

# The Mystery of the Pirate Cancel (AARRRRH)

By Josh Furman

Among the treasures of an auction buy was the cover pictured below [Figure 1]. The back of the cover has two CDS (Circular Date Stamps) [Figure 2] with U. S. Navy and the date and time: Mar 3 1946 PM, along with a New York, N.Y. transit cancel dated Mar 4 from some branch office (I can read ??0088 BR. but can't make out what comes before the two zeros.)

Have you ever seen such a cover, with a simple letter R used as a cancel? Well, nobody else has either.<sup>1</sup>

The first question that came to mind was -- why are there no dated cancels on the front of the cover? After a little research, here's the answer:

From Beecher & Wawru-kiewicz, *U.S. Domestic Postal Rates, 1872-1999, Revised Second Edition* page 221:



**Postmarkless Cancels:** A problem faced the USPS in 1910 in that postal workers were not checking the reverse side of registered matter that passed through their hands for signs of tampering. Therefore, "effective now" [PB 9375 Nov 26, 1910] no postmark could be placed on the face of registered matter. Thus city, date and transit information had to be placed on the reverse of the matter....

But the R is still a mystery. Usually a blind oval is used without date on registered matter fronts. One suggestion is that the clerk didn't have or couldn't find a blind oval, so he reached for whatever device he had handy to note that the stamps had been canceled.

As noted on the return address, the U.S.S. Spangler was a Destroyer Escort (DE), a relatively small ship that might not, in fact probably did not have a Postal Clerk on board. So perhaps the Pharmacist Mate filled in as Postal Clerk. One problem here: there was never a pharmacist mate (Ph/m) attached to the Spangler, so the person who mailed that letter wasn't ship's company.

Now back to the research. One of the members of the U.S. Specialized Group, an internet stamp club, if you will, which I recommend highly to all collectors of U.S. material, checked on the Spangler. Here's what Rudy had to say at first:

"I was postal officer, among other things, for NAS Cubi Point at Subic Bay in the Philippines for three years during Vietnam. We were very busy, but had an experienced pair of petty officers in charge. I wouldn't say all the clerks were experienced - we had new people assigned fairly regularly. I would not be at all surprised to see the R used as a cancel. Most of the registered mail was classified confidential or secret. I can see a yeoman from the classified material control office,

<sup>1</sup> Actually there were a few towns that used the letter R as a cancel back in the late 1800's -- but no recorded usage of an R in the 20th century.

logbook in hand, giving a letter to a postal clerk for registration. Would the postal clerk go digging around for a missing mute canceller while that yeoman was waiting at the counter? Just whack the stamp with the 'R' and get on with it.

Rudy went on to investigate the Spangler:

A DE is a small ship, and like all but carriers, doesn't get mail at sea unless being replenished by a tanker or supply ship. The postal clerk would be part time. I think the use of that 'R' was expedient, and with no one to look over his shoulder, whatever worked was ok. The Spangler didn't have a postal clerk assigned, not surprising. It looks like my part-timer assessment might be correct.

The Spangler left San Pedro after overhaul on February 20, 1946, headed for Pearl Harbor, then Guam, and an assignment on "China Station." I don't find anyone with a name that matches what I see on the cover as a crew member, and at any rate, they didn't have a pharmacist's mate assigned to the ship.

The March 3 date would have put them at Pearl, and if the NY receiving date of March 4 is correct, they would have had to have been there for the mail to go out. That letter would not have left the ship if they were steaming, so I'm pretty sure they were in Pearl on that date. That was a very speedy airmail for those days. If they had been at sea, there would have been a gap after the March 3 date, until a supply ship got their mailbags, and then for it to make port.

The Spangler didn't ever have a PC assigned - postal clerk. My first guess, a part timer handled the mail, is probably correct, and just grabbed whatever rubber stamp he had that was undated."



So that's the tale of the Spangler, or as much as we know about it right now. Is there something else we should look at while researching a cover such as this? How about the postage? The sender, or the temporary postal clerk, applied 31¢ worth of postage to this missive. Was that correct? The registry rate was 25¢

for an indemnity of up to \$5.00, and the air mail rate at the time was 8¢, having gone up from 6¢ in March 1944. I didn't see any special dispensation listed for Naval personnel in the Beecher & Wawrukiewicz book mentioned above, so the question of whether or not the rate is correct is still open.

Anyhow, wouldn't this be a dandy cover for collectors of Prexys on cover or collectors of the transport issue on cover? So far the R cancel unique, and wouldn't that look nice in an album or on an exhibit page!

So the research continues. AARRRGH!