

New Discovery: Previously Unrecorded Tonga Tin Can Mail Evacuation Covers

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Fig. 1: 6d Evacuation cover with typewritten cachet and canceled in manuscript *Niuafou* 21-12-46 J Malikamu

A correspondent in New Zealand recently forwarded scans of a few Tonga Tin Can Mail evacuation covers that have not been previously recorded.

On September 1, 1946, Niuafou island experienced a series of strong earthquakes. The quakes continued for nine days, and on September 9 the ground lifted and separated. A wall of lava spewed forth destroying most of the main village of Agaha. Fortunately, the residents were able to escape to the hills where they lived until help could arrive.

The radio station, government office (including the post office), and homes were destroyed. The Tongan government ordered a complete evacuation of the entire island.

On September 18 and American Navy plane dropped a first aid box containing food and medicine. There was also a note attached that said "New Zealand ship will call here in ten days."

Two days later the Tongan government yacht *Hifofua* arrived along with an American tanker that had been diverted to assist in providing humanitarian aid. However, it was not until the Union Steam Ship *Matua* arrived on December 21, 1946 that the evacuation of the entire island was begun.

In spite of the fact that the government ordered the evacuation, and that most of the island's infrastructure had been destroyed, many of the islanders wanted to rebuild and stay at Niuafou. It was their home. Indeed, a couple

hundred did stay behind in order to harvest the island's staple crop, copra, which had mostly escaped the lava flows unscathed. The final evacuation of these remaining citizens and their crop occurred on October 9, 1947, aboard the *Hifofua*.

The evacuations were marked by covers that had been made by interested persons and collectors who were aware of the evacuations and could have the envelopes placed on board the two vessels. Since the post office and its contents had been destroyed, the postmaster/ radio operator, John Malikamu, dutifully postmarked the stamps with the island name, his signature and date (Fig. 2). Most of these covers are difficult to find but are not really "rare" in the true sense of the word.

In February 2011 a correspondent in New Zealand provided the scans shown here of two evacuation covers bearing typewritten cachets that explain the plight of the islanders. The covers were sent to a Miss T.E. Barlow in Otakeho, New Zealand, from the first evacuation aboard the M.V. (motor vessel) *Matua*. The Tongan stamps affixed to the covers have John Malikamu's manuscript cancels and the stamps have also been postmarked Nuku'alofa (on the main island of Tongatabu) December 22, 1946.

The reverse of both envelopes have the *Matua* printed flap, the ship's purser's oval handstamp, and backstamps from Nuku'alofa and Otakeho.



Fig. 2: Detail of cancellation



Fig. 3: 2½d Niuafou’ou evacuation cover to New Zealand with slightly different typewritten cachet

The covers from this correspondence will be sold at auction in New Zealand. For further information, contact:

Or check their website at: www.mowbraycollectables.co.nz.

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