A Postal History of Ross Dependency
(New Zealand Antarctic)
1955-87

Mark Jurisich FRPSNZ
2018
# Contents

Introduction and Acknowledgements

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Introduction and Acknowledgements

In 1908 Britain was the first country to lay claim to territorial sovereignty in Antarctica. Britain later granted New Zealand responsibility for administering her territory between 150° East and 160° West and, on 21 May 1923, the New Zealand Cabinet made the Ross Sea region a Dependency and vested control in the Governor-General.

“And whereas the coasts of the Ross Sea, with the islands and territories adjacent thereto, between the 160th degree of East Longitude and the 150th degree of West Longitude, which are situated south of the 60th degree of South Latitude, are a British settlement...that part of His Majesty’s Dominions in the Antarctic seas...shall be named the Ross Dependency...the Governor General of the Dominion of New Zealand shall be the Governor of the Ross Dependency.”

Imperial Order in Council under the British Settlements Act 1887, 30 July 1923

Territorial Claims

Several other countries have made claim to Antarctic territory and much activity has occurred there to secure those claims or position for the eventual lodging of claims. However, since 1959 the Antarctic Treaty has put all claims on hold for the duration of the Treaty, which now has an indefinite term.

New Zealand Antarctic Postal History Background

Robert Duns’ 1997 monograph New Zealand Antarctic Postal History to 1941 covered New Zealand’s early Antarctic postal history. Very little happened regarding Antarctic activities during the period 1942-54 from the New Zealand postal history point of view, apart from occasions when some of the US fleet of Operation High Jump passed through Wellington and Dunedin ports on their way to and from Antarctica during 1946-47 and the US Navy Antarctic Expedition when USS Atka visited Wellington and Dunedin in January 1955. This second chapter of New Zealand’s Antarctic postal history begins with preparations for New Zealand’s participation in the Commonwealth Trans-Antarctic Expedition of 1955-58 and ends with the closure of Scott Base Post Office on 30 September 1987. For convenience, I have divided chapters to accord with US Operation Deep Freeze periods. Specific topics of New Zealand’s Antarctic postal history have been dealt with separately elsewhere, so they are not represented herein; the following monographs may be viewed at www.classicstamps.co.nz:

- A Postal History of the 1955-58 Commonwealth Trans-Antarctic Expedition
- Operation Deep Freeze Picket Ships
- The Postmarks of Ross Dependency
- The Postage Stamps of New Zealand - The Ross Dependency Issues
- Ross Dependency Historic Huts Restoration Project
- A Postal History of the Joint New Zealand - United States Hallett Station Antarctica
- The New Zealand Oceanographic Institute Antarctic & Sub-Antarctic Voyages 1956-79
- A Postal History of Campbell Island

Acknowledgements

Much of the primary data on the people who went south, how they got there and what they did while they were there, was extracted from the journals of the New Zealand Antarctic Society, the United States Antarctic journals (and its predecessors) and reports of the New Zealand and United States Antarctic Research Programs. The postal history of their dispatches was reconstructed from polar philatelic collections of Ian Harkess, Eric Gibbs, G.J. Harvey, the author, and many others. I am especially grateful to Paul Wales, Stephen McLachlan and Brian Summerell of New Zealand, David Larson, John Young and Bob Stark of the United States, Brian Clayton of the United Kingdom, Andrew Fitzhardinge of Australia, Neils Bruhn of Germany, and many others for access to their collections. There will be omissions and errors presented here I am sure, as the field is so wide and the information available often limited, my apologies for such occurrences. Images of covers were generally scaled to a 7.5cm width, with larger covers scaled to 10cm width, for consistency in presentation. Ross Dependency postal rates are the same as those of New Zealand, which have been reported elsewhere.

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New Zealand’s early involvement in Antarctica
In 1923 New Zealand took over responsibility for the Ross Dependency, thereafter the government did little other than appoint a succession of administrators. During the next 30 years, not much else happened. In 1933, a group of enthusiasts formed the New Zealand Antarctic Society and 20 years later Robert Falla (Chair) and Arthur Helm (Secretary) wrote to New Zealand Prime Minister Sidney Holland urging the government to establish a permanent station in the Ross Dependency. A year later Jim Rose, President of the Federated Mountain Clubs of New Zealand, together with his son-in-law Sir Edmund Hillary, were quoted in the Evening Post of 13 November 1954 “it is time New Zealand took some steps to establish its right to administer the Ross Dependency...we should at least send an expedition there”.

The Commonwealth Trans-Antarctic Expedition
See: Jurisich, M. A Postal History of the 1955-58 Commonwealth Trans-Antarctic Expedition; Classic Stamps Ltd, Blenheim, New Zealand 2018. @ www.classicstamps.co.nz

New Zealand participation in the International Geophysical Year
New Zealand participated, along with 12 other countries, in the IGY, from 1 July 1957 to 31 December 1958. The United States Operation Deep Freeze program subsequently became closely inter-woven with New Zealand’s Antarctic efforts and also provided New Zealand with transport of men and equipment from New Zealand to and from Antarctica, together with internal ship and helicopter support.

Operation Deep Freeze I (1955-56)
The United States contribution to IGY included the establishment of bases in the sector between 160°E and 120°W. DF I had for its mission the construction of bases at Little America, South Pole, and Hut Point on Ross Island (McMurdo). These bases were in addition to Ellsworth Station on the Antarctic Peninsula. Nominally led by Antarctic veteran Rear Admiral Richard E. Byrd, operational command was with Rear Admiral George Dufek, who had returned to active service from retirement for this command, having served under Byrd in both the 1939-40 and 1946-47 Byrd Antarctic Expeditions.
U.S. Fleet

Seven ships formed the fleet: USS Glacier, USS Edisto, USS Arneb and USS Wyandot (with post offices aboard), plus USCGC Eastwind, USS Nespelen and USNS Greenville Victory (no post offices aboard). Fuel tanker YOG-34 was towed south by USCGC Eastwind.

Operation Deep Freeze I began in earnest in November 1955 when most of the United States Navy Task Force 43 fleet departed from Boston for Lyttelton, New Zealand.

U.S.S. Glacier arrived at Lyttelton on 6 December 1955 and USS Edisto on 16 December; USS Wyandot, USNS Greenville Victory and USNS Nespelen, escorted by USCGC Eastwind, arrived on 12 December, and USS Arneb on 13 December.

U.S. Fleet and USS Edisto departed Lyttelton on 10 December 1955 to clear a path through the sea-ice and for the advance crew to set up an ice airstrip in McMurdo Sound for incoming aircraft.

New Zealand Advance Party with Operation Deep Freeze I

On 12 December 1955, geologist Bernard Gunn went south on USNS Greenville Victory while geophysicist Trevor Hatherton and Royal New Zealand Navy Lieutenant Commander William Smith went on USS Edisto.
The first sea-ice report was sent early on 16 December when USS *Glacier* was just south of Scott Island. Dufek decided to sail the other ships immediately, and at 2pm that afternoon they left Lyttelton.

U.S.S. *Glacier* departs Lyttelton

U.S.S. *Glacier* arrived off McMurdo Sound on 18 December. An airstrip was laid out on firm ice about 30 miles south of open water and USS *Glacier’s* UC1 Otter aircraft was off-loaded. A tent city was hurriedly thrown up at Hut Point to accommodate flight crews.
On 19 December USS Edisto arrived in McMurdo Sound and USS Glacier was ordered to her picket station near Cape Adare (71°S 170°E) for the incoming flights. Before the day was out everything was ready at McMurdo for the fly-in. On 20 December, USS Glacier’s UC1 Otter aircraft made the first flight from McMurdo Sound (opposite Mt. Erebus) to Hut Point.
Admiral Byrd and his veterans visit Little America’s I & II on the occasion of his 7th Polar expedition and 5th visit to here since he founded it in 1928. Flag was raised. 60 foot radio tower was buried and 12 feet of other two was showing. LA’s III & IV located, summer tent city of latter located partly intact – 28 Dec 55.

New Year’s Eve; unloading supplies for Little America V, Admiral takes usual walk on deck but this time just before the New Year and wishes everyone Happy New Year. A number of Officers and men asked permission to take photos and some pose with him, and later Glacier has beer party on the ice around camp fires. - 31 Dec 55 and 1 Jan 56.

Seamail
Nearly 280,000 souvenir covers accompanied the United States fleet for cancellation at Little America V Station in the Bay of Whales, at Byrd Station in Marie Byrd Land and at Amundsen-Scott South Pole Station.

Sulzberger Bay visited and subterranean Grand Canyon with sharp peak (apparently) in center discovered – 3 January 1956.

Little America V Commissioned 4 January 1956.
Mail was cancelled at McMurdo on board those ships that had postal facilities, and mail from those ships without postal facilities, can often be identified by ship’s cachets:

![Image of a cachet](image1.png)

**4 JAN 1956; No Postal Facilities Available Aboard U.S.S. NESPELEN**

signed B.J. Woodruff Executive Officer

![Image of a cachet](image2.png)

**POLE STATION, ANTARCTICA DEC 15 1956**

cachet U.S.C.G.C. Eastwind

**U.S. Flights inbound**
The first incoming United States aircraft, an R5D-3 Skymaster and a Lockheed P2V-2 Neptune, arrived at the Royal New Zealand Air Force Base at Wigram near Christchurch on 27 November 1955. The rest arrived soon after, the R5D-3 Skymaster, Grumman UF-1L Albatross and the Douglas R4D-5 Skytrain on 30 November; the R4D-5 Skytrain on 2 December, the Albatross UF-1L on 9 December and finally the Lockheed P2V-2 Neptune on 11 December.

![Image of aircraft](image3.png)

**US aircraft at Harewood (Christchurch) airport on 15 December 1955**

On 20 December, with all vessels on station and weather favorable, the eight aircraft of VX-6 Squadron took off from New Zealand for McMurdo. The two Skytrains and the two Albatrosses left from the Royal New Zealand Air Force Base at Wigram at 3am, refueling at Taiieri Airport near Dunedin. The two Skymasters and the two Neptunes left from Harewood (Christchurch) Airport. As the two R4Ds and two UFs drew near the ‘point of no return’, gasoline was dwindling at an alarming rate and they would never make McMurdo.
The pilots proposed making an emergency landing short of the McMurdo destination, near Cape Adare. The United States Task Force Commander however ordered the smaller aircraft back to New Zealand.

The long-range aircraft: P2V 122466 (pilots Lieutenant W. Hawkes & Lieutenant Commander J.H. Torbert), P2V 122465 (pilot Lieutenant J.W. Entrikin), R5D 56505 (pilot Lieutenant Colonel H.R. Kolp), and R5D 56528 (pilot Lieutenant Commander H. Jorda) flew south and by 10pm all had safely landed. The R5Ds landed on the sea-ice landing strip in McMurdo Sound near USS *Edisto* and the P2Vs at Hut Point on the ice runway. Hawkes & Torbert made a photographic pass by Cape Adare to obtain photographic resources that might later assist in the Cape Adare site selection. As a result, they were the last to land. Torbert and Hawkes carried the cover below to Captain Richard Black, who was in charge of US local operations at McMurdo. Pilots spent their first night on USS *Edisto* then moved to the tent city on 21 December.

`Sent 20.12.55 on first NZ-Antarctic flight from Wigram, carried by LCdr J.H. Torbert`

**First airmails**

A stamp dealer in Christchurch arranged for 48 covers to be cancelled at Christchurch Central Post Office at midnight on 19 December 1955; they were then affixed with US stamps and delivered to aircraft that started to depart at 3am from Christchurch Airport. The covers were arrival cancelled on 7 January 1956 on board USS *Wyandot* that was berthed at McMurdo.

CHRISTCHURCH 19 DE 55, U.S.S. WYANDOT JAN 7 1956
"Insufficiently Prepaid for Transpacific Air Mail"
"Insufficient Postage For Clipper"
sent by Jack O. Hill VX-6 P2V-466

A number of US covers were also carried, mainly by individual flight crew members:

WIGRAM AIR FORCE 19 DE 55

WIGRAM AIR FORCE -9 MR 56
first USN Neptune flight on 20 December, signed J.G. Arnold
With all ships, except USCGC Eastwind and YOG-34 (they arrived McMurdo Sound on 31 December), at or proceeding to Scott Island, a plea for immediate medical assistance was sent from McMurdo on 23 December. The UC1 aircraft piloted by Hawkes had crashed, seriously injuring two persons and slightly injuring two others. USS Edisto returned to McMurdo Sound to help while USS Glacier provided escort for the other ships through the pack-ice.

On 29 December 1955 Lieutenant Commander Torbert wrote from the McMurdo Air Facility to Dr. H. Turner Jennings, thanking him for his hospitality during his stay in Christchurch:

Of high importance was the task of fueling aircraft for long-range flight. USNS Nespelem was brought two miles into the channel broken by USCGC Eastwind and USS Edisto on 2 January then an airstrip was laid out adjacent to USNS Nespelem. Local flights were made on 3 January during which aircraft were fueled directly from USNS Nespelem.

The first exploratory flight on 4 January 1956 was made by R5D 6505 aircraft piloted by Lieutenant Colonel H.R. Kolp. The destination was Wilkes Land and the course due west, but whiteout was encountered at 77°30’S 135°17’E. Kolp then reversed course and returned to Longitude 145°E where visibility was normal. Not wishing to return empty handed, he flew down that meridian to the South Pole, flying over unknown territory from 85°S to 90°S and determining the altitude of the South Pole to
be 9,700ft. Over the South Pole the aircraft descended to 500ft for a close look. The area was quite flat with gentle, elongated sastrugi that had the appearance of a white, stationary sea. By dropping smoke bombs, crew members inferred the snow to be soft and powdery with a low order of density. On the return flight, the polar plateau south of 80ºS was found to be flat and featureless. (no known mail).

The **second exploratory flight** on 5 January 1956 was made by R5D 56528 piloted by Lieutenant Commander Henry Jorda. This time the aircraft flew to the unexplored heart of Wilkes Land from 80ºS 120ºE to 80ºS 90ºE and returned from 82ºS 120ºE to Barne Inlet, then to McMurdo Sound. Two new mountain ranges were discovered on Jorda's flight. The first one stretched along 156ºE 79ºS, for about 80 miles southward. Its width averaged 30 miles, with numerous peaks towering between 7-10,000ft. The second range sighted by Jorda extended from 79º30'S 151ºE to 79ºS 156ºE, about 100 miles to the southeast and 60 miles wide. Like the first range, it thrust jagged peaks aloft from 7-10,000 ft above sea level. Total flight distance was 2,200 miles.

The **third exploratory flight** was on 5-6 January 1956 in P2V 124466, piloted by Commander W.M. Hawkes and Lieutenant Commander J.H. Torbert. This flight went to Vincennes Bay at 68ºS 109ºE on the Budd/Knox Coast, then westward on the Knox Coast for 50 miles to Conger Glacier, before returning to McMurdo, about 2,600 miles in 14.5 hours. Save for mountains immediately west of McMurdo Sound, the landscape was entirely featureless icecap. Along Vincennes Bay, the location of Wilkes I.G.Y. Base, the icecap sloped gently to the sea but was scored with crevasses. Upon approaching McMurdo Sound, Mt. Erebus was sighted 200 miles away. This was the first round-trip Trans-Antarctic flight.

On 6 January, the **4th exploratory flight**, a near-tragedy occurred. P2V 142465, piloted by Lieutenant J.W. Entrikin, was flying to 72º15'S 96º30'E. The flight was controlled from U.S.S. *Wyandot*. She received a routine position report at 22:30hrs, but at 22:51hrs SOS signals began. The aircraft's starboard motor was failing, Entrikin reported. 1,060 miles of icecap lay between the aircraft and McMurdo Sound. About every three minutes the crippled engine backfired violently. When the distress alarm was flashed to McMurdo Sound an R5D and P2V were hastily flown to USNS *Nespelen*. They re-fueled and took off to escort the crippled aircraft to McMurdo. Ten minutes before landing Entrikin's starboard engine failed completely; he made a single-engine landing at the airstrip with only 150 gallons of gasoline left. The flight covered 2,120 nautical miles.

On 7 January, the **fifth exploratory flight** was made by R5D 56505, piloted by Lieutenant Colonel Kolp. The aircraft flew directly to 71ºS 146ºE and then to 69º S 130º E, crossing the South Magnetic Pole, future location of the French I.G.Y. Station Charcot. From this point Kolp headed north until he reached the Wilkes Land coast, which he skirted to 145ºE, location of the French Base Dumont D'Urville. It was then necessary to return to McMurdo.

On 8 January, the **sixth exploratory flight** was made by R5D 56258 piloted by Commander G. Ebbe and Lieutenant Commander H. Jorda, with Rear Admiral R.E. Byrd and P. Siple aboard. The itinerary was to take them to the Pole of Inaccessibility at 82º30'S 56ºE, but they were forced by weather to turn for the South Pole 360 miles short of this destination. They returned via Beardmore Glacier.
flown over South Pole 8 Jan 1956, signed by Cdr G.K. Ebbe. C.O., VX-6

AUCKLAND 25 JAN 1956

reverse: This card was flown over the South Pole aboard Navy R5D#5628 on 8 Jan 1956 by LCdr H.P. Jorda US Navy

U.S.S. ARNEB JAN 8 1956

South Pole Flight – Admiral Byrd’s Third in 26 years – 8 January 1956

U.S.S. ARNEB FEB 3 1956

Little America V, McMurdo Sound, South Pole 8 Jan ’56; signed by Paul Siple and Rear Admiral R.E. Byrd

On 9 January, P2V 124466, piloted by Commander Hawkes and Lieutenant Commander Torbert, made the first flight from McMurdo to Little America V. From there they flew with Commander Whitney and Lieutenant Commander J. Bursey to Byrd Station and returned to Little America.

On 11 January, Rear Admiral Dufek passed command of Task Unit 43.1.2 to Captain C.W. Thomas then flew with Hawkes and Torbert back to McMurdo Sound.

WIGRAM AIR FORCE N.Z. 12 DE 55.2

(Major Fredrick J. Helling, U.S.M.C. second pilot was aboard the 7th exploratory flight)
On 13 January 1956, the seventh exploratory flight was made in R5D 56505, piloted by Lieutenant Colonel Kolp. The 14.7-hour flight took in the new Pole of Inaccessibility and returned by way of the South Geographical Pole. This was the first time the former pole had been viewed by man. After leaving the South Pole, the aircraft encountered a complete whiteout that obliged Kolp to finish the flight on instruments.

On 14 January 1956, the eighth exploratory flight was flown in R5D 56528, piloted by Commander Ebbe and Lieutenant Commander Jorda. The 14-hour flight penetrated to the heart of Antarctica, 81°S 62°E, near the future Sovietskaya Russian IGY Base. Again, the region was found to be a high featureless plateau. The maximum elevation was 13,800ft at 80°S 83°E. This was the highest altitude noted so far in the entire continent.

On 13-14 January 1956, the ninth exploratory flight was made in P2V 124466, piloted by Commander Hawkes and Lieutenant Commander Torbert. The 19-hour record-making flight, flew to the Weddell Sea at 40°W via the South Pole. The return flight was made from 77°S 43°W to 84°S 90°W, to the Pole and return by Leverett Glacier. Four new mountain ranges were discovered and photographed. These stretched between 85°S and the Weddell Sea as far as 90°W. This was the first round-trip Trans-Polar Antarctic flight.

These flights more than achieved the exploration objectives for DF I.

**DF I Aircraft return to New Zealand**

In anticipation of the fly-out to New Zealand, USCGC Eastwind was sent to take ocean picket station between New Zealand and Cape Adare.

A flight plan from McMurdo to Wigram was prepared for 17 January. Regrettably, that day aircraft were unable to take off for New Zealand because of bad weather. The next day, with good flying weather, the two R5D's and two P2V's took off and made the flight to Wigram without incident.

USCGC Eastwind then left her ocean picket station and returned to McMurdo.
U.S.S. ARNEB JAN 18 1956
“Planes fly back to New Zealand (AirOpFac),
McMurdo to Wigram Field) 18 January 1956”

WGRAM AIR FORCE N.Z 19 JA 56
flown from McMurdo Sound Antarctica
to New Zealand via R5D #56528 1/18/56

WGRAM AIR FORCE 19 JA 56 USS ARNEB JAN 1 1956
signed by LCdr H. Jorda (VX-6)
cachet First Flight from McMurdo to New Zealand

U.S.S. ARNEB DEC 25 1955; WGRAM N.Z. 19 JA 56
signed by Rear Admiral Dufek and LCdr H. Jorda (VX-6)
cachet First Flight from McMurdo to New Zealand
The P2-V Neptunes then left for the United States on 24 January and the Skymasters two days later.

U.S. Fleet returns to New Zealand
March 7 was the deadline date given by Rear Admiral Dufek for the U.S. ships to be out of both McMurdo Sound and Kainan Bay (Little America V).

USS Glacier left McMurdo on 9 February with the New Zealand Advance Party aboard; she went to Little America V in the Bay of Whales on 10 February and departed the same day for Lyttelton, arriving there on 17 February 1956. She then departed for the USA, arriving there on 2 April 1956.
USS *Edisto* departed Wellington on 14 March for the United States at the completion of DF I.

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“22 Feb – no postal clerk on board at date of crossing Antarctic Circle. Cancelled while in Wellington, N.Z. 1 March to 15 March 1956.”