

Naval Cover Fakes, Forgeries and Frauds

Part III

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The Hobby Shop Covers

Timing is everything. Whether it's buying or selling in the stock market, throwing a football to a receiver in the end zone or firing at the target at skeet, you'll miss if your timing is off. And so it was in 1941 when the Hobby Shop at Sibley, Lindsay and Curr Company, a department store in Rochester, New York, decided to cover the fleet with covers postmarked in every ship of the battle fleet. The Hobby Shop planned to issue 250 cacheted covers postmarked on the ship's launch anniversary date with a cover for every ship in commission on 1 April 1941. The project was ambitious, to be sure; the chance of hitting the launch anniversary date for all 250 ships was slim to none. And, the war intervened eight months after the series started so, from then on, it was all downhill.

Here it should be noted that it is not clear if the Hobby Shop, located on the fourth floor of Sibley, Lindsay and Curr's department store, was a department of the store or a franchise operation run by an independent contractor. Certainly, the latter would not be as closely controlled as a store department and might be the situation in events which followed.

The Hobby Shop prepared a four page order form, **Figure 1**, approximately 3½" x 7" in size which offered the 250 covers in the set for \$25. Because of the scope of the project, advance orders were required. The covers could be charged to a regular account, fully paid in advance but time payment was offered with a total cost of \$27.50. The series was planned for a full calendar year commencing April 1941. All envelopes would be 6¾ in size and have a uniform cachet. The 3½" x 3" cachet featured a blue border of stars with the Great Seal of the United States upper left, ship's name at the top, cut of the ship centered with the ship's statistics below in a contrasting color to the border. The informational pages of the order blank are shown as **Figure 2**. A typical cachet is included as **Figure 3**.

The Hobby Shop advertised that the covers would be addressed and sent to the recipient directly from the ship. Damaged or lost covers would be replaced at no cost.

The series began as announced with a SWORDFISH (SS 193) cover mailed to recipients postmarked with the ship's type 3(A-TBT) cancel. The cachet had a minor error, however; the launch date (1 April 1939) was missing from the cachet.

Covers from WASP (CV 7) with a type 6fp and YORKTOWN (CV 5) with a type 3(A-BBT) Pearl Harbor postmarks of 4 April 1941 followed so the series was off to a fine start. Covers arrived in May, June and July all directly from ships, but in June things began to fall apart.

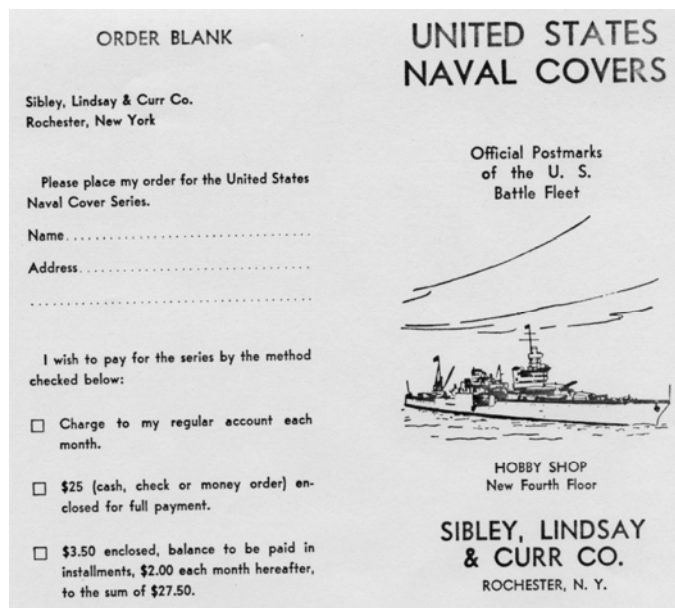


Figure 1: Front and rear panels of the Sibley, Lindsay and Curr Co. announcement page and order blank for the series of covers to be postmarked on all ships of the fleet in 1941-1942.

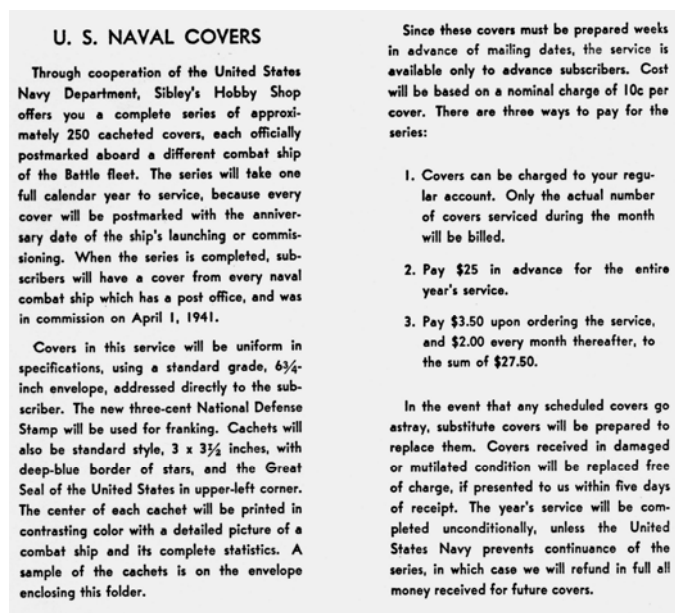


Figure 2: Middle panels of the brochure providing information on the series of 250 cacheted covers and details on payment.



Figure 3. Typical cachet for the series done in two colors. The border of stars is in dark blue with the center ship print and specifications in a contrasting color.

In the Atlantic, ships were routinely on Neutrality Patrol with some actually being shot at by German submarines. Some ships put away their name cancels using instead the Locy type z US Navy cancel. The Pacific Fleet was preparing for war with ships delivering war supplies to far-flung islands and submarines routinely making simulated war patrols. Postal clerks were not servicing large lots of covers quickly as they had been doing earlier. With the start of hostilities, censorship was begun, and the Navy Department directed postal clerks to cease servicing collector mail.

In July 1941, a new style of cancel, sort of a Locy type 3, but somehow different, began appearing on Hobby Shop covers and *only* on Hobby Shop covers. Moreover, the covers with this new cancel were delivered to customers under cover rather than directly from the ship. The *Catalog of United States Naval Postmarks* (Postmark Catalog) identifies this cancel as Common Design 3 (CD-3), a Hobby Shop Fake Cancel. **Figure 4** illustrates an early Hobby Shop fake, probably the earliest one recorded. The dial has a flat spot upper right and a bump on top with a nick in the dial underneath and the spacing of U.S.S. is fairly narrow, but not as narrowly spaced as the "B" variant of the normal type 3. The end of the top killer adjacent to the dial is square while the ends of the center and bottom killers are cut at an angle leading away from the dial. There is a slot at the bottom of the dial so that the ship's name can be changed. As with normal cancels, there are slots in the center for date and time information.

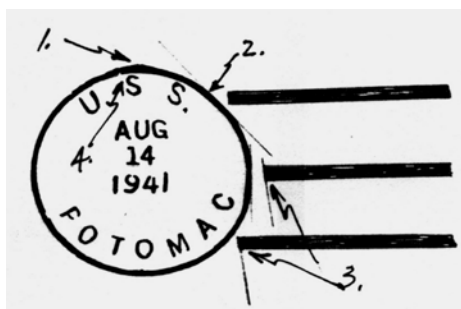


Figure 4: Illustration of the first cancel type (CD-3 in the Postmark Catalog) manufactured by the Hobby Shop mimicking a Locy

type 3 cancel issued by the US Navy to ships.

The cancel is a known fake since it appears on a variety of ship postmarks with consistent recognizable differences from the Navy issued type 3: #1- bump on top of the dial, #2- flat spot upper right, #3- dial end of bottom two killers cut at an angle away from the dial, #4- nick on top of inner dial adjacent to middle "S" of USS. The drawing was made by Jim Russell (USCS H-692) analyzing the differences of this Hobby Shop cancel from a standard Locy type 3. The CD-3 cancel was used on covers between 19 June 1941 and 26 March 1942.

Three months later, a variant of CD-3 appeared, designated CD-3a in the Postmark Catalog, **Figure 5**. In this, U.S.S. are widely spaced with the final "S" next to the top killer bar. The ends of the top and bottom adjacent to the dial are sharply slanted to match the dial. CD-3a was used on only 20 of the 109 documented covers; it is not

known why the Hobby Shop thought a second cancel device was needed. CD-3a did not replace CD-3; both continued in use to the end of the series.

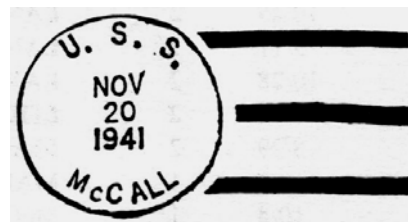


Figure 5: Illustration of the second cancel type manufactured by the Hobby Shop (CD-3a in the Postmark Catalog). This cancel has noticeable differences from the first type: a wider spacing of U.S.S. and a different angle of the killer bars adjacent to the dial. This cancel was used between 6 September 1941 and 6 February 1942.

There are a number of minor variants known with the CD-3 cancels: BALLARD has AVD/10 at the sides of the dial; PLUNGER has 179/P-8 similarly placed; PIKE, SKIPJACK and SPEARFISH have a U.S. Navy (Locy) z type dial with the ship's names in the killer bars and NEW YORK has an open star in place of killer bars. The names of SEAWOLF and TRUXTUN are misspelled.

A fancy type cancel made its appearance on Hobby Shop covers in August 1941, **Figure 6**, identified in the Postmark Catalog as CD-3b. This cancel has three sub variants, with an open star, an "E" or a "2" in place of the eagle. A total of 14 covers are known with this fancy type cancel.



Figure 6: Illustration of a fancy type cancel (CD-3b in the Postmark Catalog) manufactured by the Hobby Shop and used between 22 August 1941 and 28 March 1942. Variants include: an "E", a "2" or an open star substituted for the Eagle.

The Hobby Shop issued a special cover for the Roosevelt-Churchill High Seas meeting aboard USS AUGUSTA 9 August 1941 but the meeting was not announced publicly until August 14th or 15th when both parties were safely home. The AUGUSTA cancel is a CD-3 dated 15 August 1941, clearly a backdate, but the cachet is uniquely different, **Figure 7**. This exact same cancel was struck in POTOMAC dated 14 August 1941, which may also have been a backdate. However, on those dates the two ships were hundreds of miles apart and could not have both used the same cancel device.



Figure 7: The cachet for the Roosevelt-Churchill High Seas Meeting aboard USS AUGUSTA August 14-16, 1941. The AUGUSTA cancel is a CD-3 dated 15 Aug 1941, but the cachet is uniquely different from the balance of the series.

INDIANAPOLIS covers are known with an undated Rochester, New York machine cancel, probably a leftover cover used to mail a letter or advertisement.

Hobby Shop CD-3 fake postmarks are known for several British ships with a date of 12 May 1937, coronation day of King George VI. However, they were undoubtedly created in 1941 along with the other Hobby Shop fakes. The ships include: HMS COURAGEOUS, GLASGOW (misspelled), GLORIOUS, HOOD, LEANDER, RENOWN, REPULSE, RESOLUTION, REVENGE, RODNEY, SOUTHAMPTON and VALIANT. The cachet is a large line drawing of the ship, which covers most of the bottom half of the envelope with the ship's name printed in the upper left corner. The HOOD cancel is larger than the others with four long killer bars.

The ultimate proof that the British ship cancels are fakes is simply that the British Navy ships have never had post offices.

The Hobby Shop covers continued to be issued into 1942 with the last recorded for PREBLE on 8 March 1942. By that time, it must have been obvious to some that the markings were fakes.

Fortunately, a USCS member, Albert Schuster, of Brooklyn, New York missed some covers of the series, and wrote to the Hobby Shop to obtain replacements. Albert also queried the Hobby Shop about the apparently same cancel used on a great many of the covers. A Hobby Shop employee, Miss Ruth Henry, replied as follows:

“Those covers which you mentioned as having the same stamp (cancel) with different ship names and lettering were sent to us just as all other covers from the Navy Department. If there had been any change in the philatelic value of these covers, we would surely have been notified. All covers received through our service are absolutely genuine.”

This was, of course, a bold-faced lie, but it is possible that Miss Henry was just a clerk and was not aware of the truth of the matter. However, her statement clearly represents the position of Hobby Shop's proprietor in the matter.

It is interesting that no mention of these covers appeared in the leading naval cover publications of the period. Perhaps the editors of the USCS *Log* and ANCS *Navigator* did not want to publish what was competition or perhaps they were outraged at the high price of the Hobby Shop covers. Consequently, it was not until the 1950s when these covers began coming out of collections that questions were raised about the source of some of the cancels.

It turns out that Deane Bartley bought Al Schuster's covers with the complete set of Hobby Shop covers. In 1966, Jim Russell corresponded with Bartley about the covers and Bartley offered to send the set to Russell since they could not be sold (Bartley recognized them as fakes).

Jim subsequently wrote a summary of the Hobby Shop covers, apparently as an article for the *Log*. In this piece, Jim wrote:

“...Someone had ‘cancels’ made to resemble the cancels in use at that time. Only at the bottom of the dial there was a slot in which the name of any ship could be placed. If the name was short, the letter s were spaced to look like a type 3r. If the name was longer, then no space between letter and it appeared to be a type 3 cancel. What makes this a bit harder many of these covers do have the correct cancels from the various ships. If a person only glances at these cancels, they appear to be the real thing.”

“I do have more background on these. It appears a buyer was found who purchased all unsold covers, odd sets and even the uncanceled covers. I have been told they had a press run of 1,000 covers for each event. There was between 500 and 700 complete sets dispatched. They had between 300 and 350 advance subscriptions at \$25 each. The remaining covers being pencil addressed and returned to the Hobby Shop for later sale. Between 200 to 225 sets did get through.”

That's pretty much the story of the Hobby Shop faked cancels. The Postmark Catalog has a complete list of the fakes by ship name, cancel variant and date. Missing only is PHOENIX, a recent discovery and POMPANO. The USCS *Naval Cover Cachet Makers' Catalog* lists the known Hobby Shop cachets, irrespective of the legitimacy of the cancel. PHOENIX and NEW YORK are missing from that list. Images of a complete set of these covers may be seen in the online Naval Cover Museum,

www.navalcovermuseum.org.

In summary, it's clear that Sibley's Hobby Shop perpetrated a fraud on cover collectors and got away with it. Perhaps no one complained to postal authorities, or if they did, with the war in progress the Post Office Department had bigger fish to fry. Perhaps the extent of the fraud did not really become clear until twenty-some years later when USCS members fully documented the faked cancels. Fortunately, the information has been available since then and, with this series, will become a part of the public record of the Hobby Shop fakes.