAPNER	
		Long Bar Handstamp		Machine Cancellation, Box & Bars					
	DESTINATION	TYPE OF POSTMARK	DATE OF POSTMARK	TYPE OF BACKSTAMP	DATE OF BACKSTAMP	COLOR OF CACHET	RATE OF POSTAGE	NUMBER OF COVERS	REMARKS
WESTWARD FLIGHT (U.S. to P.I.)	San Francisco-Honolulu		Nov. 22 1 PM 1935		Nov. 23 11 AM 1935	Green	25¢	46,750	Covers sent on flight from California to all points numbered 110,000.
	San Francisco-Guam		ditto		Nov. 27 3 PM 1935	Green	50¢	20,350	Backstamp ranges from blue-black to purple-black as well as black
	San Francisco-Manila		ditto		Nov. 29 5 PM 1935	Green	75¢	42,900	One backstamp reads, "MANILA TRAFFIC CENTER OF THE PACIFIC".
	Honolulu-Guam		Nov. 24 5 AM 1935		Nov. 27 3 PM 1935	Dark red purple	25¢	6,430	
	Honolulu-Manila		ditto		Nov. 29 5 PM 1935	Dark red purple	50¢	6,968	
	Guam-Manila		Nov. 29 5 AM 1935		ditto	Green Black	25¢	5,700	** Both green and black colored cachets were used. Green was the more constant.
EASTWARD FLIGHT (Return)	Manila-Guam	 	Dec. 2 ² 5:30 AM 1935		Dec. 2 7 PM 1935	Black	25¢	4,808	² Stamps used- 1-20c Clipper Over P. I. 2-10c 1-6c 1935 Feb.
	Manila-Honolulu		ditto		Dec. 4 7 PM 1935	Black	53¢	4,273	² Similar stamps used few Commonwealth stamps also used
	Manila-San Francisco		ditto		Dec. 6 12:30 PM 1935	Black	75¢	25,435	Covers sent on return flight from P. I. to all points numbered 11,624
	Guam-Honolulu		Dec. 3 6 AM 1935		Dec. 4 7 PM 1935	Green Black	25¢	3,543	³ Backstamp reads, "BUY U.S. SAVINGS BONDS ASK YOUR POSTMASTER".
	Guam-San Francisco		ditto	ditto	Dec. 6 12:30 PM 1935	Green Black	50¢	6,476	
	Honolulu-San Francisco		Dec. 5 2 PM 1935		ditto	Dark red purple	25¢	48,661	

Where covers from Manila contained insufficient space for stamps, reverse side was utilized for attachment of adhesives. This likewise applied in the case of cachets.

* Required postage from Point to Point only.

A table that accompanied the Feb. 29, 1936 article. For a better read, use your pdf magnifier.

to be recorded among the truly pioneering aeronautical accomplishments of the age. It is no wonder therefore, that collectors should prize their first voyage 'China Clipper' covers....”

The author goes on to list the many varieties of cancellations, cachets, misdirected covers, and other cover varieties. We will not repeat them here, but will offer this one report, which indicates the high level of service provided by the Post Office Department:

“Weighing both the errors made and the quantities handled, the opinion of both collectors and dealers was that they were very well satisfied with the service rendered.... The following quotation, taken from a recent letter, is enlightening and accounts for the delay in returning many of the covers. ‘On December 30th I received my cover from Manila, postmarked there Dec. 2nd, and backstamped ‘San Francisco, Dec. 6th.’ I wrote to the Postmaster at San Francisco regarding the delay in my receiving the letter—24 days from ‘Frisco to here! Here is his reply:

“All Manila to San Francisco first flight Trans-Pacific Air Mail covers were received in this office on December 6th, 1935, and were postmarked that date. While distributing the first flight covers in this office it was noted that a great many covers had not been properly prepared, some failed to receive the official cachet impression while others failed to receive a Manila postmark. After being backstamped December 6, they were returned to the Postmaster, Manila, via the Philippine Clipper with the request that they be cacheted and postmarked and returned on the return flight of the Philippine Clipper, which arrived San Francisco December 26, 1935. The first flight cover which you received was one which was returned due to being improperly prepared.’

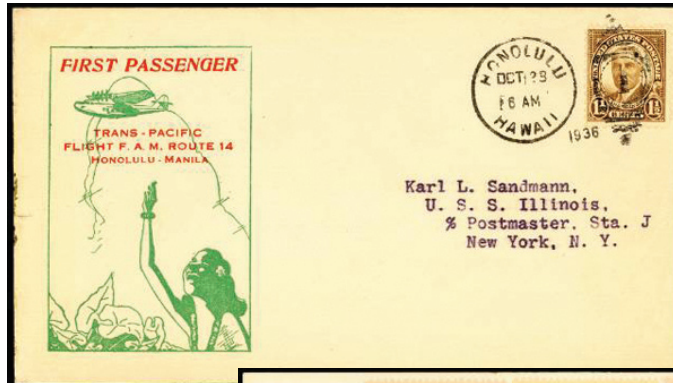
“Thought you would be interested in learning of the extra journey these covers had at no extra charge!”

First Commercial Passenger Service

On October 21, 1936, Pan-Am began Transpacific commercial passenger service on the Clippers. Prior to that, a so-called VIP “Philippine Clipper” flight was made.



Oct. 14, 1936 Philippine Clipper Inspection Flight, San Francisco to Hong Kong, addressed to Honolulu. This was the VIP public relations press flight with Pan AM president Juan Trippe and invited guests on board, including Amon G. Carter, who prepared this cover. Signed by the pilot, J. H. Tilton.



Cover from First Passenger Revenue Flight, Hawaii to Philippines, Oct. 29, 1936. Only seven paying passengers were on this flight.

Oct. 24, 1936 Philippine Clipper "VIP" Inspection Return Flight, Manila to San Francisco, with ten Philippines airmail stamps. Registered and addressed to Amon Carter.



To Be Continued