

## Naval Cover Fakes, Forgeries and Frauds, Part XII



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### 1931 Wilkins-Ellsworth Trans-Arctic Expedition

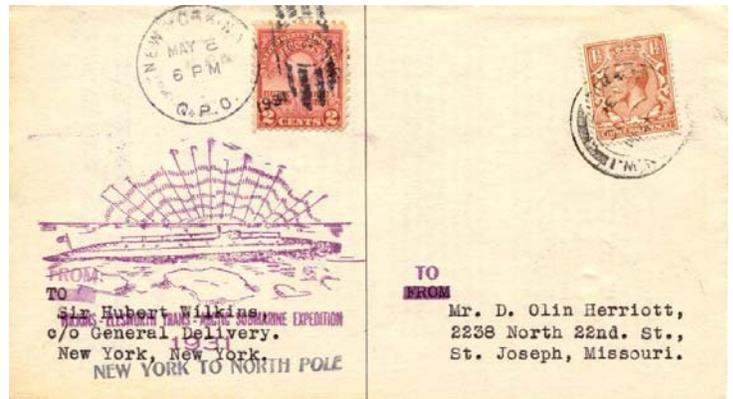
Although this series was intended to document fakers of U.S. naval covers, the forgeries done by A.C. Roessler in the 1931 time-frame surely were “nautical covers” and deserve mention. The Roessler faked covers can be found in dealers’ boxes and are often seen in eBay auctions. Quite often a seller does not know what he has and thus advertises the faked covers incorrectly. In point of fact, the Roessler fakes are scarcer than the genuine Wilkins covers and, on that basis, could theoretically command a somewhat higher price than the real thing.

Sir George Hubert Wilkins, MC, well known as an Antarctic explorer, logged many firsts in several expeditions to the Antarctic between 1920 and 1929. About 1926, he also turned his attention northward and, in 1930, in a striking *tour de force* secured use from the U.S. Navy of the soon to be scrapped submarine USS S-30 for an expedition to sail under the ice cap to the North Pole. In 1931, Wilkins with partner Lincoln Ellsworth, another polar explorer, began raising funds for the 1931 Wilkins-Ellsworth Trans-Arctic Expedition. In addition to grants and donations, the expedition offered collectors the opportunity to send covers, which would be mailed during the voyage at London, Bergen, Spitsbergen and from an unidentified port at the end of the expedition. The basic fee was 75 cents per cover for the first three legs, \$1 for the final leg with additional fees for registry service and autographs. The basic fee included cost of proper return postage for the service requested.

Wilkins’ submarine was modified for that purpose by Simon Lake in his shipyard and christened NAUTILUS by Lady Wilkins on 24 March 1931. NAUTILUS set sail for European waters 4 June 1931, broke down en route and spent a month in a British dockyard undergoing repairs. Eventually, NAUTILUS reached Spitsbergen departing 18 August for the North Pole. The expedition reached a point 450 nautical miles from the North Pole when a series of equipment failures caused Wilkins to abandon the attempt. NAUTILUS returned to Spitsbergen 6 September and then sailed for Bergen arriving the 21<sup>st</sup>. In accordance with the terms of the agreement with the Navy, NAUTILUS was scuttled off Bergen 21 November 1931.

Covers which arrived at Expedition Headquarters in New York by the advertised deadline date of 1 May 1931

received an 8 May 1931 New York duplex postmark and were placed aboard NAUTILUS for the voyage. (A small number of later arriving covers were postmarked in New York and also made the trip). The expedition prescribed an addressing format which allowed it to overprint “To” and “From” notations with “From” and “To” to facilitate return of the cover to the sender. The cachet was simple: a starboard side view of the submarine in the ice pack with a representation of the aurora borealis in the background, **Figure 1**.



**Figure 1: Typical 1931 Wilkins-Ellsworth Trans-Arctic Expedition cover, this one for the New York to North Pole leg mailed at the end of the voyage. This cover is in the prescribed format with Wilkins’ address on the left and sender’s address on the right. Expedition personnel overstamped “To” and “From” so that the sender’s return address is in the correct position on the right for return of the cover. Outgoing mail received a New York duplex postmark of 8 May 1931 before being placed aboard NAUTILUS for the voyage to the North Pole. Expedition personnel applied the expedition cachet and straight line stamp “New York to North Pole” and the correct UK franking for return. Covers for this leg were postmarked with a hand or machine cancel in various London postal stations between 1 October and 18 October 1931. Registered mail was postmarked 19 October 1931.**

Expedition covers received one of four straight line stamps to identify the leg on which carried: New York to London, New York to Bergen, New York to Spitsbergen and New York to North Pole for covers carried throughout the entire trip. The voyage received a great deal of newspaper and radio coverage and covers continued to arrive at expedition headquarters long after the deadline. These were sent, uncanceled, under separate cover to Bergen, Norway where they met the ship. These covers were cancelled in Bergen, stamped with either a Bergen to North Pole or Bergen to Spitsbergen straight-line rubber stamp and placed aboard. It’s unclear what determined which covers would receive which of those two straight-line rubber stamps.

Two additional leg stamps were applied to a small number of covers which met the ship in Spitsbergen: London to North Pole and Spitsbergen to North Pole. Of all the covers serviced, these markings are the most rare.

Expedition records indicate that 12,655 covers were serviced of which 2,704 were registered and 2,666 received an autograph of Wilkins or Captain Danenhower. The expedition staff was small and clearly overwhelmed by the amount of mail received. Covers for the first leg were serviced in a number of postal stations in London; both machine and hand cancels are known. Covers in Bergen and Spitsbergen received hand cancels. Covers for the final leg, New York to North Pole, were postmarked in London with either a hand or machine cancel dated between 1 and 19 October at various postal stations.

#### Albert C. Roessler (aka A.C. Roe)

Albert C. Roessler was a pioneer sponsor of first-flight, naval and first-day covers from the dawn of aviation through the 1930s. Roessler was born in 7 April 1883, in Newark, New Jersey and died in obscurity on 26 January 1952, in Orange, New Jersey at the age of 69. He went out of business sometime in the 1940s. Roessler or "A.C. Roe" as he sometimes would write, was also a stamp collector and dealer who resided at 140 South Parkway, East Orange, New Jersey. His address commonly appears on covers that he had serviced. He published two newsletters, *Air Plane Stamp News* and *A.C. Roessler's Stamp News*.

In one of Roessler's newsletters *A.C. Roessler's Stamp News*, he stated that he was the exclusive agent for distribution of NAUTILUS covers. However, nothing has been found in expedition records to substantiate Roessler's claim.

In 1931, Roessler reported he had a number of dual serviced covers from 1928-1930 Wilkins-Hearst Antarctic Expedition and the 1931 Wilkins-Ellsworth Trans-Arctic Expedition in the NAUTILUS, **Figure 2**. These covers have a Falklands Islands one-penny (1p) King George V stamp, were postmarked 29 October 1928 with a Port Stanley, South Shetlands Islands hand cancel, bore a green or blue-green double-circle rubber stamp reading, "Wilkins Antarctic Expedition" in the outer ring and "Deception Island" in the center and were autographed by Wilkins and his pilot, C.B. Eielson. These covers are the first flight covers carried by an airplane in Antarctica. The covers originally had a rubber stamp address to A.C. Roe, Orange, New Jersey.

The dual expedition covers were originally serviced by Wilkins and were offered to Roessler for "as liberal as possible offer." There is no documentation that an agreement between the two was reached; in fact, the four-line over stamped expedition address would indicate that the expedition retained possession of the covers. The covers were cacheted with a black expedition cachet, postmarked on 1 June 1931 in New York, carried aboard NAUTILUS, stamped New York to North Pole and cancelled in London 3 October 1931. These covers are genuine in all respects and can be found in usual sources but at a fairly high price.

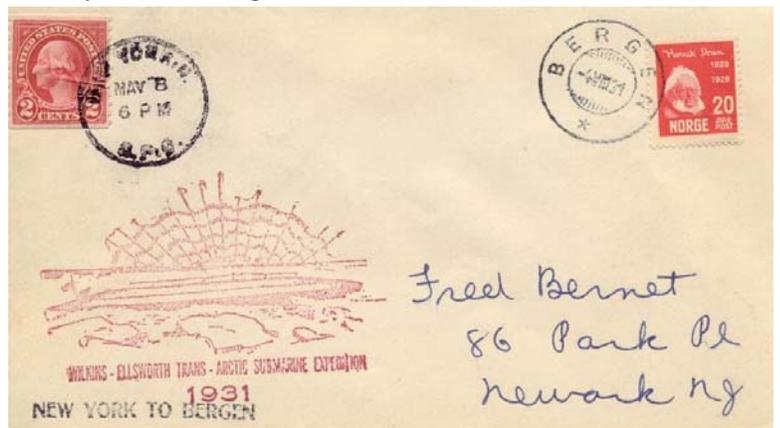


**Figure 2: Dual serviced cover for first flight in Antarctica and first attempt by submarine to achieve the North Pole. The flight covers were serviced at Port Stanley 29 October 1928, bear a Deception Island double circle stamping in blue or blue green and Wilkins autograph and that of his pilot, C.B. Eielson.. The 1931 Trans-Arctic Expedition covers received a black expedition cachet, a New York duplex postmark of 1 June 1931 and a London 3 October 1931 hand cancel, many of which were poorly struck. The four-line expedition address stamp overstrikes the original address stamp of A.C. Roe(ssler). Expedition correspondence indicates that 150 such covers were dual serviced.**

#### Faked Covers

Roessler evidently could not supply sufficient covers for the NAUTILUS voyage, so he produced his own cachet covers but for only two legs: New York to Bergen and New York to North Pole. Why he did not also produce covers for the two remaining legs - New York to London and New York to Spitsbergen - remains a mystery. None of the faked covers were ever carried aboard NAUTILUS.

Roessler produced three different cachets for his faked covers. The first was a reproduction of the expedition rubber stamp cachet. This facsimile is readily identifiable since the conning tower and portholes of the original are missing, **Figure 3**. This cachet is usually stamped in red ink whereas the genuine cachets were normally done in a magenta color.



**Figure 3: Fake Roessler 1931 expedition cover for NAUTILUS New York to Bergen leg. The facsimile cachet mimics the expedition cachet but is recognizable by the missing submarine conning tower and lack of portholes on the submarine. This cachet is struck in red ink whereas the expedition cachet is struck in a magenta or purple shade. The New York cancel is bogus and lacks the duplex killer. The Bergen postmark is also bogus. The addressee, Fred Bernet, is also an indicator of a Roessler fake of a genuine 1931 Trans-Arctic expedition cover.**

The second cachet is printed in brown and shows Sir Hubert holding a mailbag, **Figure 4**. The third cachet, printed in black, shows a three quarters view of Wilkins head, **Figure 5**. Covers with the second and third cachets also have the replica expedition cachet.



**Figure 4: Fake Roessler 1931 expedition cover for NAUTILUS New York to North Pole leg with brown printed cachet of Sir Hubert Wilkins holding a mailbag. The expedition facsimile cachet is also applied in red ink. Fred Bernet's address is printed on the cover in brown. The London postmark is bogus.**



**Figure 5: Fake Roessler 1931 expedition cover for NAUTILUS New York to Bergen leg with a cachet of three quarter's view of Sir Hubert's face printed in black. A red facsimile cachet has been added along with Roessler's return address stamp. Note that the cover lacks Norwegian franking and corresponding postmark.**

Most of the faked leg covers have a typed address to Fred Bernet, 86 Park Place, Newark, NJ. Some covers have that address deleted with a typed replacement address for one of Roessler's customers and then forwarded under cover. In one case, however, Roessler simply added correct franking and mailed the cover to the customer.

The faked leg covers have a facsimile New York 8 May 1931 postmark but with a flawed cancel – the duplex killer is absent. The London replica machine cancel is also flawed having just a CDS but no wavy killer bar lines. The Bergen postmarks double circle hand cancels were faked as well, but the fakes are not readily distinguished from the real thing. In all cases, however, the bogus postmarks are fuzzy, not clear and sharp as are the real postmarks.

The faked cachets notwithstanding, it was the bogus New York postmark, which got Wilkins in trouble with postal officials. Interestingly, his application of bogus London and Bergen postmarks did not violate any U.S. law.

Collectors lodged complaints when they realized they had been defrauded which resulted in Roessler's indictment. The *New York Times* of 31 January 1933 reported that, on 30 January 1931, "Albert C. Roessler, stamp collector and dealer, was arrested at his home 140 South Parkway, East Orange, N.J., on a bench warrant under an indictment by the Federal grand jury, charging fraudulent use of the mail. He was released on a \$1,000 bail taken out by the United States Commissioner A.L. Friedman. The government charged that Roessler entered into an agreement with George Hubert Wilkins, the polar explorer, thus giving Roessler exclusive rights to mail sent on the NAUTILUS. The NAUTILUS was the submarine used in 1931 by Wilkins on an Arctic exploration trip that failed. Finding a greater demand for stamps (covers) canceled on the trip than he could meet, it was charged that Roessler used a facsimile of a New York cancel mail that was never taken on the trip and he represented this as a genuine Wilkins trip mail."

*Linn's Stamp News* of 15 July 1933 reported a letter from Tom C. Cargill, U.S. Post Office Inspector, Elizabeth, New Jersey, stating that: "On 21 June 1933, Albert C. Roessler, 140 South Parkway, East Orange, N.J., appeared in Federal court in Newark, New Jersey, and pleaded guilty to two indictments; one charging the use of mails in furtherance of a scheme to defraud, and the other that he caused to be printed and did use prints (the New York cancellations) in similitude of obligations of the United States. Federal Judge Guy L. Fake (real name) imposed a sentence of one year and one day in the Atlanta Penitentiary on each charge, then suspended the sentence and placed Roessler on probation for three years."

#### Other Roessler Fakes, Forgeries, and Fantasies

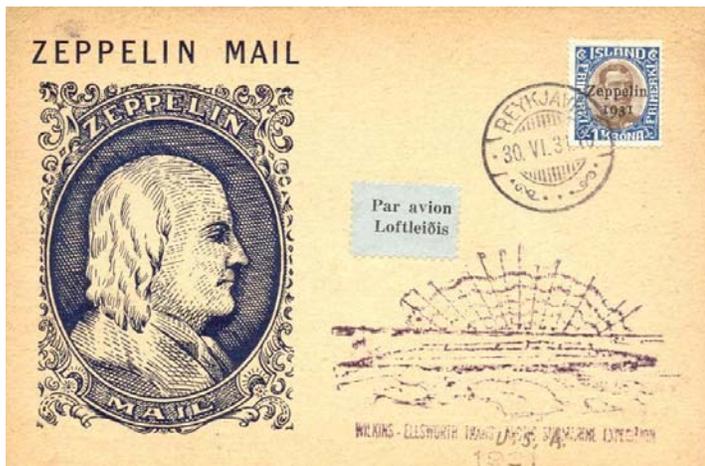
**Figure 6** is yet another example of Roessler's ingenuity. He evidently guessed that NAUTILUS would end her voyage in Iceland and prepared covers for that contingency. The Reykjavik postmark of 27 August 1931 is genuine, but on that date NAUTILUS was nine days out of Spitsbergen and ready to abandon the effort to reach the North Pole.

In the initial planning stages, NAUTILUS and the dirigible GRAF ZEPPELIN were scheduled to meet in the Arctic and exchange mail. NAUTILUS was delayed by her mid-Atlantic breakdown and on 30 June 1931, the planned date of the exchange, was in a dockyard in Devon, England. Not to be deterred, Roessler prepared a bogus cover for this non-event also postmarked in Reykjavik, Iceland, **Figure 7**. Both **figure 6** and **7** covers are rare.

In 1922, Newfoundland commissioned an engraved airmail stamp essay, printed by the company of De La Rue in shades of red-brown (imperforate) or in sepia with black or sepia with blue (perforated 14 x 13½). In 1931, Roessler offered an embossed lithographed stamp for sale in ads that were worded to promote the impression that it was the De La Rue essay. Roessler's forgery had a red-brown center surrounded by a dark green frame. Apparently perforated 11,



**Figure 6: Faked Roessler cover created for the end of NAUTILUS Arctic voyage postmarked at Reykjavik, Iceland 27 August 1931 addressed to Providence, Rhode Island (9 September), missent to Randolph, Vermont (10 September) and received at Vincennes, Vermont 11 September 1931. At no time during her voyage did NAUTILUS make a port call to Reykjavik.**



**Figure 7: Bogus Roessler postcard with Zeppelin Mail cachet created for a scheduled mail transfer between submarine NAUTILUS and dirigible Graf Zeppelin in Arctic waters. However, NAUTILUS was delayed and the Arctic mail transfer was accomplished with Russian ship MALYGUIN. Nevertheless, Roessler produced this bogus card with his facsimile expedition cachet and a Reykjavik postmark of 30 June 1931. On that date, NAUTILUS was in a Devon, England dockyard.**

the stamp is in actual fact die-cut to produce a perforated edge. This is easily seen since the “perforations” have green edges.

Roessler overprinted (private precancel) a U.S. Scott 632, 1¢ Benjamin Franklin stamp with a two-line “Graf Zeppelin” overprint. Roessler had been inspired to make his creation by the U.S., Scott 646, 2¢ Battle of Monmouth (Scott 634, overprinted George Washington) stamp with a two-line “Molly Pitcher” overprint and the Scott 647 and 648, 2¢ and 5¢ Hawaii Sesquicentennial (Scott 634 and 637, overprinted George Washington and Theodore Roosevelt) stamp with a two-line “Hawaii 1778-1928” overprint. (Contrary to a myth,

Roessler did not get in trouble with the government for this action; as noted earlier, it was the forged New York postmark on the faked 1931 Wilkins-Ellsworth expedition covers that got him arrested.)

Roessler thought the “Graf Zeppelin” overprinted stamp would dress-up a first return trip Graf Zeppelin flight cover from Lakehurst, New Jersey to Friedrichshafen, Germany. The flight covers were postmarked at Lakehurst, New Jersey on 28 October 1928 and Friedrichshafen, Germany on 1 November 1928. Roessler created a special postcard for the event and he overpaid the 53¢ rate by a penny, so his overprinted stamp was superfluous. Roessler reasoned that if his overprinted stamp wasn’t valid for postage it didn’t matter, because the other stamps paid the rate. Roessler offered these covers for sale for \$1. Roessler had under 500 of his “Graf Zeppelin” overprinted stamps left over so he offered them for sale as mint stamps for 10¢ each.

Roessler applied an overprint to U.S. Scott 649 and 650, 2¢ and 5¢ International Civil Aeronautics Conference stamps. The overprint states “Kitty Hawk” with “N.C.” inside a circle. He printed this overprint with many varieties. Roessler said he had 50 covers with the 5¢ overprint stamp on it and cancelled at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina on 17 December 1928. He offered the covers for 50¢ each. The covers had a New York backstamp. He offered the 2¢ overprinted stamp on cover for 30¢.

It is widely acknowledged that Roessler was responsible for servicing covers for many aerophilatelic events which would not otherwise have been documented philatelically. Nonetheless, his capers as noted in the foregoing diminish his stature among philatelists. Whether he was driven by greed or an egotistical need to be “first,” he set a poor example and deservedly was punished.

### Conclusion

This article completes the twelve article series of fakes, forgeries and frauds associated with naval/maritime covers. It was the intention of the USCS board of directors to shine a light on the shoddy practices of a few which have continued, to this day, to flummox unwary collectors. This series will be collated, placed on the USCS web page and made available in print. If readers have other examples of naval cover fraud, please bring them to the attention of Bob Rawlins, address above.

### References

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