

Picking up the Pieces: The Aftermath of Hiroshima

By Janet Klug
American Philatelic Society
tongajan@aol.com

Abstract

This paper discusses the British Commonwealth Occupation Force (BCOF) and specifically the Australian contingent within BCOF. The focus is on how postage stamps were used to facilitate and then combat the black market that developed within the Hiroshima prefecture due to extreme living conditions and how mail to and from BCOF troops illustrated the trials and tribulations of Australia's first military occupation.

1. Introduction

On May 7, 1945, Nazi Germany signed an unconditional surrender and the Allied Powers declared victory in Europe. Two months later, Harry Truman, Josef Stalin and Winston Churchill met at Potsdam. Churchill was replaced by newly elected British Prime Minister Clement Atlee. On July 26, they issued a declaration setting out their requirements for Japan's unconditional surrender or Japan would face the alternative, "a prompt and utter destruction."^[1]

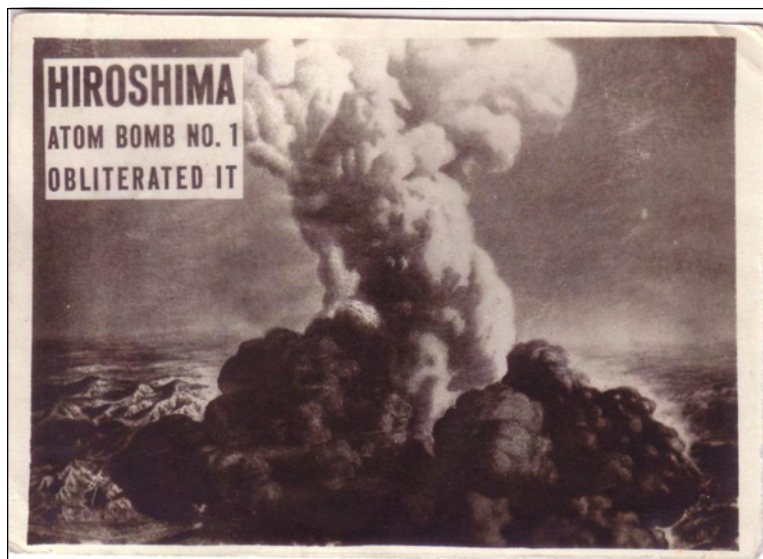


Figure 1. Picture post card, Hiroshima Atom Bomb.

Japan did not surrender and what happened next changed the world forever. On August 6, 1945, the United States dropped a single atomic bomb on the Japanese city of Hiroshima killing an estimated 80,000 to 140,000 people,^[2] and destroying most of the city. Three days later another atomic weapon was dropped on Nagasaki with similar devastating effect.^[3]

On the morning of August 15 (local Japan time), Japan's Emperor Hirohito made a radio broadcast that announced he had "ordered our Government to communicate to the Governments of the United States, Great Britain, China and the Soviet Union that our empire accepts the provisions of their joint declaration."^[4]

Allied Powers began immediate implementation of the Potsdam agreement for Three Powers occupation of

Japan. There was one exception. The Soviet Union would not be a part of the occupation, having only declared war on Japan six days earlier (August 9).^[5]

On September 2, 1945, 200 Allied vessels assembled in Tokyo Bay in witness of Japan's signing the instrument of surrender on board the U.S. aircraft carrier *Missouri*.

2. Occupation begins

U.S. forces began the occupation of Japan immediately. The British Commonwealth, however, was delayed by internal affairs. One of the delays was deciding which of the Commonwealth countries would command the Commonwealth troops in Japan. Four nations within the Commonwealth would comprise the British Commonwealth Occupation Force, known by the acronym BCOF. The nations were Great Britain, Australia, India and New Zealand. A total of 45,000 Commonwealth military served during the six years of BCOF occupation. During the peak of BCOF occupation in December 1946, 37,021 Commonwealth military personnel were serving in Japan, of which 11,918 were Australian.^[6]

Australia, whose war efforts against the Japanese had indeed been formidable, presented a winning case for Australian leadership in Japan, and BCOF came under the command of Royal Australian Army Lieutenant General Horace “Red Robbie” Robertson.

By this time months had passed, and the Australian-dominated BCOF did not arrive in Japan until February 1946. It was the dead of winter and most of the forces had been awaiting deployment in tropical holding areas in Northern Australia, Borneo, Malaya and India.^[7]

3. The black market



Figure 3. Hiroshima in 1946.

And herein is where the lines between postal history and social history become blurred.

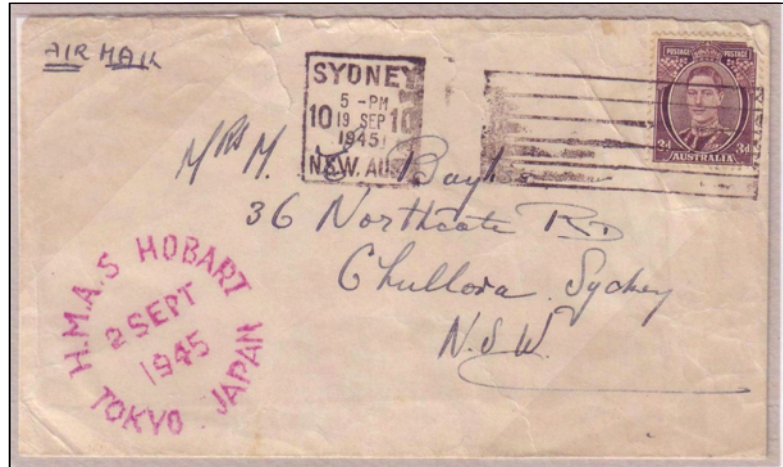


Figure 2. Envelope posted aboard the Australian light cruiser HMAS Hobart on September 2, 1945, the day the instrument of surrender was signed on the USS Missouri.

BCOF forces arrived in Japan ill equipped for the cold weather. To make matters worse, BCOF was assigned the Hiroshima prefecture, where conditions were bleak. The military squarely addressed the occupation force needs with shiploads of supplies necessary for basic survival. Food, warm clothes and blankets, tents and shelters, water, vehicles...all of these things were required by the military. Coincidentally, these necessities of life were also needed by the local Japanese survivors of the Hiroshima attack.

This created a perfect formula for trouble. Add a sudden influx of abundant military supplies, plus extreme local need, plus ingenious, underpaid soldiers and all of that equals a thriving black market where “acquired” military goods were sold to locals. Although the BCOF administration attempted to control currency exchanges through the use of military scrip, the Australian BCOF contingent found a loophole.

4. It's all about postage stamps

There were 19 Australian military post offices in Japan.^[8] The bases served the Australian military's mailing needs by selling then-current Australian regular issue postage stamps. The face values of the stamps that were stocked by the military post offices were those most needed for both concessionary and non-concessionary rates available to the military, that is, ½-penny, 1-penny, 3-pence, 6-pence, 1-shilling, 2-shilling and 5-shilling values.

Australian military serving in Japan could send letters home to Australia by surface mail for free. This concessionary rate remained in effect for the duration of the occupation. Stamps were needed for airmail, registration, parcels and non-concessionary overseas mail.^[9]

Those members of the military who were engaged in black market activities discovered they could convert their illegal black market windfalls into currency by legally purchasing postage stamps from the base post office, then sending the stamps home to friends or family in Australia. Once the stamps arrived in Australia, the recipients could take them to their local post office and "cash them in" for face value, less 5%. Thus, Australian postage stamps became a key ingredient in maintaining the thriving black market.

By September 1946, BCOF command reviewed ways to eliminate the black market. Command's idea was to overprint all of the postage stamps sold by the Australian military post offices, making the stamps invalid for use outside Japan and having no exchange value within Australia.

In October 1, 1946, four proof sheets of overprints consisting of three lines of serif type and one proof sheet of sans-serif type in three lines were made under military supervision at the Hiroshima Printing Company.^[10]

4.1. Serif Type Overprints

Two BCOF officers and the managing director of the Hiroshima Printing Company co-signed and dated the four serif-type proof sheets. Two of the four sheets were printed entirely in gray-black type. One of the sheets was printed in red type. The final sheet was printed with the left "pane" in a color called "gold" but actually brownish; and the right "pane" in red.

Trial printings of sheets of ½-penny, 1-penny and 3-pence stamps were thus overprinted with this type, using the same color formulations of gray-black, red and "gold." Once seen on the stamps, it became apparent that the thin, spidery type was not suitable for the dark brown 1-penny and 3-pence stamps but could be used in black for the orange ½-penny stamp. The red and gold colors were not appropriate for any of the stamps.

4.2 Sans Serif Overprints

In a similar fashion, the Hiroshima Printing Company made one sheet of heavy, black sans serif overprints. This, too, was co-signed by two military officers and the printing company's manager. The proof sheet indicates this was adopted for the 1-penny and 3-pence stamps.

4.3 Here Today; Gone Tomorrow

An initial quantity of ½-penny, 1-penny and 3-pence stamps were overprinted and released without fanfare and without government authorization on October 12, 1946; only to be withdrawn two days later until the proper authorizations were acquired.^[11]

That took seven months. On May 8, 1947, a set of seven stamps overprinted "B.C.O.F./ JAPAN/ 1946" was finally released.

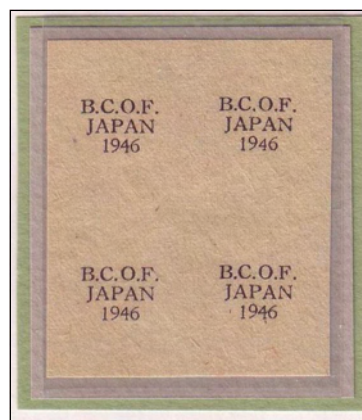


Figure 4. Proof of serif overprint in gray-black on plain paper. Thin numeral "4" at

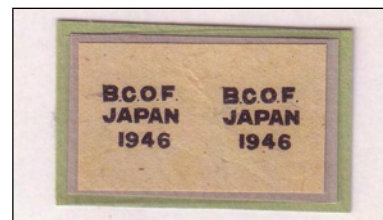


Figure 5. Proof of sans serif overprint in black on plain paper.



Figure 6. Unadopted essay of serif overprint in red on ½d stamp.

4.4 Stamp Collectors Take Notice

Contemporary reports in Australia’s philatelic press confirm that stamp collectors quickly became aware of the BCOF overprints released in October 1946.

In its’ December 1946 issue *Australian Stamp Monthly* reported, “We mildly suggested in an editorial note in the September, 1946, edition of the “A.S.M.” that ‘overprinted stamps would serve to remind Japan that it was an occupied country.’

“We confess, however that we had not expected such suggestions to bear fruit. Consequently we were profoundly surprised to learn at the beginning of November, that Australian stamps had actually been overprinted.

“Information gathered from various sources – we acknowledge particularly our indebtedness to Mr. A.M. Leitch and Mr. H.D. McNess – indicate that a major reason prompting the issue was that large quantities of Australian stamps were being bought in Japan with black market money and sent to Australia.

tralia.

“Australian postal regulations provide that unused stamps may be repurchased at a discount and this was apparently being done on a fairly large scale.”^[12]

Australian Stamp Monthly reported in early 1947, “We have been attempting to obtain reliable information concerning the issue of Australian stamps overprinted “B.C.O.F./JAPAN.1946” and to which we first made reference in our December, 1946, edition.

“Early in the previous month, just after we first gained knowledge of the stamps so overprinted, we wrote to the Postmaster-General’s Department asking for full information of the issue. We also stressed the obvious danger of permitting but a few of the stamps (which had been pre-released) to be in philatelic circulation, and pointed out that it was most desirable that, in these circumstances, they should be placed on sale again.

“Actually, we think the Postmaster-General’s Department to be blameless in the matter of issuing the stamps, but as Australian postal paper is involved the P.M.G.’s Department should, logically, make the proper explanations.

“Black marketing is still rife in occupied Japan. Indeed, the matter is so serious to warrant discussion by the Australian Cabinet, to whom a report on black market operations in the B.C.O.F. area was recently presented.

“The overprinting of Australian stamps was one of the means by which it was hoped to hamper black market operations, and, possibly, some Government explanation might now be forthcoming.”^[13]

4.5. Money in stamps

Australian Stamp Monthly later reported, “Under the state of uncertainty that has existed it is not surprising that many collectors have take a chance and bought the stamps while the few available are on the market. We note that £7/10/- was paid for a mint block of the 3-pence at auction in Melbourne on February 27 (1948), while other reports indicate that high prices are being paid for the scarcer ½-penny and 1-penny stamps.”

In the meantime, the entire set of seven stamps was being prepared for issue in May. The stamp collecting community in Australia and throughout the world wanted these stamps for their collection. The demand from collectors became acute. Collectors were offering occupation personnel more money for the overprinted stamps than they were making in the black market from exchanging unoverprinted stamps for cash.

Australian Stamp Monthly: “There is general local agreement that the stamps are very hard to secure in Japan, and if they are available persons are not allowed to purchase more than 10-shillings worth each day. Further, if a person does purchase this quantity each day a military order requires him to explain the reason therefore.”

Australian government officials initiated an investigation about the stamps.



Figure 7. The highest value 5-shilling stamp had the lowest printing quantity.

(British) Royal Army Colonel E. Percy Dickson, acting Brigadier General Staff, and himself a philatelist, was requested to give evidence. In a letter dated April 29, 1948, Dickson writes, "I was on my home [to Britain] when the original issue was made in October 1946 but I told some truths about prices these damned things were fetching. I advised unrestricted sale through the GPO in Australia and Australia House in London. I said the London Market would require about 50,000 sets, a figure that I think you gave me at one time. It remains to be seen if anyone takes any notice of the recommendation."^[14]

No one did.

The 5-shilling stamp, the highest face value in the set, had the lowest printing quantity – 32,508.^[15]

BCOF overprinted stamps were withdrawn on February 12, 1949, ending a 20-month period of validity.

4.6. Stamp varieties



Figure 8. Doubled overprint of 3-pence value. Only one sheet of 160 was printed thus.

There are three basic types of overprints – two types of serif overprints and the sans-serif overprints.

The ½-penny, 6-pence and 1-shilling values in the set were serif printing overprints. The 1-penny and 3-pence stamps were sans-serif overprints. The two high values, 2- and 5-shillings, respectively, were slightly larger and the sheets were formatted differently. Thus the serif printing was spaced more widely apart but is otherwise similar to the other serif printings.

The serif printings have many varieties. Some of the more noticeable varieties, such as the wrong font "6" in "1946," are listed in some catalogs. *The Australian Commonwealth Specialists' Catalogue*, King George VI does the most extensive job of listing varieties of BCOF overprints. The serif BCOF overprints (including the high values) offer stamp collectors much challenge and resulting exultation when they have found something unusual.

The sans serif stamps have fewer varieties. The scarcest is a doubled overprint on the 3-penny stamp, of

which only one sheet of 160 impressions was made by error.

4.7. Postal usage of the stamps

A large percentage of mail weighing 4 ounces or less sent by Australian BCOF military personnel to Australian addresses required no postage stamps, provided it was sent surface mail and inscribed "Free."

Airmail was preferred by many of the Australian military, at a concessionary rate of 3-pence per half ounce. This was the most common usage of BCOF stamps, mainly paid by a solo use of one 3-pence stamp.

Registered mail was used frequently, especially for sending cash. The basic registration rate that included no compensation for loss was 3-pence. Higher rates applied for articles requiring compensation for loss. Often another 3-pence stamp was used to pay for registration on airmail letters to Australia, but a 6-pence stamp also covered basic registration and airmail.

Parcels to Australia were charged concessionary rates based upon weight. Australian military had to pay non-concessionary standard postage on mail sent outside Australia and for other special services.



Figure 9. The most common use of BCOF stamps was to pay postage for airmail service from Japan to Australia.

4.8. Non-Australian use of Australian Military Post Offices in Japan

British, Indian and New Zealand forces used stamps from their respective countries of origin. However, when transiting through an Australian base, letters sent from non-Australian BCOF forces were readily accepted by the Australian military post offices and received corresponding cancels from Australian field post office (FPO), unit postal station (AUPS), base post office (ABPO), Army post office (APO) or Royal Australian Air Force post office (RAAFPO).

5. The end of BCOF occupation

By 1950, most of BCOF had withdrawn from Japan. BCOF occupation formally ended on April 28, 1952, although BCOF air bases at Iwakuni and Kure continued to serve in “policing” activities in Korea and Malaya. Those former-BCOF who remained were nearly all Australians.

BCOF’s duties and responsibilities during the occupation were:

1. Dispose of Japan’s stocks of war material, including chemical agents and ordnance.
2. Repatriate returning Japanese soldiers.
3. Assist in the reconstruction of Hiroshima.
4. Honorably represent the British Commonwealth.
5. Safeguard all Allied installments within the BCOF area.
6. Promote the democratic way of life.

To these ends, BCOF:

- Cleared BCOF area of stockpiled Japanese war material, including 100,000 tons of explosives and 500 tons of poison gas.
- Repatriated 700,000 Japanese military personnel and civilians.
- Patrolled BCOF area by land and sea to suppress smuggling and illegal immigration.
- Built housing for dependants of Commonwealth military personnel eligible to bring their families to Japan (illustrating the “democratic way of life”)
Provided humanitarian relief.^[16]

6. Afterword

In the course of their duty, some of the Australian BCOF personnel were exposed to residual radiation from the atomic bomb. One Australian soldier describes his experience: “We Aussies, our captain told us, had been given pride of place in BCOF by being stationed in the Hiroshima prefecture, historic target of the world’s first atomic bomb and the launching site of a new age for mankind...”

“Most of this dead inferno was fairly level and covered by brown talc-like dust several feet thick in places. The troops found it was a good soft surface on which to play football!

“And so time passed. Four months after reaching Hiroshima, I got sick. I began to pass blood in the urine and it burnt....I was taken to 20th Field Ambulance and then sent by truck and barge to the island of Eta Jima in Hiroshima Bay.

“I was admitted [to the 130th Australian General Hospital] and put to bed and subjected to two days of tests. No organisms were found.

“On the third day I was prepared for theatre. There was to be a bladder inspection with something known to doctors as a cystoscope and the rest of the army as a hockey stick. A little blond nurse was fitting a white cap on my head.

‘That’s funny,’ she said.

‘What’s funny?’

‘Your hair – it’s all coming out in handfuls.’

So it was. We laughed. ^[17]

The writer became a crusader for Australian BCOF veterans who had been exposed to radiation in Hiroshima, after having been denied a disability pension for radiation-related illnesses he claimed were a result of his BCOF service. ^[18]

References

- [1] *Proclamation Defining Terms for Japanese Surrender*, Potsdam, July 26, 1945.
- [2] Data recorded by the Radiation Effects Research Foundation, Hiroshima, Japan.
- [3] Estimated number of deaths associated with the Nagasaki atomic attack is 60,000 to 80,000, according to the Radiation Effects Research Foundation.
- [4] Hirohito, *Accepting Potsdam Declaration Radio Broadcast*, as recorded by the U.S. Federal Communications Commission, August 14, 1945.
- [5] Molotov, Vyacheslav Mikhaylovich, *Soviet Declaration of War on Japan*, August 8, 1945.
- [6] Australian Department of Defence, *The Forgotten Force*, "Chapter 7: BCOF: Time for Reappraisal," quotes statistics from Defence Committee assessment conducted April 22, 1948. By the end of 1947 all of the Indian contingent was gone as were most of the British and New Zealand forces.
- [7] Bates, Peter, *Japan and the British Commonwealth Occupation Force 1946-52*, "The Long Wait" pp. 44-51.
- [8] Collas, P., *The Postal History of Australian Forces in Japan and Korea, 1945 – 1957*
- [9] *Australia Commonwealth Specialists' Catalogue*, "Pre-Decimal Postal Rates, Forces Mail and Miscellaneous Services"
- [10] Marginal notes on proof sheets dated October 1, 1946 and attested by officers and manager on October 8, 1946. The proof sheets were photographed in black & white in the 1970s before being broken up and sold to collectors.
- [11] Ito, Yoshimi, *B.C.O.F. Overprints and British Commonwealth and Indian Military Postal Services in Japan and Korea*, Japan Philatelist Club, undated. Quotes letter dated August 17, 1950 from F.R. Sinclair, Secretary of the Department of the Army, Commonwealth of Australia.
- [12] *Australian Stamp Monthly*, December 1946
- [13] *Australian Stamp Monthly*, February 1947
- [14] Letter sent from Kure, Japan by Col. E. Percy Dickson to Maj. A. Walker, London, April 28, 1948.
- [15] *The Australian Commonwealth Specialists' Catalogue, King George VI*, Brusden White, 2006.
- [16] Australian War Memorial, *As You Were, 1948*, Halstead Press, 1948, Chapter 9: Occupation & *The Forgotten Force, The Australian Military Contribution to the Occupation of Japan, 1946 – 1952*, Australian Department of Defence, 2005.
- [17] Collins, J.G., *The War of the Veterans*, self-published, March 2001
- [18] *VeRBosity*, Vol. 16, No. 1, "Administrative Appeals Tribunal, Repatriation Commission Tribunal and J.G. Collins," Muller, Brumfield and Kennedy, March 21, 2000