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## U.S. Mail to Turkey during World War II

by

Louis Fiset

### Introduction

Despite intense pressure from Nazi Germany and the Western Allies, Turkey remained neutral until the last months of World War II, joining the Allies on 23 February 1945. This largely ceremonial move assured the country of subsequent charter membership in the United Nations.

Turkey's neutrality meant wartime international mail could move in and out of the country, with mail service from the U.S. not in danger of being suspended. Nevertheless, geographically situated in a region of intense combat in nearby Mediterranean and Balkan countries, creative mail routes had to be devised to circumvent the fighting. Such alternate routes combined with all mail being subject to censorship resulted in considerable delays in transmission of both surface and airmail during the war.

*The Postal Bulletin* and the *U.S. Official Postal Guide* remain silent on wartime routings and average transit times involving Turkey. What we know is that from 28 April 1939 the transatlantic airmail rate to Turkey was 30 cents per half-ounce with no additional fee for airmail in Europe (*PB* 17681) including the part of Turkey in Asia. On 17 December 1941 the rate became 70 cents per half-ounce (*PB* 18348), and remained unchanged for the remainder of the war. Prewar airmail service occurred twice weekly, with an average transit time of four days. Routing of prewar surface mail went via New York and France three times a week, with an average transit time of 8 to 12 days. Twice each month ships sailed via Italy, with an average transit time of nine days.

Several years ago, over a period of several months a large World War II correspondence from the U.S. to Istanbul came on the eBay market. Providing an opportunity to study wartime mail to a neutral country between 1940 and 1945, the author's attempt to purchase the 200+ covers from the Vermont dealer proved unsuccessful. Alternatively, as covers came on line, Dickson Preston made scans, resulting in images for approximately 75 percent of the collection to be recorded.

The correspondence was sent from the eastern seaboard to Luther R. Fowle, a protestant minister who lived and worked in Turkey from 1914 to 1950. Fowle was affiliated with The American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions. Founded in 1810, it became the first organized missionary society in the United States. It established mission stations throughout Asia and Africa, including Asiatic and European Turkey.

### Study Sample

The sample employed in this analysis includes 91 airmail covers postmarked between 8 August 1940 and 8 March 1945; and 72 surface route covers postmarked between 12 July 1940 and 15 January 1945. Sixty of the airmail covers received Turkish backstamps (most of them Istanbul) allowing average transit times to be calculated. Similarly, 47 of the surface covers had backstamps. Nearly all covers bear evidence of U.S. and/or foreign censorship, thereby providing information on routing of the mail. Thus, covers without Turkish backstamps but bearing censor markings were retained for the study.

Representativeness. The 75 percent representation of the correspondence allows generalization of the results to the universe of Fowle letters. However, because the correspondence was to a single addressee, the sample may or may not be representative of all wartime mail to Turkey. However, trends can be noted.

## Results

Airmail covers. Nearly all correspondence was postmarked on the eastern seaboard and thereby within one day of the foreign exchange office at New York. The average transit time for mail postmarked in the U.S. and received in Turkey was 57 days, with a range from 10 to 122 days. These summary results can be broken down into three groups, showing alternate routings that impacted the length of average transit times:

1. **Transatlantic 30-cent airmail rate paid; to Lisbon and onward by air within Europe.** Average transit time - 52 days (range, 46 to 57). [8 total covers; 3 backstamped]

Eight covers passed through Bermuda and were censored there by UK censorship. They were postmarked between 8 August 1940 and 31 July 1941. During this period, four airlines flew connecting flights to destinations within Europe. The German airline, Deutsche Lufthansa, transported mail from Lisbon to Frankfurt. Evidence of German censorship was found on four of these covers, three at Vienna, one at Frankfurt. Among its duties, the Vienna station was charged with examining mail to and from the Balkan countries, Hungary, and Turkey. See Figure 1.



Figure 1: Postmarked 23 May 1941; received 10 July. UK censorship at Bermuda (3432); passed by German censor (A<sub>g</sub>) at Vienna. Transit time: 49 days.

Prior to a significant routing change, shown in the next grouping, two covers in the study bearing the transatlantic 30-cent airmail rate were dispatched to the west coast and onward by transpacific air route to Singapore. These covers were postmarked in September 1941, and 6 October 1941. Presumably they were flown on the BOAC horseshoe route to Cairo. Lacking backstamps, the transit times from the U.S. to Istanbul remain unknown. See Figure 2. Reference to the transpacific route for mail to Turkey in PB 18348 (18 December 1941) may be seen below.

2. **Transatlantic 30-cent airmail rate paid; by ship from New York to Cape Town and onward by air to destination.** Average transit time - 75 days (range, 53 to 95). [12 total covers; 10 backstamped]

With Mediterranean airspace closed and General Erwin Rommel's Afrika Korps on the offensive in North Africa, alternate airmail routes to the region had to be found. Connection with Cairo via the BOAC Horseshoe Route's terminus at Durban, South Africa was a logical choice. The covers in this group were postmarked between 27 October and 15 December 1941. The increase in average transit time by more than a month corresponds with prewar ship transit times of 22-28 days to South Africa. With censorship at Cape Town, the mail likely went by train to Durban for air dispatch to Cairo via the Horseshoe Route. Eleven covers were censored at Cape Town and passed unopened at Cairo. The twelfth bypassed Cape Town censors and was opened by a Palestine examiner. See Figure 3.



Figure 2: Transatlantic airmail from the west coast, to Singapore and onward via the BOAC Horseshoe Route. Censored at Singapore and Cairo. Transit time, unknown.

3. **Transatlantic 70-cent airmail rate paid, after December 17, 1941.** Average transit time - 55 days (range 10 to 122) [69 total covers; 47 backstamped]

With entry of the U.S. into the war and transatlantic air service beyond Honolulu suspended, a newly established southern transatlantic route with rates at 70 cents per half-ounce helped enable service to Africa, the Middle East, and beyond, to continue. Because of Turkey's location in a contested region, the trans-Africa route continued, but now at the 70-cent airmail rate, which became effective on 17 December 1941. The vast majority of covers in this group bear both U.S. and Egypt censor markings. See Figure 4.

Twelve of the 69 covers in this third airmail group bear both Cairo and Istanbul backstamps, which provide some information on the average transit time between the two cities. If we assume the Cairo backstamps were applied prior to censorship, the average time from Cairo, including censorship, was 11 days (range 8 to 17).

Surface route covers. Like the airmail covers in the study, nearly all surface route correspondence was postmarked on the eastern seaboard, within one day of the foreign exchange office at New York. The average transit time for mail postmarked in the U.S. and received in Turkey was 98 days, with a range from 58 to 153 days. The covers, postmarked from 7 December 1940 to 15 January 1945, fall into three groups:



1. **Transatlantic ship route from New York to Europe.** Average transit time - 93 days (range 78 to 107). [36 total covers; 16 backstamped]

Prior to the U.S. entry into the war, Italy permitted mail to pass between neutral countries despite Axis control of the Mediterranean region. All covers were opened and censored at Cairo or Palestine. See Figure 5.

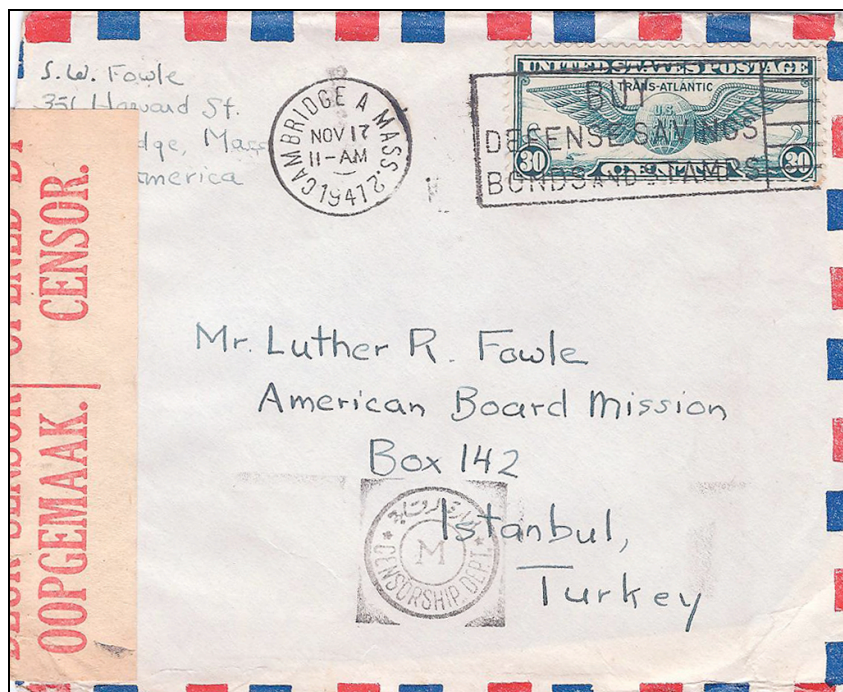


Figure 3: Transatlantic airmail postage paid. By ship from New York to South Africa, and onward by air to Cairo. Censored at Cape Town and passed unopened at Cairo. Average transit time for airmail routed via Cape Town – 75 days.



Figure 4: Postmarked 5 Sep 1941; received 14 February 1945. Censored at New York and passed unopened at Cairo. Transit time: 32 days.

2. **Transatlantic ship route from New York to Cape Town and onward by surface to destination.** Average transit time - 124 days [range 120 to 130]. [12 total covers; 11 backstamped]

Covers in this group were postmarked between 21 September and 1 December 1941. They correspond to the same period in which surface/airmail service via Cape Town occurred. All covers were opened and censored at Cape Town. See Figure 6.

3. **Transatlantic ship route from New York after December 11, 1941.** Average transit time - 99 days (range 56 to 153). [24 total covers; 20 backstamped]

After 11 December 1941 and until 9 July 1944 all covers in the study sample were opened and censored at Cairo. The first U.S. censorship (New York) markings appeared mail postmarked 2 February 1943. Throughout 1943 and mid-1944 dual USA/Egypt censorship markings may be found on all surface correspondence. Subsequently only U.S. censor markings appear. See Figure 7.

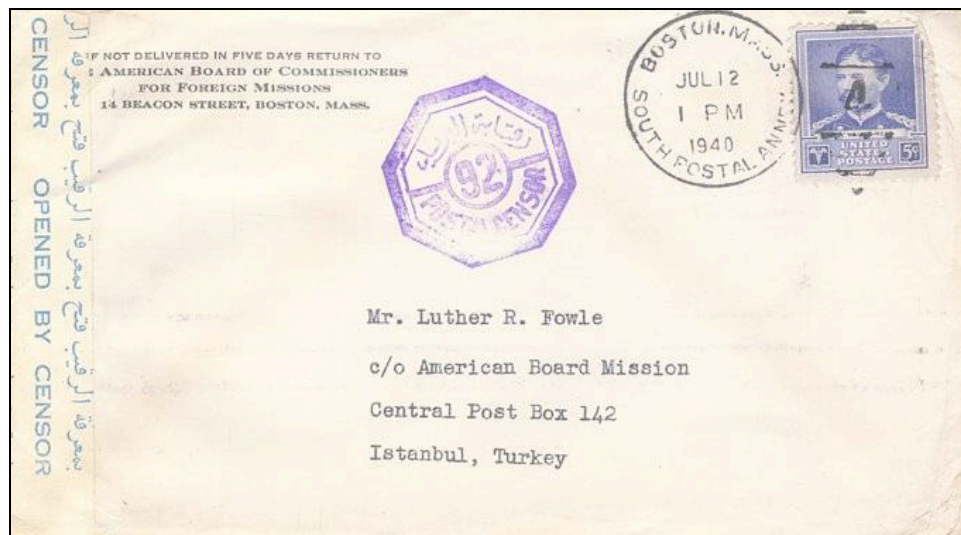


Figure 5: Surface letter postmarked 12 July 1940; received 20 Oct 1940. Censored at Cairo. Transit time: 100 days.

### Discussion

It is clear from this survey that regardless of method of dispatch and routing, the war slowed transmission of the mail to Turkey significantly. Several inferences can be made from the evidence provided in the study:

- Official publications and existing philatelic studies make no mention of a suspension of mail to Turkey during the war. The covers used in this study provide no evidence that in-transit mail was held or returned to the exchange office pending a resumption of suspended service. While covers “returned to sender/service suspended” likely would not have been included in the sample, the evidence provides evidence to validate mail to Turkey not having been suspended.
- At least three periods existed for both airmail and surface mail in which changes in routes occurred, impacting the length of average transit times.
- Airmail service or combined surface/airmail had shorter average transit times than surface mail regardless of routing or censorship.

- Airmail service during the 30-cent transatlantic airmail rate period that was dispatched by ship from New York to Cape Town had significantly longer average transit times than mail dispatched from New York by air.
- All mail was opened and examined by at least one Allied country, whether U.S. or British (Bermuda, South Africa, Palestine, Egypt.) The impact of censorship on increased average transit times, especially individual pieces that were opened and censored multiple times, cannot be determined.
- In most cases, transit mail was opened by only one Allied censor then docketed and passed unopened at censor stations in other countries.
- Because the average prewar transit time between Cairo and Istanbul has not yet been found, whether transit airmail dispatched from Cairo went by air or surface routes cannot be determined.
- Average transit times for airmail correspondence shortened significantly late in the war.

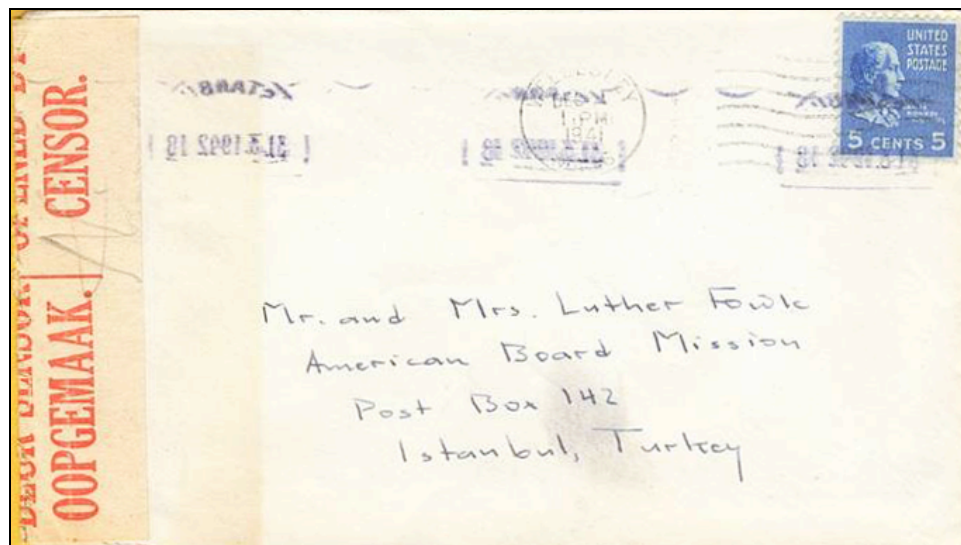


Figure 6: Surface letter postmarked 1 Dec 1941; received 31 Mar 1942. Censored at Cape Town, South Africa. Transit time: 90 days.

## Conclusion

Turkey's neutrality during World War II and its precarious geographic location enable the impact of the war on transmission of the mail to an embattled region to be examined empirically. The exigencies of war contributed to the delay of the mail by rerouting and censorship, which help explain the wide range of transit times. However, lag times at individual censor stations and the length of time bags of mail sat on the tarmac awaiting outbound flights will be forever unknowable. In wartime, routines and schedules simply fly out the window.

SECOND ASSISTANT POSTMASTER GENERAL,  
*Washington, December 17, 1941.*

**FOREIGN AIR MAIL SERVICE**

Air mails for Netherlands Indies, North Borneo, Sarawak, Straits Settlements, Malaya, Burma, unoccupied China and countries west thereof (including Turkey), which have heretofore been sent by the trans-Pacific route, shall be routed promptly via Miami, Fla. The total postage on articles for all these countries is 70 cents per half ounce.

Air mails for the countries listed in the POSTAL BULLETIN of December 2, 1941, under the heading "Foreign Air Mail Service To Africa," will of course also be sent via Miami, except any that are prepared to be carried by steamship to Africa thence by air.



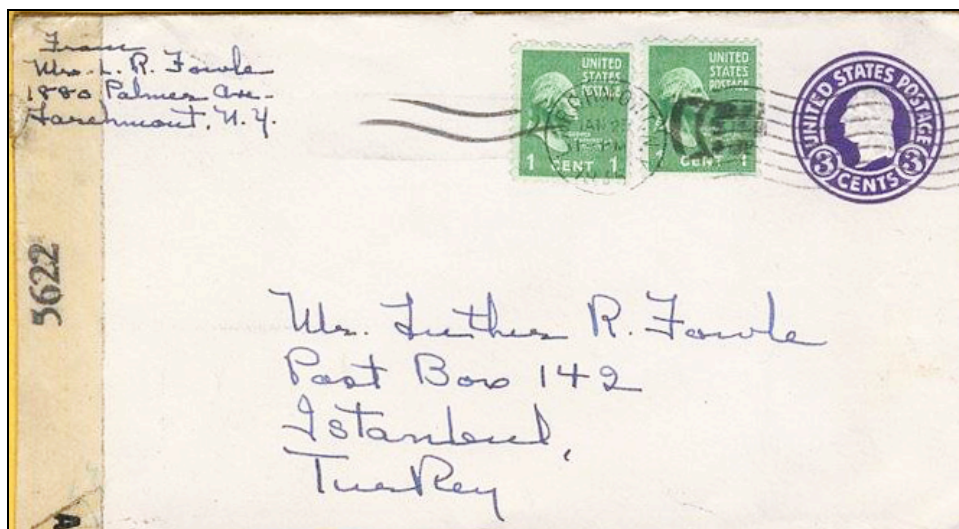


Figure 7: Surface letter postmarked 25 January 1945; received 16 Mar 1945. Censored at New York. No Egypt (Cairo) censorship. Transit time: 51 days.

### 20-Cent Non-Concession Airmail Rate to New Zealand

by

Art Farnsworth



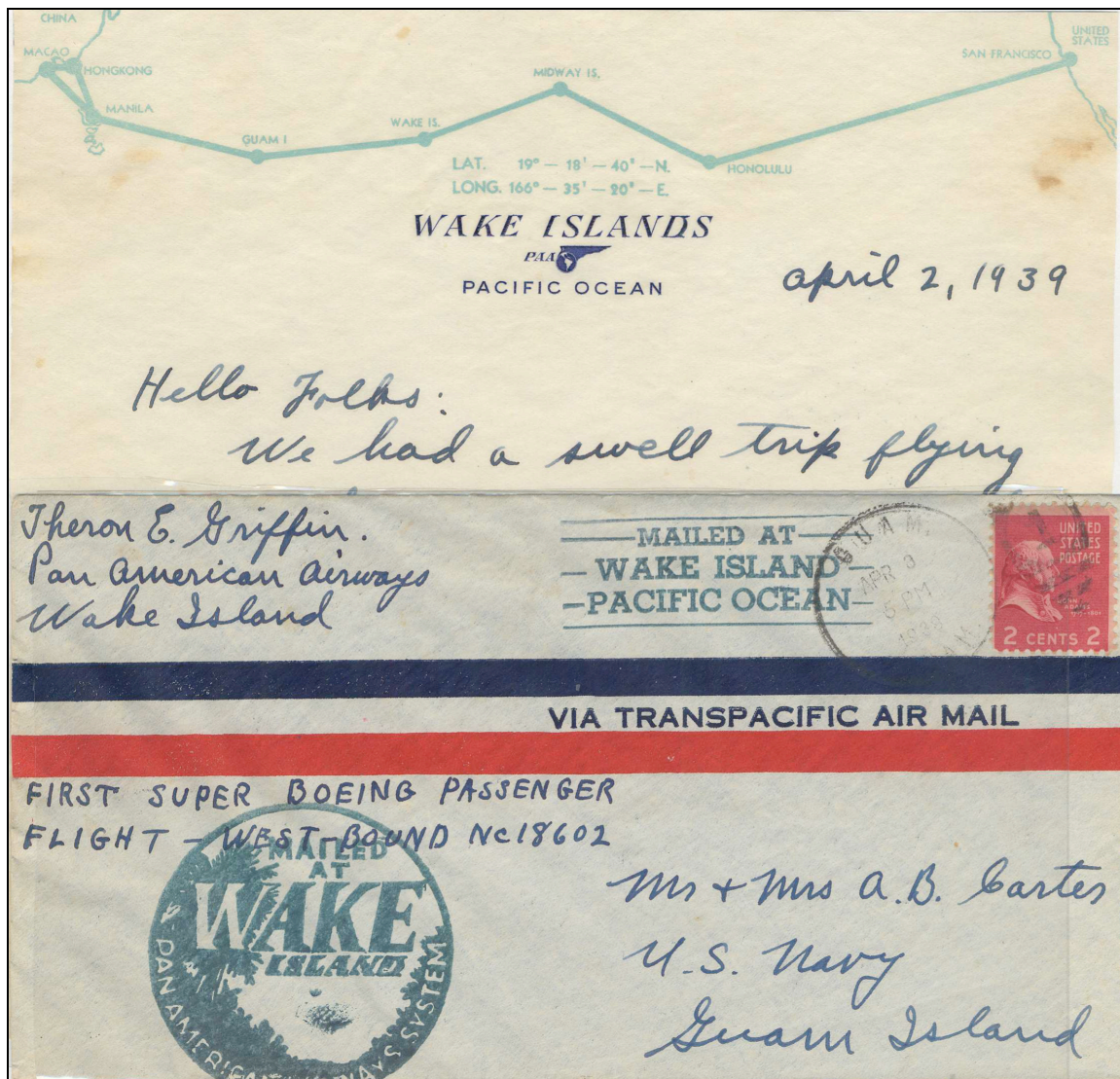
During World War II active duty personnel, non-military direct and indirect employees of the U.S. government, and members of government and private relief agencies were given a reduced rate (6 cents per half ounce) airmail privilege on mail sent between their overseas location and the continental U.S. The rate did not apply to mail sent to overseas addresses. The cover shown here was sent from a sailor aboard the troop transport USS *Harris* to a civilian New Zealand addressee. The *Harris* was in the South Pacific during the autumn of 1943. The 20-cent rate is curious. Were the letter posted in the continental U.S. the rate would have been 50 cents. Given the ship's location at the time, the postage paid suggests the letter originated at Fanning or Washington Island, where the rate to New Zealand was 20 cents.



## Local Delivery in Guam of a Cover from Midway

by

Jeffrey Shapiro



A 2-cent Prexie paid the local carrier rate on this April 3, 1939 cover sent from the Pacific Island of Midway Island to Guam. How can a local carrier rate be valid on a cover sent from Midway Island?

The cover was sent by Theron E. Griffin, an engineering officer working for Pan American Airways. It was carried free as a courtesy aboard the westbound Clipper flight across the Pacific from the US mainland, saving the unpublished 20 cents per half-ounce airmail rate. With a scheduled stop at Guam, the letter was off-loaded and placed into the U.S. mail stream, which required two cents to pay the local carrier fee to deliver the letter to a Mr. & Mrs. A. B. Carter, of the US Navy. Mr. Carter (1922-2010) was a retired Texas postal employee who served in the US Navy as a radio operator during World War II.

The cover was carried aboard the first westbound passenger flight of Pan Am's new Super Boeing 314 Clipper, one of the largest aircraft of the time. Twelve 314s were sold to Pan Am and three were resold by Pan Am to the British Overseas Air Corporation (BOAC) in 1941. The Boeing 314s were built for "one class" luxury air travel. The Clipper had a lounge and dining area, with chefs from four-star restaurants serving five and six course meals on china with silver utensils. The passenger seats could be converted into bunk beds. Flying at 155 mph and with multiple refueling stops along the way, a one-way trip from San Francisco to Hong Kong took six days to complete. Tickets in 1939 cost \$760 (\$12,500 in today's currency).

Commercial passenger service across the Pacific lasted less than three years, ending when the United States entered World War II in December 1941. The Pan American Clipper fleet was pressed into military service. At the end of the War, surviving Clippers were returned to Pan Am, but by then new technology had made the planes obsolete.

### ***LaPosta* Seeks "Prexie" Articles**

With the First Quarter 2013 issue of *LaPosta: The Journal of American Postal History*, editor Pete Martin has initiated a regular series of articles featuring the postal history of the Prexie series. In a column he titles, "The Prexies," Martin will publish articles of varying length first appearing in *The Prexie Era*, as well as previously unpublished material. An electronic copy of the first article showing the formatting style accompanies the current issue. For more information, contact Martin at: [pmartin2525@yahoo.com](mailto:pmartin2525@yahoo.com)

### **Airmail/Surface Rate to Japan?**



The cover illustrated here is franked with 26 cents postage to pay the domestic airmail rate to the west coast, airmail to Hawaii, and onward to Japan by surface. The question here is, given the sender's instruction, what postage rate was correct? We know that 20 cents paid the Clipper rate to Hawaii from any location on the mainland. But what additional amount was necessary to pay the surface rate to Japan; 5 cents, or 2 cents? We all know that a mainland letter paying the 5-cent UPU rate first flown by airmail to the exchange office required 8 cents postage, with 3 cents of the 6 cents domestic airmail rate contributing to the UPU rate. Here, presumably 3 cents of the 20-cent Clipper rate would contribute the same, making the correct rate 22 cents. Can anyone come up with another plausible rate for this wartime cover – one that never left the mainland?