

Synopsis of a single-frame exhibit: Wake Island in World War II

The historian Robert Daley wrote of Wake Island, “For a brief time — only the blink of an eye as history is measured — it was one of the most famous places in the world.” The purpose of this exhibit is to evoke the tears in that blink, and perhaps, in so doing, rise to a higher rung on the cultural ladder than straight postal history usually does. To some extent this places these pages in the realm that the FIP calls Social Philately, but it is considerably more than that, embodying poignant tragedy for the ages, as worthy as the siege of Troy.

Challenge: Wake Island is the most difficult United States possession for the postal history or air mail specialist to collect comprehensively. A fair rule of thumb is that mail to and from Midway Island, a similarly isolated and remote but equally essential base about halfway between Wake and Hawaii, is ten to one hundred times easier to collect than Wake Island mail for any given historical period. Like Wake, Midway had its own unpublished civilian air mail rates to Hawaii and the United States between 1935 and 1946; unlike Wake, Midway was never conquered and occupied by the armed forces of a foreign enemy. Midway had U.S. Marine post exchanges from 1941 on, and shore-based Navy post offices during the war; Wake was captured before its PX could open. Thus the Wake Island men’s World War II experience (there were no Wake Island women), from the arrival of defense construction contractors in early 1941 to the Japanese surrender in 1945, is unique.

Importance: Wake Island was important in both conventional and exhibit-evaluation meanings. Without Wake Island there could have been no east-west trans-Pacific air transport until after World War II. The range of a fully fueled civilian long-range aircraft before 1946 was less than the distance between Midway Island and Guam, the span made possible by an intermediate fueling call at Wake. Without a sheltered base at Wake, Pan American Airways would have built a southward route instead, via Kingman Reef, Samoa, New Zealand, Australia, and the Dutch East Indies to the Far East. When war came to the United States, Wake Island defenders’ 16 days of heroic resistance significantly slowed the Japanese advance. After they surrendered, Wake Island became Japan’s easternmost fortified outpost in the central Pacific Ocean, forcing the Allies to fight back by advancing westward farther south while preventing a Japanese invasion of Midway and blockading Wake.

Unusual Postal History and Air Mail Aspects: Basic postal history elements are rates, routes, and postal markings. Basic air mail criteria include cachets and aircraft. Wartime mail in both classes adds censorship locations, markings, concessionary rates, and free postage. The detail that’s often elided is the personal situation (active-duty military, civilian contractor, prisoner, internee, and so forth) that qualified the sender or recipient to use the concessionary rate or free frank. This exhibit conveniently includes those features as they became applicable by showing first that all mail users paid civilian surface and air mail postage; that after the Americans were captured, civilian internees’ mail briefly required postage while prisoner-of-war mail qualified for free surface transport; that internees soon gained the free mail privilege; that in at least one instance a prisoner’s status was uncertain at the beginning; that over time the U.S. Office of Censorship location for POW and internee mail moved from Chicago to New York; that the transfer point for mail to and from captives changed from Geneva to Moscow; and that in 1944 POWs and internees in enemy and enemy-occupied countries were granted the concessionary air mail rate that active-duty members of the armed forces had enjoyed since December 1941. Having identified the individuals for those postal history features, it is a short additional step, in keeping with the broader mission of the exhibit, to report their fates if known. For Japanese occupiers’ free military mail, it’s a specialist’s bonus that these were blockade-run by submarine, not transported by air or surface ship.

Scarcity and Rarity: In this exhibitor’s philatelic vocabulary neither term applies to monetary value. An item is rare if ten or fewer are known to exist; scarce if seldom seen and difficult to acquire. All Wake Island covers are scarce, but these are rare (based on 30-plus years of collecting this subject and familiarity with others’ collections):

- Page 1: 15¢ per half ounce unpublished air mail rate Wake Island to Hawaii.
- Page 2: Navy supply ship cancel struck at Wake Island in 1941, during base construction (2 known).
- Page 3: Air mail from U.S. Marine at Wake Island (possible only August 19 to December 3, 1941).
- Page 4: Last air mail and last surface mail (2 known) from Wake Island before the Japanese conquest.
- Page 5: Book-rate parcel post to Wake Island, service suspended, returned to sender (unique).
- Page 8: Cover to Wake Island civilian internee before free mail privilege became effective (possibly unique).
- Page 9: Postal card report of shortwave radio news from Tokyo about a Wake Island captive (2 or 3 known).
- Page 10: International Red Cross two-way formular envelope for POW/internee correspondence.
- Page 14: Japanese military card from Wake Island occupation force member to Tokyo, undeliverable (unique).