

Another Flight to Kingman Reef.

By Steve Pendleton.

Kingman Reef is best known as a stop-over point (briefly) for PAA's clipper flights in the 1930's. However on 1 November 1935 there was another experimental flight on which about 100 covers were carried.

The reef lies about 36 miles northwest of Palmyra Atoll, the northernmost inhabited island in the Line Islands. By an Executive Order of 29 December 1934, Kingman Reef came under the jurisdiction of the Secretary of the U.S Navy. It had been considered the only suitable seaplane base between Honolulu and Pago Pago, American Samoa, although there was only an acre or two of land above water, and that often gets wet.

In late 1935 the U.S.S Wright was tasked to visit Palmyra and to investigate Kingman Reef. The U.S.S Wright was an airship tender turned seaplane tender, at that time a unique combination in the U.S.Navy. (This vessel was included in the Navy lists from 1920 until 1946. She should not be confused with an aircraft carrier, launched in 1944, carrying the same name).

The "Wright" left San Diego for Palmyra on 21 October 1935, and arrived off the island on 31 October, where she remained until 2 November. Whilst at Palmyra she assisted in the photographing of the island and acted as a base for the surveying parties. On 1 November 1935 one of the pilots, Jack Wilson, made an exploratory flight from Palmyra to Kingman Reef and return. This flight was undertaken by a seaplane carried by the ship. I do not actually know if he landed his plane in the Kingman Reef lagoon, but the purpose of this flight was to prove that such a landing was practicable.



The covers carried have a light blue cachet reading "First Flight 1935", together with a depiction of a seaplane in front of a tropical island – one certainly not compatible with either Palmyra or Kingman. In addition to being cancelled on 1 November they also carry a backstamp from the Pearl Harbor Branch station of 9 November.

The "Wright" wasn't finished with the Pacific, after the visit to Palmyra she helped to establish a seaplane base at French Frigate Shoals, and then between 1939 and 1941 he helped establish naval bases at Midway; Wake; Johnston; Canton and Palmyra.