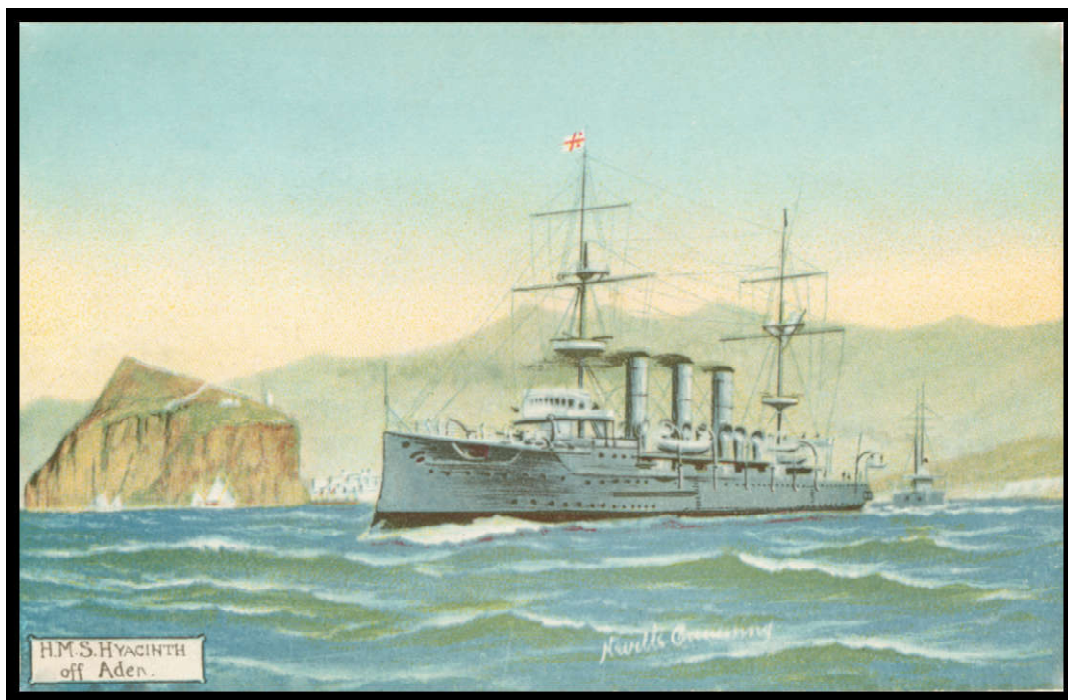


BONC 1047 on 'The Hyacinth Cover'

**Including various snapshots of
the war in German East Africa!**

Steve Hannath



**Circa 1906. The British gunboat, HMS Hyacinth, Rules the Waves of Aden.
It had also waived the rules off Dubai in the Persian Gulf.**

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postmaster@southafricanphilatelyclub.com



The Hyacinth Cover - An Overview



1915. Cover. Passed by Censor aboard HMS Hyacinth. Received SIMONSTOWN '28 APR 15'. KGV GB 1d red obliterated with BONC 1047. Boxed rectangular PAQUEBOT mark applied.

Acquiring a “Scarce 1915 PAQUEBOT Mark” and Discovering an Unrecorded Simonstown BONC!

Sometimes the collecting of postal history creates a magic confluence of unexpected coincidences and surprises. My discovery of what I like to call ‘The Hyacinth Cover’ was full of them, none more so than in its ending which sadly mirrors these troubled times. (February 2021).

Beginning at the beginning, once upon a time many years ago I was a pirate prince on Simonstown's Boulders Beach. This was before the penguins swam ashore from their rocky island breeding grounds to squat and squirt their offensive fishy shit over the perfection of the Peninsula's finest bathing beach. In reminiscence of that time past I have for the last decade collected the postal history of Simonstown, once a Royal Navy base but for me always the happiest harbour of my childhood holiday memories.

My accumulation of Simonstown material has been haphazard and eclectic. I have bought almost anything from Simonstown for the creation of an 'Open Class' display. This material often lacked quality or purpose or both and disappeared into boxes of 'stuff' or into folders in my filing cabinet, never used, always there, waiting for me to rummage through it, plaguing me for being a spendthrift and damning me for not yet having found any good use for it. Some of that material has now found a home in this display.

As my Simonstown collection soon included all the common datestamps and Naval markings, the missing, more difficult to find items grew as ever larger gaps in my display. I thought I would never find an Octagonal Numeral 8 on cover but eventually I did. I thought I would soon find a 1940s' skeleton relief datestamp but to date have not! It was the same with the scarce rectangular Simonstown Paquebot mark of WW1 during which it is only known used in 1915. Towards the end of 2020 I learned that one was coming up at auction. I felt I would never own this scarce postmark on cover if I did not seize the moment. I viewed it on-line and decided to acquire it. I was intrigued by its faint and unclear BONC which was said to be '17'. I dismissed this as a mistake. Everyone knows, that BONC '17' was George, (right?) and that Simonstown used '27' and no other (right?). I convinced myself it was an error and concentrated on acquiring the cover for its WW1 Paquebot mark. I would resolve its mysterious BONC once I had the cover in front of me.

The Hyacinth Cover - Reverse



The reverse of the cover embossed 'HMS HYACINTH, CAPE STATION' with red wax seal 'ROBB'. London receiver 'MAY 21 1915' (insert enhanced).

I put in a bid that surprisingly won me the lot at the reserve price. As it contained some 20 other top class South African maritime covers I could not believe my luck. I paid immediately, then spent an interminable time waiting for my purchase to arrive. One morning when I had forgotten all about it and the arrival of the post, my wife bought a package upstairs to my office. That was the first pleasant surprise of this tale.

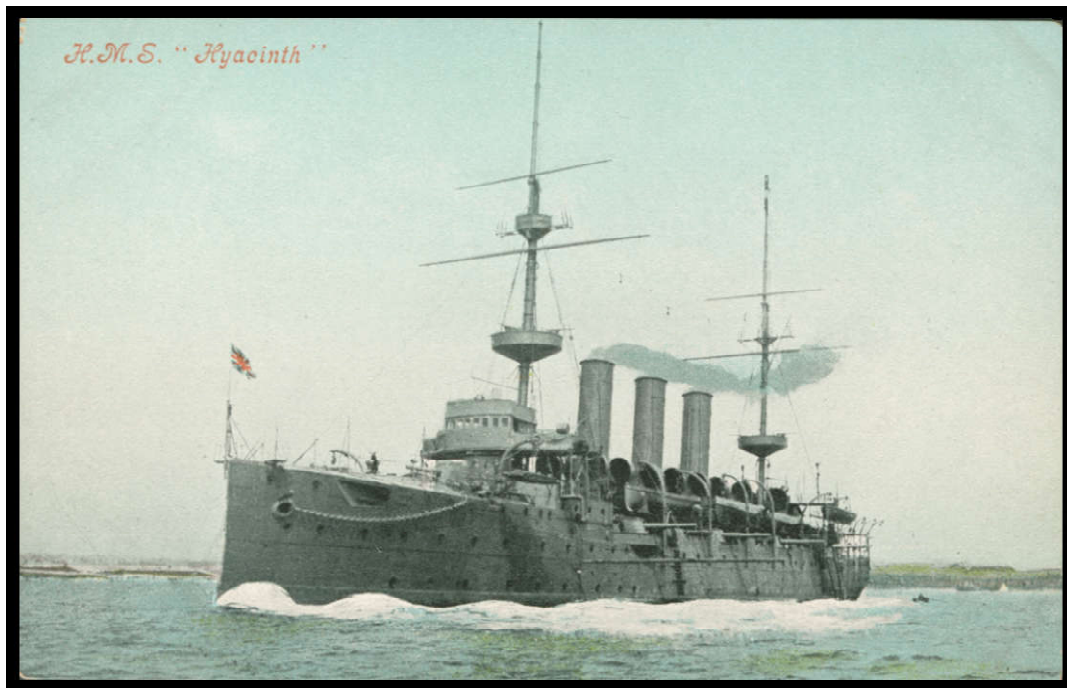
As stated, I wanted this cover for its fair strike of the first boxed rectangular PAQUEBOT mark. Known as the 'Omnibus' Paquebot handstamp, it was supplied to all Cape Colony ports some time shortly after 1900.

The cover I had bought had once been in the collection of Roger Hosking, the author of *'PAQUEBOT CANCELLATIONS OF THE WORLD'*. It had come up for sale in the Cavendish Auction of his Paquebot Collection in December 2014 and was acquired by Dr J. Frank, an eminent 'South African Maritime' collector. Hosking's listed this Simonstown Paquebot mark as '2737' which he rated as 'D' (rare) and "only recorded in 1915". With only three WW1 covers known, this mark is as rare as Hosking suggests.

The cover itself is an item of embossed naval stationery originating from HMS Hyacinth, the flagship of the Cape Station between 1913 - 1918. The embossing on the reverse flap has been sealed with red wax showing a mounted knight above 'ROBB', the surname of the sender. The front cover has an initialled Double Circle 'PASSED BY CENSOR' mark in purple ink, a Royal Naval censor handstamp recorded used on board HMS Hyacinth. Addressed to "The Editor of the Globe", London, the cover was re-routed from Fleet Street to the Strand WC. There is a fine but unremarkable post-Union SIMONSTOWN Double Circle datestamp, (Putzel No. 8), one commonly seen on civilian and naval mail from before WW1 into the late 1920s. Its date of '28 APR 15' is only partial in the one-line date slug but the Year is confirmed by the LONDON receiving backstamp 'MY 21 15'. (See insert in reverse of cover above.)

The cover bears a GB KGV 1d red stamp, then the Empire letter rate, which has been cancelled by a partial BONC whose numeral is unclear. On close inspection I was expecting to see Simonstown's BONC No. 27 but was stunned to see that it looked more like a four digit BONC that appeared to end '17'. Whatever the numeral it was a new and unrecorded Simonstown BONC! As this was too good to be true, I immediately began to have doubts about the cover. The long use of BONC 27 in Simonstown, plus my lack of knowledge about Paquebot marks created a sense of unease. I found myself asking questions I had no answers for. What was its postal route? Perhaps this BONC, maybe also the Paquebot mark, was applied en route elsewhere? But where, why and how? This article is my attempt to understand this cover.

HMS Hyacinth - A Classic Gunboat!



Circa 1900. HMS Hyacinth as part of the Royal Navy's Channel Fleet.

Hyacinth was an eleven gun, twin-screw cruiser launched in Govan on the Clyde in 1898, one of three Highflyer-class protected cruisers built for the Royal Navy. Initially assigned to the Channel Fleet, she relieved HMS Highflyer in 1903 as the flagship of East Indies Station (Indian Ocean). In 1904 she took part in the Somaliland Campaign, supplying men for a landing party that stormed and captured the forts at Illig under covering fire from Hyacinth's guns. In the 'Hyacinth Incident' of 1910, her guns bombarded Dubai in the Persian Gulf after a landing party was pinned down by local resistance fighters. In 1912 she went into the reserve but after a refit was recommissioned in 1913 and sent to join the Cape of Good Hope as the flagship of the Cape Station's incompetent commander, Rear Admiral Herbert King-Hall. Hyacinth's Flag Officer was the capable Captain D M Anderson, her commander from 1913 to 1917.



Circa 1906. The gunboat, HMS Hyacinth, flagship of the East Indies Station, rules the waves off Aden.

HMS Hyacinth: Success and Failure



**Circa 1902. HMS Good Hope, named after the Cape of Good Hope colony.
Good Hope was the flagship of Rear Admiral Christopher Cradock.
She was lost in 1914 with all her 926 men in the Battle of Coronel.**

When WW1 began on 28th June 1914, HMS Hyacinth was the Cape Station's flagship. On 1st November 1914, the German Navy's East Asia Squadron destroyed the British 4th Cruiser Squadron at the Battle of Coronel off the coast of central Chile. In this shocking defeat, HMS Good Hope, the British flagship named after the Cape Colony, was sunk with all its men. With the Union of S. Africa having just invaded GSWA (German South West Africa), it was feared that the victorious German fleet might soon appear off southern Africa. As a result, Hyacinth spent the first months of the war escorting ships around the Cape and safeguarding the backs of South African troops in GSWA. Calm was only restored after a powerful British fleet annihilated the German cruisers in the Battle of the Falklands in December 1914.

In early 1915 Hyacinth was deployed to Zanzibar where she became active in the Royal Navy's search for the Königsberg, a German light cruiser. Operating out of GEA (German East Africa), the Königsberg had attacked and sunk the Cape Station's HMS Pegasus in Zanzibar harbour in September 1914 while the helpless vessel was having its boilers repaired. Following this success, the Königsberg itself suffered engine failure and was forced to take shelter in the Rufiji River delta in GEA. The Hyacinth cover was written while she was blockading the Rufiji River as part of a task force attempting to sink the Königsberg.

Twelve days before this cover was received and dated in Simonstown, Hyacinth intercepted the Kronborg, a captured British ship which the Germans had disguised as a Danish merchantman in an attempt to resupply the Königsberg and German forces in GEA. Satisfied she had set the Kronborg "well on fire in all holds and engine room" and observing that she "had apparently settled on the bottom" of Manza Bay, Admiral King-Hall had Hyacinth sail away. The Germans, however, were able to salvage much of her cargo which included field guns, rifles, ammunition and supplies. After the Königsberg was sunk in July 1915, Hyacinth left the coast of GEA and returned to Simonstown for a refit.

In March 1916, a second German blockade-runner, the Marie, arrived safely in Sudi Bay, GEA, to unload a vital cargo of artillery, rifles, machine-guns, ammunition and supplies. An incredible 100,000 African porters were needed to transport this war materiel to Dar-es-Salaam. Eight days too late, Hyacinth found the Marie and bombarded her at anchor. Somehow the Marie survived to sail to neutral Dutch Batavia. After the war, the GEA commander, Colonel (later General) Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck said that the allies "*greatest defeat in GEA was their failure to destroy the Kronborg and the Marie*".

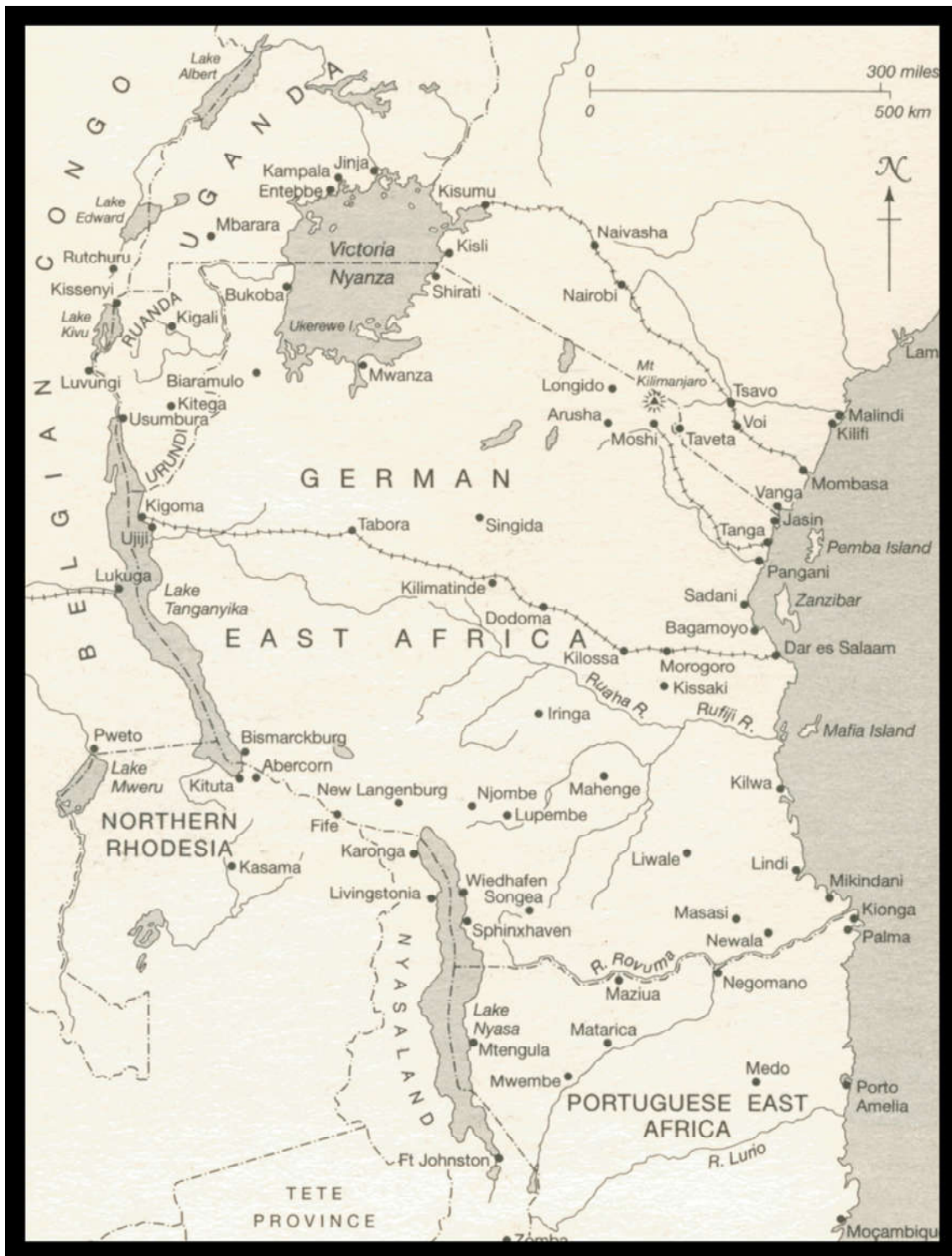
The War in German East Africa



Circa 1935. General Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck. (Deutschland Kolonien, Hinz & Kuster AG).
By WW1's end von Lettow-Vorbeck was Germany's undefeated 'Lion of Africa'.

Colonel (later General) Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck was the resourceful commander of a small German force of about 14,000 (3,000 German Schutztruppe and 11,000 native African askaris) in GEA. He served in GSWA from 1904 -1907 during which time he gained experience in bush fighting. He was appointed military commander of GEA in 1914. He successfully repelled a British landing at Tanga in November 1914, the greatest German victory of WW1 in Africa. Resorting to guerilla warfare, he hoped to influence the war in Europe by pinning down some 300,000 British (including South Africans, Rhodesians and Indians), Belgian, and Portuguese troops. By war's end, he remained undefeated with a force of 1,200 still in the field. He returned to a hero's welcome in Germany in March 1919.

German East Africa

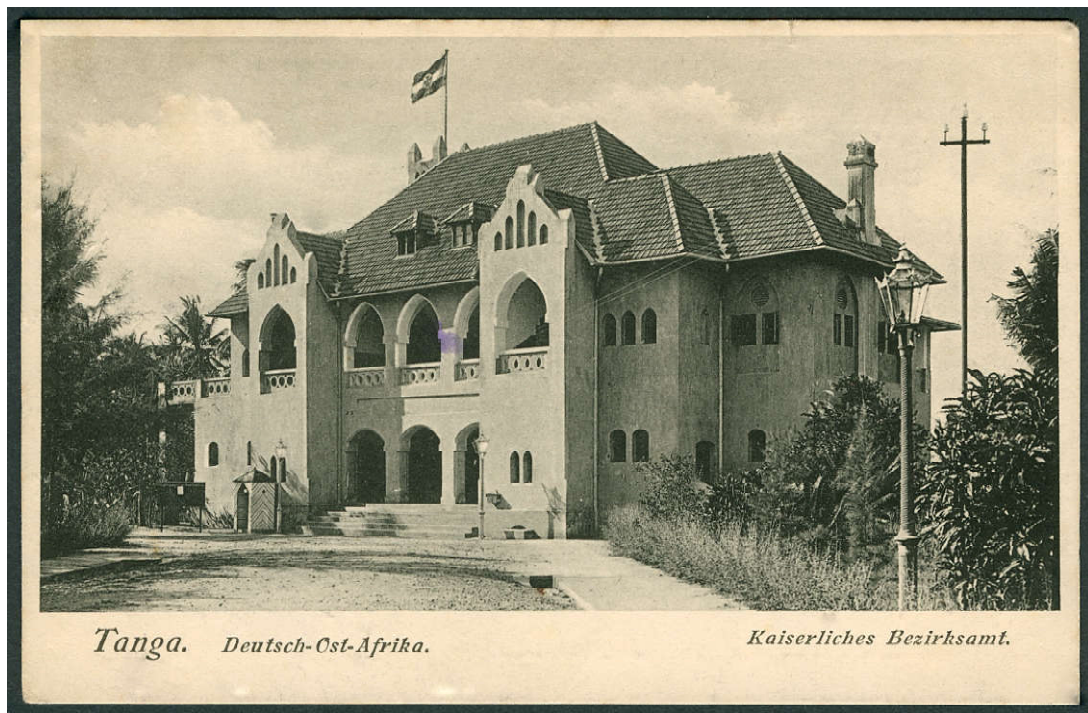


1914. Map. German East Africa showing Lake Tanganyika (centre left).

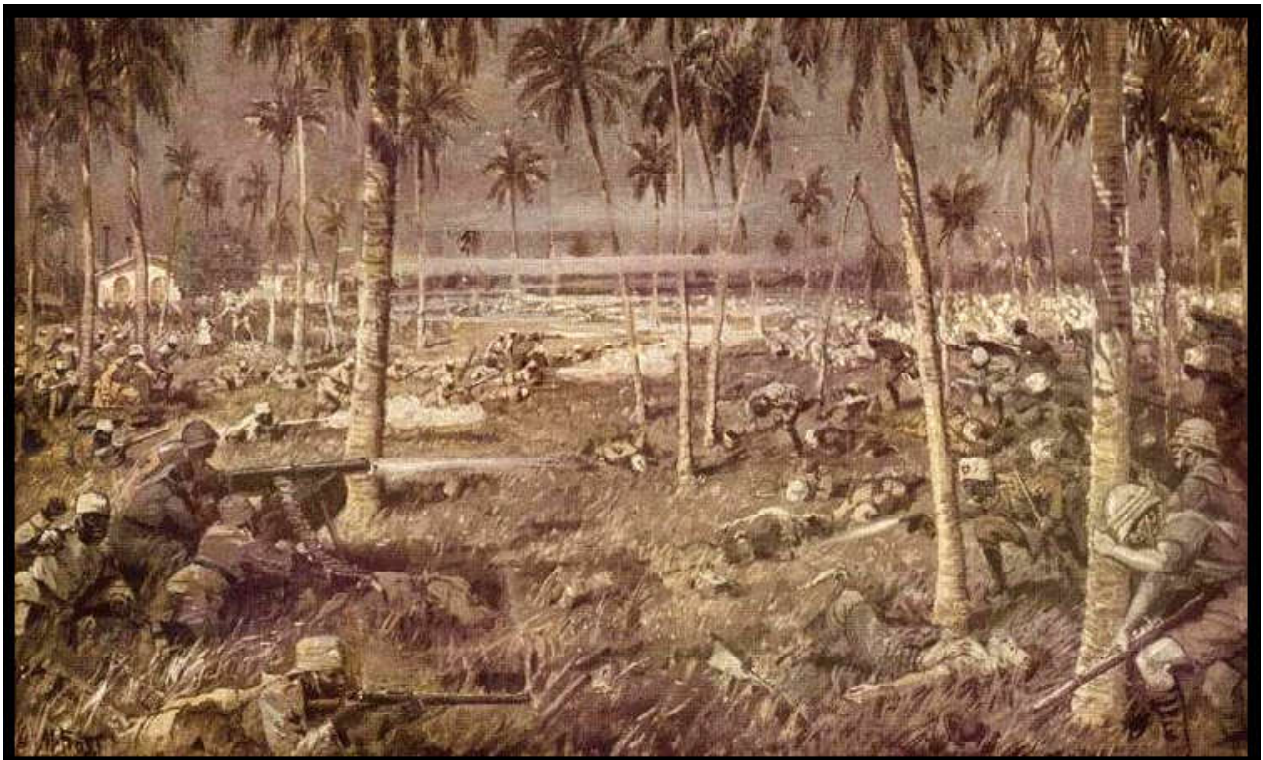
In July 1890, Great Britain and Germany had played colonial 'swapsies'. In a treaty known as the Anglo-German Agreement, (aka Heligoland–Zanzibar Treaty), Germany gained Heligoland in the North Sea at the entrance to the new Kiel Canal plus a narrow finger of land, the Caprivi Strip, in far northeast German South West Africa. In exchange, Britain wanted and got Zanzibar in order to restrict the Omani Arab slave trade. During the WW1 blockade of German East Africa and the hunt for the Königsberg holed up in the

Rufiji Delta, HMS Hyacinth, the flagship of the Cape Station, operated out of Zanzibar. Control of Heligoland failed to allow Germany's Imperial Navy to escape being 'bottled up' in Kiel for most of WW1. Britain got the best of the exchange. Ex-Chancellor von Bismarck knew it. "*Trousers for a button*", he huffed.

British Defeat at Tanga: November 1914



Circa 1914. The German Flag flies above the German Administration Offices.
Note the street lighting and the telephone pole.



3rd - 5th November 1914. The Battle of Tanga, (aka the Battle of the Bees), a repulsed amphibious landing.
The 1,000 outnumbered and defenders comprised German officers and native Askaris.
The British Indian Expeditionary Force numbering some 9,000 are on the right.

The battle soon became a debacle. Swarms of bees attacked both sides. German reinforcements arrived at a critical time but they were still outnumbered 8 to 1. The British chose to withdraw from the battle at the point when Tanga was theirs for the taking. The British evacuation abandoned masses of equipment, including 600,000 rounds of ammunition, field telephones and 16 prized machine guns. Many an Allied soldier fighting in GEA in 1915 and 1916 would die as a result.

The Askari's and Porters' War in German East Africa



GEA was one of the more difficult Allied campaigns of WW1.

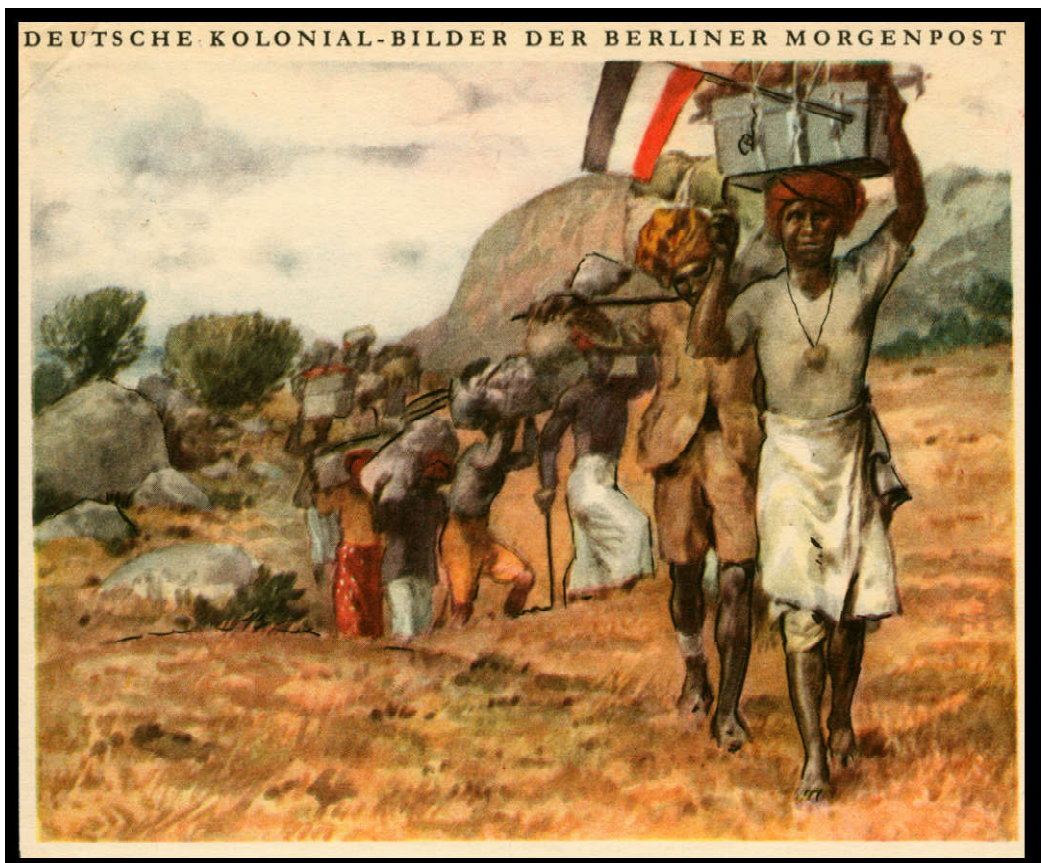
Tropical diseases decimated SA troops and caused a political storm at home. The German's 'tip-and-run' guerilla tactics also exacted a high toll in men, equipment and the high cost of a never-ending military campaign. By war's end, General von Lettow-Vorbeck remained undefeated and defiant.

1941. Berliner Morgenpost Deutsche Kolonial-Bilder, Berlin.

40 above. White officered askaris pass von Lettow-Vorbeck. 35 below. Porters.



Both sides used civilian porters to transport supplies in the absence of roads and railway lines. As many as one million Africans are thought to have died during war in East Africa. Supplies of arms and ammunition from the Kronborg and Marie allowed the Germans to continue fighting. These supplies were carried to Dar es Salaam by some 100,000 porters



Vice-Admiral David M Anderson KCB, KCMG, etc., etc.



1927. Vice Admiral Anderson, Commander, Africa Station: 1926 - 1929.

Among my Simonstown clutter was a faded old real photo postcard of a ghostly Royal Navy officer. Being curious I used PhotoShop to enhance the image and convert it to black and white. To my surprise Vice Admiral D M Anderson emerged from the fog of time to appear once more on the deck of his flagship, HMS Birmingham, in Simonstown in 1927. He had been HMS Hyacinth's WW1 Flag Captain. (As a flagship flies the Admiral's flag, so the captain of a flagship is a 'Flag Captain'.) Finding a photo of the captain of Hyacinth so coincidentally was another satisfying surprise. Fortuna had waved her magic wand once again.

Admiral Sir David Murray Anderson KCB, KCMG, was born in 1874. He joined the Royal Navy aged 13 and served as a senior British naval officer until 1936. He first saw action against King Koko slave traders on the Niger River and later in West-Africa in the 1900 Ashanti Campaign. In 1902, he was posted as First Gunnery Lieutenant to the cruiser HMS Brilliant. He rose rapidly up the ranks. In 1905 he was made a Commander; in 1908 he was posted to the Royal Yacht HMY Victoria and Albert; in 1911, he was promoted to Captain; and in 1913 sent to Simonstown as Flag Captain of HMS Hyacinth. He commanded Admiral King-Hall's flagship in the operations against the Königsberg and was Mentioned in Despatches. From 1918 to 1919, he was posted to command the battleship HMS Ajax in the Grand Fleet. In 1921 he was appointed aide-de-camp to King George V. Promoted to Rear Admiral in 1922, he was invested as a Companion of the Order of the Bath in 1923 and posted to China until 1925, serving as the Senior Naval Officer, Yangtze, and briefly as temporary Commander-in-Chief China Station. In 1926, he was appointed to command Africa Station, Simonstown. During his time in this command, he was promoted to Vice Admiral in 1927. (See photo above.) He briefly served as High Commissioner to the Union of South Africa in 1928 and was later Governor of Newfoundland in 1932 and New South Wales in 1935. After a short illness, he died suddenly at work in Sydney, Australia, in 1936.

Naval Censor Marks.

The SAW (South African War 1899 - 1902) gave servicemen the expectation of easily sending and receiving letters. It also gave the British Army the experience of implementing country-wide censorship. As a result, Britain's Post Office Act 1908 anticipated a possible future need for national censorship.

Was the Royal Navy prepared for censorship when WW1 began? I have seen no naval censorship marks used in Simonstown during the SAW prior to the outbreak of WW1. It appears that this requirement possibly caught the Navy flat-footed. The early 'PASSED BY CENSOR' (PBC) mark (below) appears to be an ad hoc effort made using an off-the-shelf 'John Bull-type' rubber stamp kit.



1914. Postcard. SIMONSTOWN 'DE 4 14' to CHATHAM, GB.
Kit-type purple 'PASSED BY CENSOR' mark. Cachet appears hurriedly hand-made.



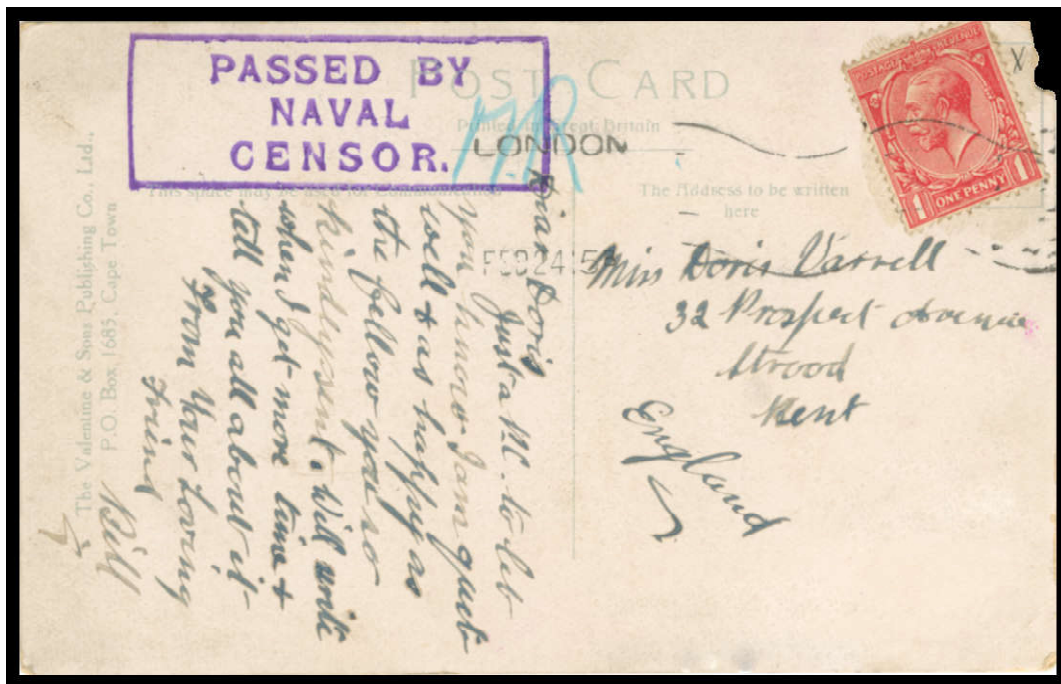
HMS Hyacinth - 'PASSED BY CENSOR'
(Gould 6B74)

With time, proper PBC handstamps were produced. PBC marks are many and varied. The PBC mark on the Hyacinth cover is a large, double-circle type with well-balanced lettering, probably made of steel. It is not known how or when it was issued to Hyacinth. Was it in peacetime or after the start of WW1?

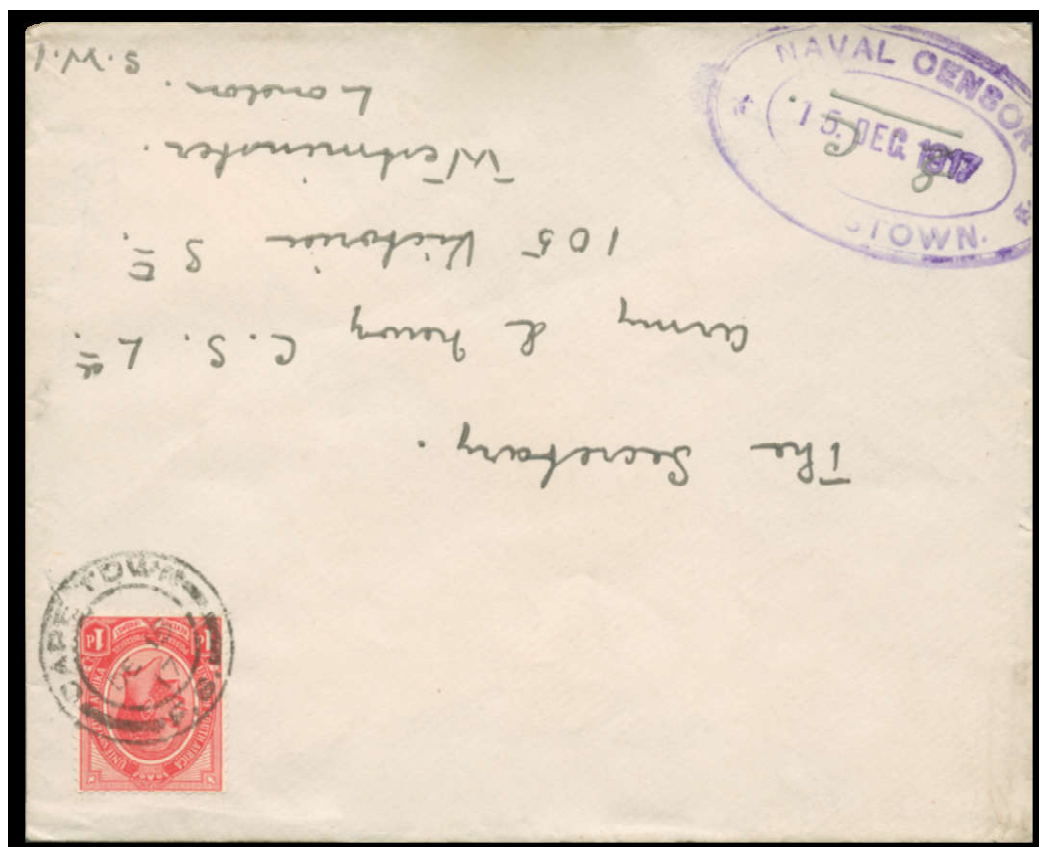
The Hyacinth cover is arguably a 'PBC proving piece' as it comes from a named serving crew member using Hyacinth's embossed stationery. A poorly drawn copy of this PBC mark or similar is listed as '6B74' in Dr. M. H. Gould's *'British Naval Post & Censor Marks' of the First World War*.

Naval Censorship was hated by the crew who had to serve alongside the junior officers who read and censored their mail. If anything private needed to be written to a wife or girlfriend, the officer would know about it. In the confines of a ship the embarrassed men could not avoid the censoring officer. Only after a long public campaign did seamen receive self-censoring 'Honour Mail' envelopes similar to the Army's.

Improved Naval Censorship Handstamps: 1915 - 1917.



1915. Simonstown Postcard ex-HMS Albion, Cape Station battleship (Oct 1914 - Jan 1915). Posted in West Africa en route to the Dardanelles. Received LONDON 'FEB 24 15'. Purple Ship 'PASSED BY NAVAL CENSOR' Mark - (Gould TD 51 - HMS Albion).



1917. Cover. NAVAL CENSOR SIMONSTOWN '15 DEC 1917' via CAPE TOWN FS to GB. Censored and marked with purple Naval Base 'NAVAL CENSOR SIMONSTOWN'. Posted in Cape Town at the FS (Foreign Service) counter 'DE 15 17'. Ex-Dr J. Frank.

Paquebot Marks - Some Background.



**1967. Philatelic Paquebot Cover. LUDERITZ '26 SEP 67' to GB. Unknown ship.
4d GB stamp affixed. Posted at sea, cancelled LUDERITZ PAQUEBOT, mailed SWA to GB.
Cover is addressed to Roger Hosking, author of *'Paquebot Cancellations of the World'*.**

The late 19th Century saw huge growth in European mail ship and cargo/passenger liner services that encouraged international travel. However, when sending letters home, passengers and crew aboard ships faced obstacles posting mail in foreign ports. Before a letter could be posted, the sender had to go ashore, exchange a small amount of money, purchase a local postage stamp, affix it to the letter and post it.

In 1892 the Swiss-based Universal Postal Union decreed that all ships were their own sovereign territory while on the high seas and outside of territorial waters. This allowed ships to act as postage authorities in their own right. Starting in 1894, Paquebot mail was soon an international convention that allowed ships' passengers and crew to write letters, add stamps from the country in which the ship was registered and to post them in the ship's mailbox on board the ship at sea for onward dispatch at the next port of call.

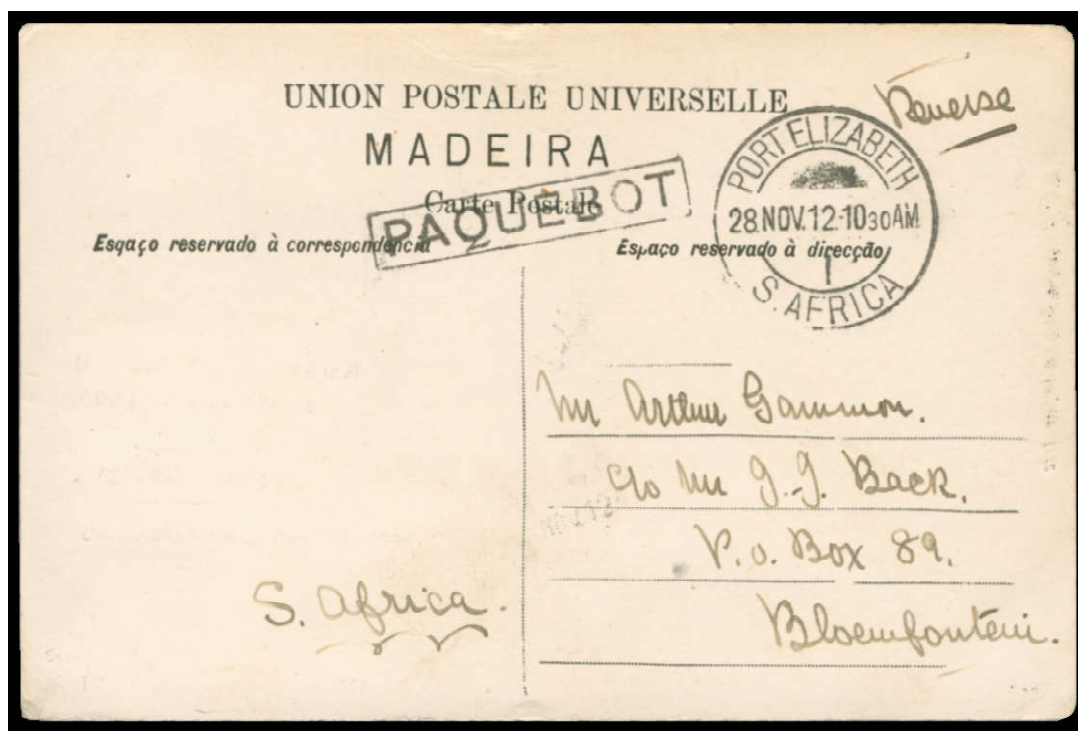
Passengers and sailors were required to use the stamps of the country whose flag the vessel flew. It was also permissible for their letters to bear the receiving country's stamps provided these were posted in the ship's mailbox, sometimes also called the 'closed mail bag'. The mail bag was taken to the nearest post office by a crew member, often the ship's purser, for entry into the UPU's international postal system.

The earliest example of South Africa's first boxed rectangular Paquebot mark are in 1902 in Port Elizabeth. Ralph Putzel in *'Postmarks of South Africa....'* records two boxed rectangular types that were introduced in Cape Town, one "prior to 1910". This was the Omnibus-type which was issued to all or most Cape ports.

While these were widely used for almost 50 years, Hosking states that the use of the boxed rectangular Paquebot mark, (his 2737, rated "D - rare"), in the Simonstown Naval base is "only recorded in 1915". It is this limited use during WW1 in Simonstown that makes the Omnibus Paquebot mark so scarce on cover.

The limited use of the Omnibus Paquebot mark in Simonstown is probably because it was a Naval Base, not a trading port. Naval mail went to Simonstown post office where it entered the SA postal system by special agreement as 'normal' mail for transmission, domestic or overseas. Merchant ships, however, had to use Paquebot mail to gain access to the SA postal system. They were uncommon visitors to Simonstown except when shipping was re-routed, as was the case when the Turks blocked the Suez Canal in 1915.

Non-Naval use of the 'Omnibus' Paquebot Mark



**1912. Paquebot Postcard. Posted aboard the 'Balmoral Castle' at sea.
Cancelled UNION OF SOUTH AFRICA - OCEAN P.O.2 '12 NOV 12' (Front).
Mail taken ashore and stamped PORT ELZABETH 1 '28 NOV 12' and PAQUEBOT (Hosking 2737).
Dispatched to BLOEMFONTEIN. Ex-Dr J. Frank.**

Used in Port Elizabeth from 1902 - 1960, the rectangular boxed 'Omnibus' Paquebot mark enjoyed a long life in most South African ports. It is believed that during WW1 it was used in Simonstown only in 1915.



Reverend Horak and his wife were collectors of mail 'curiosities'. The small but inordinate number of local mail letters addressed to them with postage stamps obliterated by Cape Cork Cancellers suggest that he and his wife used their influence to get local post-masters to favour cancel letters. It is conceivable that this Paquebot cover originated to serve their postal history interests.

**1913. Inter-Provincial Paquebot Cover. MOSSEL BAY '26 JAN 13' to MOSSEL BAY.
Received from either the 'R.M.S Briton' or 'Kenilworth Castle' with PAQUEBOT (2737).
2 x 1/2d Transvaal stamps cancelled with old Cape Colony 3 Line datestamp. Ex-Dr J. Frank.**

BONC (Barred Oval Numeral Cancellor) 27



BONC 27
was used in
Simonstown
from
1863 - 1901

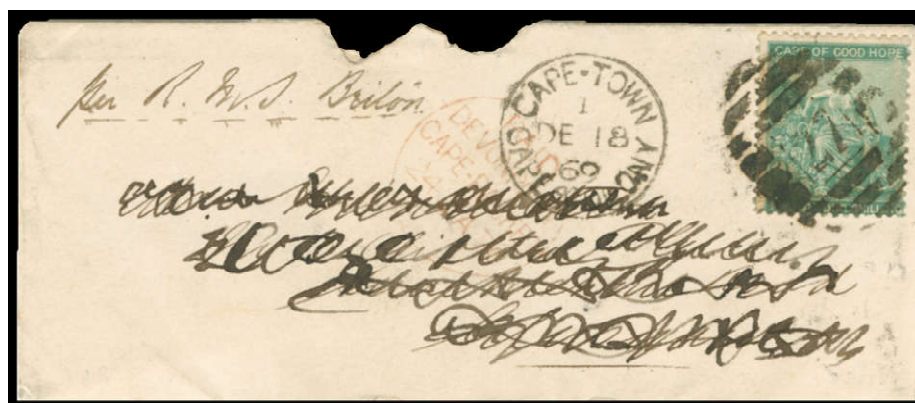


**1868. Proving Cover. SIMONSTOWN 'AP 21 68' to CAPE TOWN 'AP 21 68'.
'Penny Post' 1d red obliterated with Simonstown's BONC 27.
Dispatched dated with Simonstown's DTO (Dated Town Oval).**

It was previously believed that Simonstown's BONC 27 was issued in 1864 (Goldblatt). Research by Franco Frescura suggests that the first use of BONC 1 in Cape Town was in February 1863. He argues that BONC 27 was issued to Simonstown "as a priority shortly after" Cape Town. Given that the Royal Navy had a vital need for efficient postal communications to and from its Cape Naval Base, the early supply of new handstamps to Simonstown Post Office emphasises its importance to the Royal Navy.

Another leading specialist in the study of Cape BONCs is David Mordant whose monograph, '*Cape of Good Hope BONCs*' is now available as a free SAPC resource. Despite collaborating with Frescura his listing of BONC 27 states that Simonstown received this BONC in 1868, almost five years later. Mordant lists BONC 27 as being used in Simonstown from '24-Mar-68' to '30-Aug-01'. Whatever the correct start date, this is far less important than the fact that both only record BONC 27 as used in Simonstown.

The Paquebot expert Roger Hosking was a Maritime Man from crow's nest to keel. He saw the Hyacinth cover's scarce WW1 Paquebot mark as its outstanding feature. BONCs were not his land-lubbing field. When I first saw the 'Hyacinth cover', its BONC was described as '17', a number only known used in George, one never recorded in Simonstown whose only known number was '27' until now.



**1869. Proving Cover 'SIMONSTOWN 'DE 18 69' (reverse) via CAPE TOWN to GLASGOW.
'Per R.M.S. Briton'. Overseas rate 1/- shilling green obliterated with Simonstown's BONC 27.
Dispatch dated from Simonstown with Single Circle datestamp on reverse.**

Simonstown BONC 27

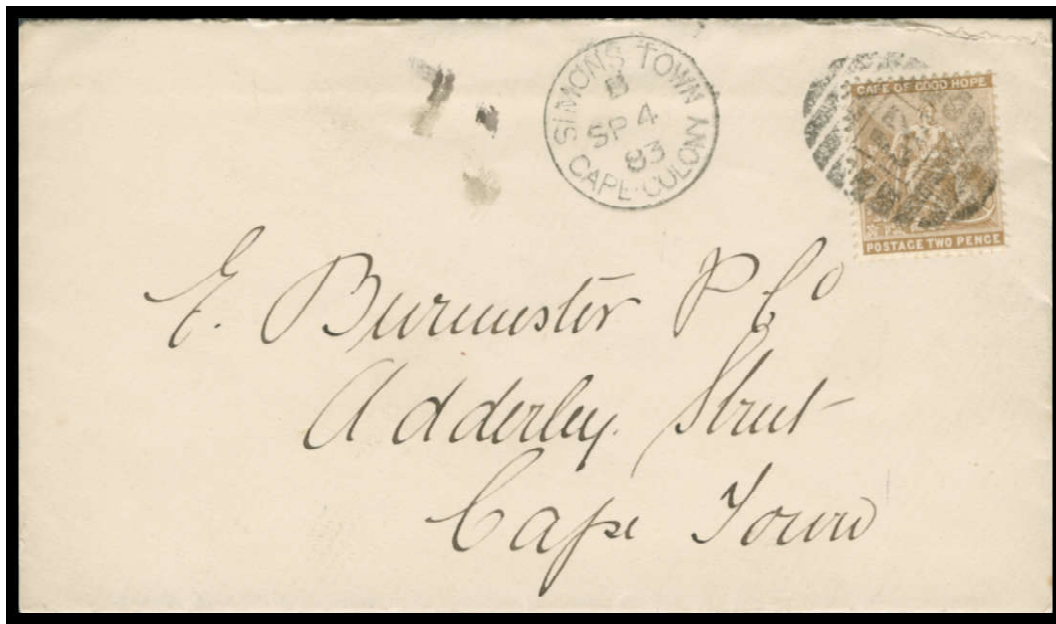
Cape Post Offices were allocated a largely unique BONC numeral. BONC numbers can be linked to a town of origin because the Cape Post Office required that a double strike with different handstamps be made on each letter. In the first instance, the stamp had to be obliterated by a BONC to prevent any re-use. In the second, the letter was to receive the town's datestamp. While both were intended to show the Post Office where the cover came from, ie. BONC 27 = Simonstown, it was the job of the town datestamp to reveal when and how long the letter took to reach its destination. Covers that link a BONC number to a town are called 'proving pieces' or 'proving covers'. No BONC other than 27 has been known to be associated with Simonstown - until now (April 2021).



Ex-HMS Dido.
Reverse.



1872. Proving Cover. SIMONS TOWN 'MY 13 72' to CAPE TOWN 'MY 13 72'.
'Penny Post' 1d COGH red obliterated with BONC 27.
Dispatch dated with Simonstown's Single Circle datestamp on reverse.



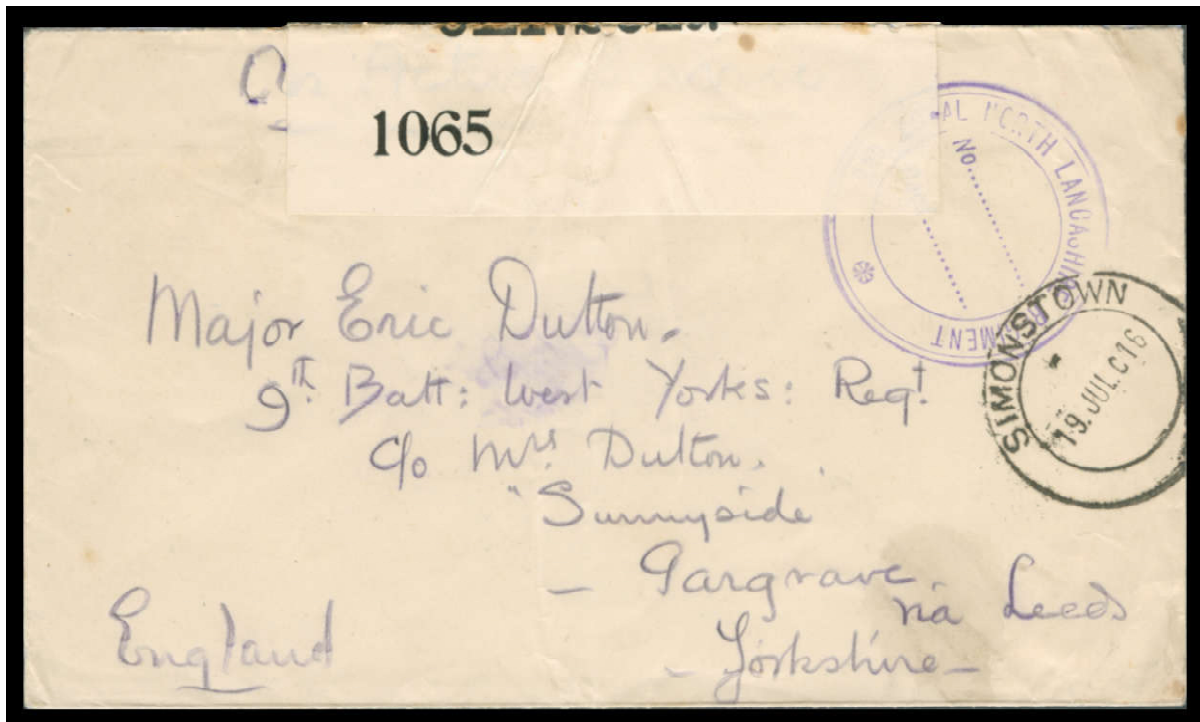
1883. Proving Cover. SIMONS TOWN 'SP 4 83' to CAPE TOWN 'SP 4 83'.
New rate 2d COGH pale bistre obliterated with BONC 27.
Dispatch dated with Simonstown's Single Circle datestamp on front.

The Large Double Circle Datestamp (LDC1): 1915



It is this common SIMONSTOWN Double Circle Datestamp that confirms that the 'Hyacinth cover' is a part of the town's postal and naval history. There are many covers from the WW1 period that show it used in Simonstown. Below is one from 1916.

The unilingual LDC1 was the first and largest of the Simonstown double circle datestamps. It was the first to spell 'Simonstown' as one word, a naming convention that would persist until 1990. The LDC1 was issued sometime after Union and before the start of WW1 in 1914. It has a one-Line date slug, an erect 'S' and is notable for being the only large Simonstown LDC with two narrow 'O's. The town name is balanced evenly within the datestamp. Two varieties are known, with and without Time Code Letter.



1916. OAS Cover. SIMONSTOWN '19 JUL 16' to LEEDS, ENGLAND (undated).

The cover was dispatched with the LDC1 datestamp, (narrow, thin 'O's). No GB receiving mark.

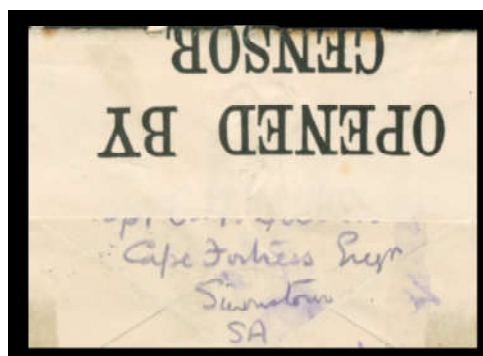
It bears the purple regimental cachet of the Royal North Lancs Regiment.

The letter has been opened and sealed with a GB Censor Label 1065.

Cape Fortress Engineers, Simonstown

The letter was opened by a censor on its arrival in GB. (The reduced part example shown right is a typical British censor label of WW1. It is not of SA origin.)

The Sender was attached to the CFE (Cape Fortress Engineers), a military unit head-quartered in Simonstown because a]. the Naval base needed fortifying, as did b]. the entire Cape Peninsula



1916. Reduced facsimile reverse of cover above.

due to its strategic importance and c]. because the Royal Navy had a workshop and more engineering expertise and equipment to draw on than the SA Army at that time.

The CFE relocated to Roberts Heights, Transvaal, in 1922 where it was disbanded in 1933, merging with the newly-formed SA Engineers Corp.

The War For Naval Supremacy on Lake Tanganyika: 1914 - 1915

The Germans scuttled the Königsberg on 11th July 1915. They set about removing the armaments from the Königsberg and supplying these to Colonel von Lettow-Vorbeck who used them to prolong the fighting. But now the Royal Navy had another problem - the German 'Navy' reigned supreme on Lake Tanganyika. It had three armed ships on the lake. The Allies had none. The largest German ship was the 1,600 ton SS Goetzen, a cargo and passenger ferry which allowed the Germans to move around the lake to launch attacks on Allied troops. She was not fast but as the only heavily armed vessel on the lake, speed was not critical

The Goetzen was built in Germany in 1913, then taken apart and shipped in 5000 boxes on three cargo vessels to Dar es Salaam in 1914. The cargo was transported by train to Kigoma where she was re-assembled and launched on 5th February 1915.

She was immediately converted to an armed auxiliary with the addition of a 105mm gun (4") from the scuttled Königsberg, plus an 88mm (3") and two 37mm Hotchkiss revolver guns. She was the biggest and most powerful ship on Lake Tanganyika and served as the inspiration for the German gunboat in C. S. Forester's 1935 novel, 'The African Queen'.

The Germans appointed Oberleutnant zur See Siebel captain of SMS Goetzen. Under his command the powerfully armed Goetzen gave the Germans complete supremacy on Lake Tanganyika. This was an intolerable situation for the British and Belgians. It was imperative for the success of their East African campaign that they take control of the lake.

To counter the German gunboats, two fast 40 foot motor launches armed with 3 pdr guns, HMS Mimi and HMS Tou-Tou, were shipped from Britain to Cape Town. These were then railed 2,300 miles by train via Elisabethville in the Belgian Congo to Fungurume, the end of the line. Mimi and Tou-Tou were then dragged overland to connect with rivers and railways that took them to Albertville on Lake Tanganyika where they were launched.

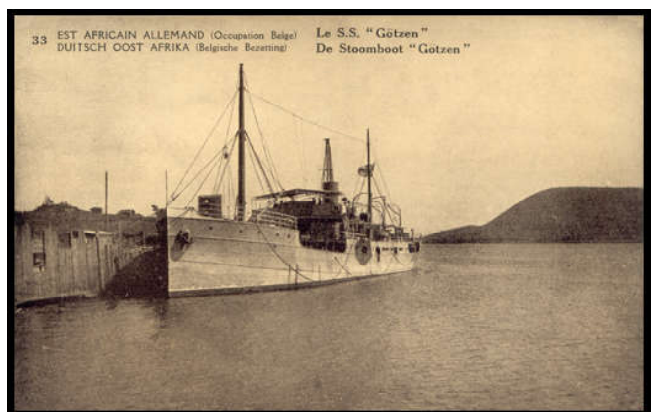
They made a successful surprise attack on slower German vessels operating on the lake, capturing the gunboat Kingani and sinking the armed steamboat Hedwig von Wissmann. With both sides declining to give further battle - the British boats were faster than the SMS Goetzen which had the bigger gun - the German ship retreated southwards until it was ordered to be scuttled. This was effected by the three engineers who had come out from Germany to assemble the ship. They scuttled her in such a way that would allow salvage later. This occurred in 1918. After considerable expense, she re-entered service in 1927 as MV Liemba and is still sailing today almost 100 years later.



**The Königsberg lies scuttled in the Rufiji Delta.
The Germans salvaged her guns and ammunition.**



**A Königsberg 105mm gun installed on the Goetzen.
The naval gunners are from the Königsberg.**



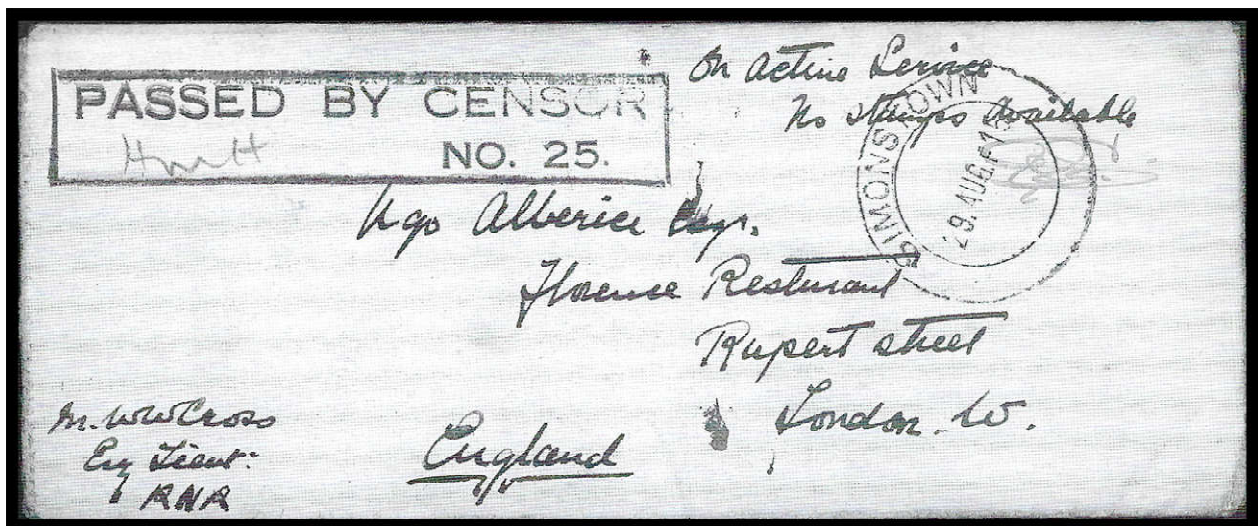
**Circa 1918. Reduced postcard.
The steamboat 'Goetzen' in Belgian hands.**

Naval Africa Expedition

Mimi and Tou-Tou were then dragged 100 miles overland to the railhead at Sankisia (see photo below) from where they entrained 15 miles to Bukama on the Lulaba River. They were then floated and or transported on lighters some 400 miles downstream to Kabalo. From there the last leg of their journey was a 175 mile rail journey to Lukuga on the western shore of Lake Tanganyika. No time was wasted in preparing Mimi and Tou-Tou for action. They were launched in December 1915.



1915. Photograph. Steam tractor hauling HMS Mimi and HMS Tou-Tou overland to Sankisia.



1915 Lettersheet. Marked OAS. PBC 25. SIMONSTOWN '29 AUG 15' to London..

Headed "Aug 14th 1915, Belgian Congo", this letter has come from a member of the "Naval Africa Expedition", an attempt to take naval control of Lake Tanganyika. Endorsed "On Active Service, No Stamps Available" and signed "M.W W Cross, Eng. Lieut, RNR", its boxed "PASSED BY CENSOR NO. 25" is initialed "HMH" (Surgeon-Captain H.M. Henschell). Cross gives his address as "c/o Senior Naval Officer, Simonstown, S. Africa". The letter above has the same LDC1 datestamp as 'The Hyacinth Cover'. There can be no doubting the letter's Simonstown, South Africa, connection. But why did this letter from the Belgian Congo travel to London via Simonstown? And how? Was Naval mail from the GEA theatre now required to be routed through Simonstown, as per the 'Hyacinth Cover'? *Argyll-Etkin (25 Nov. 2005).*

The Royal Navy Challenges for control of Lake Tanganyika: 1916



1915. Photograph. HMS Mimi on the Lualaba River. She is possibly being loaded onto a lighter at Kabalo.



Mail from the Naval Africa Expedition was routed through Simonstown where it received the scarce 1915 omnibus rectangular Paquebot mark below

PAQUEBOT

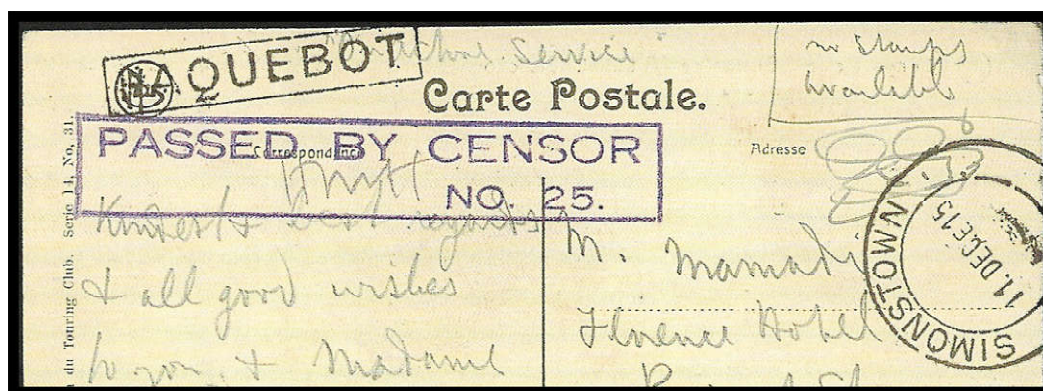
Below, is part of another item that passed through Simonstown in 1915. This postcard has been stamped with the scarce boxed rectangular Simonstown PAQUEBOT mark 'of 1915'. It is the second of three known examples of this PAQUEBOT mark used in Simonstown. As it bears the same violet boxed "PASSED BY CENSOR NO. 25" handstamp as the letter above and is also initialled "HMH" by Surgeon-Captain H.M. Henschell, this postcard of Basoko, Belgian Congo, was presumably also sent by a member of the "Naval Africa Expedition". It too has been routed from Central Africa via Simonstown to London. It is endorsed "On Active Service, No Stamps Available". It is signed "C.T. Tyrer, RNVR, WAF" and was received with the same LDC1 datestamp as 'The Hyacinth Cover'.

Argyll-Etkin (25 Nov. 2005).

Both the SIMONSTOWN datestamp and the PAQUEBOT mark use what appears to be the same ink. This suggests they were applied together in Simonstown. Why did this postcard receive a PAQUEBOT mark but the one above it did not? Perhaps the top letter was bought to Simonstown by a Naval vessel who entered its transported mail into Simonstown's Naval Mail system. The partial postcard below possibly arrived in Simonstown on a non-Navy vessel who delivered its mail to the Post Office. If a stamp had been affixed to this postcard, would it have been cancelled with the same BONC as "The Hyacinth Cover"? *Argyll-Etkin (25 Nov. 2005)*

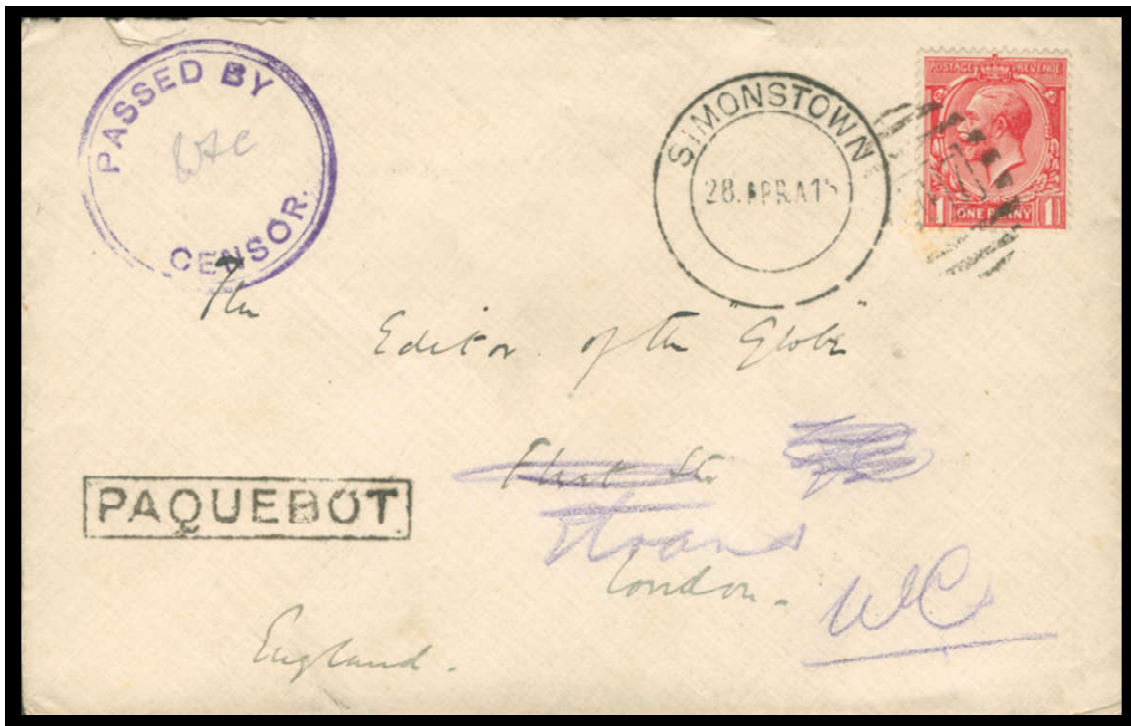


1915. Photograph. HMS Tou-Tou ready for action on Lake Tanganyika.



1915 Part Postcard. Marked OAS. PBC 25 SIMONSTOWN '11 DEC 15' to London Datestamp.

Back to the Hyacinth Cover - What we know and don't know!



1915. Proving Piece showing PBC, scarce Simonstown PAQUEBOT mark and unrecorded BONC.

How did the 'Hyacinth Cover' receive its postmarks?

The cover was written aboard HMS Hyacinth by 'ROBB' and addressed to the Globe newspaper in London. Robb applied a 1d GB stamp to his letter which received an initialled 'PASSED BY CENSOR' mark aboard ship. Undated, it went into a 'ship's bag'. Hyacinth could not have carried it to Simonstown as she remained in the Indian Ocean blockading GEA until 27th July 1915. The letter was transported to Simonstown where on arrival it was delivered to the Simonstown Post office who duly obliterated the 1 red GB stamp with a BONC, possibly one specially supplied or found for the purpose of cancelling wartime Paquebot mail. The letter was dated '28 APR 15' with a large double circle datestamp and given a 'PAQUEBOT' mark with a boxed rectangular handstamp. Examination of the BONC, Datestamp and Paquebot mark suggests the ink is the same ie. all were applied in Simonstown.

"Why did this cover from a Royal Navy ship receive a Paquebot mark in a Royal Navy base?"

Paquebot marks are uncommon on Simonstown's naval mail - except in wartime. The vast bulk of naval mail sent from Simonstown was processed as if it was South African mail. The Royal Navy had an agreement with the Simonstown PO to process its mail as per 'normal'. So, if a bag containing Navy mail was transported to Simonstown and the mail was handed over to the Naval postal authorities on its arrival, the Navy would route the mail to the Simonstown PO for onward transmission through normal mail channels. A Paquebot mark suggests that this did not happen. It is likely that a non-Navy ship transported the 'Hyacinth Cover' to Simonstown. On arrival, it was not handed over to the Navy but taken by a member of the crew to the Simonstown PO which processed it according to UPU Paquebot requirements - the GB stamp was obliterated, the cover given a Simonstown Datestamp and a PAQUEBOT mark.

Could the postmarks have been applied in another 'Simonstown' and or aboard a ship?

Simonstown, South Africa, was the Royal Navy's Cape Station base. Hyacinth was its flagship. The PBC mark was applied aboard Hyacinth. Simonstown's common Double Circle datestamp appears on the cover. Stamps on mail were not cancelled aboard ship as this would nullify the value of the stamp when brought ashore for mailing by a UPU postal authority. There is no datestamp to show it was cancelled in Zanzibar - or elsewhere. If a Zanzibar postal authority had cancelled the stamp, they would be expected to have posted the letter. They did not. It was cancelled with a BONC and posted in Simonstown!

More Questions and Some Answers

Why transport it to Simonstown? Why not post it in Zanzibar?

Simonstown was a key naval base and the headquarters of the Cape Station. In early 1915 its main activity was the blockade of GEA. Naval and supply ships were sailing to and from Simonstown all the time. Several mail ships were also serving as armed auxiliary cruisers. Any of them, as well as the merchant ships ferrying supplies, could have carried Hyacinth's mail to Simonstown. As seen from preceding Belgian Congo covers, naval mail from Central Africa was being routed to GB via Simonstown. This was chiefly because the Suez Canal was closed due to a German-led Ottoman Turk attack in late January 1915. Its closure forced mail to take the longer route from GEA / Zanzibar via the Cape to reach GB. Turkish raids, attacks and mine-laying operations continued to disrupt shipping along the Suez Canal until September 1915. The 'Hyacinth Cover' arrived in Simonstown during this time, April 1915.

So what happened next? How did the Hyacinth cover reach GB?

Once processed as Paquebot mail in the Simonstown PO, this letter entered the Union of South Africa's mail system. Normal procedure was to send Simonstown's mail to Cape Town by train. On arrival it was usually, (not always), stamped with a receiving datestamp. Although no Cape Town transit mark was applied, the 'Hyacinth Cover' departed the Cape on the earliest mailship, arriving in London on 'MY 21 15'. At some point, a Royal Mail employee re-routed the letter from Fleet Street to the Strand. Having reached its destination, someone at the Globe decided that the 'Hyacinth Cover' was worth keeping.

Decades later, Roger Hosking acquired it and wrote it up in his book, rating it "D" (rare). Dr J Frank then acquired it at the Cavendish auction. (We know this because he was sitting next to my friend, Bob Hill, when he successfully bid on it!) Hosking and Dr Frank were respectively Paquebot and Maritime experts who recognised the scarcity of the PAQUEBOT mark. However, neither were BONC enthusiasts. Neither spotted the significance of the BONC which, to be fair to them, is partial and not entirely legible.

Is this cover a "Proving Piece?"

Yes and No. It proves that the 'PASSED BY CENSOR' handstamp was used aboard HMS Hyacinth and that the 'PAQUEBOT' mark was applied in 'SIMONSTOWN'. However, as the BONC numeral is largely illegible and not obvious, it proves nothing. So, most disappointingly, it is not an obvious BONC proving piece. At best, and importantly, it tells us that another BONC other than 27 was used in Simonstown. The value of this cover lies, as Hosking and Dr Frank both realised, in its scarce '1915 only' Paquebot mark.



If it is NOT Simonstown BONC 27, what numeral is it?

This experiment was done in Photoshop in the hope of determining:
a]. the BONC number and, failing that,
b]. to determine how many numerals were held within the BONC numeral.

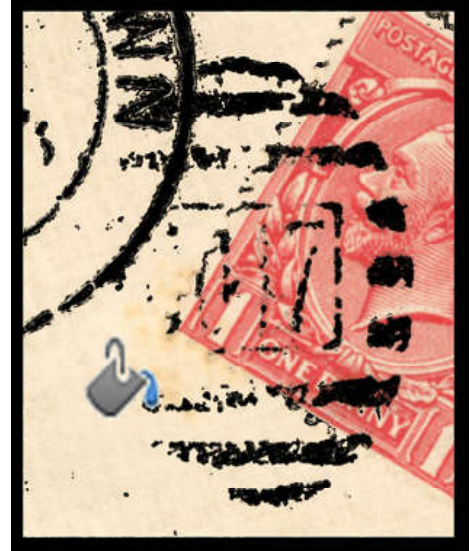


LEFT:

I began by making a 600 dpi hi-res scan of the image

RIGHT:

I then used the Paint Bucket tool to drop black into all the areas of grey BONC. This allowed me to see parts of the image a little more clearly. In doing so, I created a few small areas of black that shouldn't have been there, like down the outside of the LHS perforations.

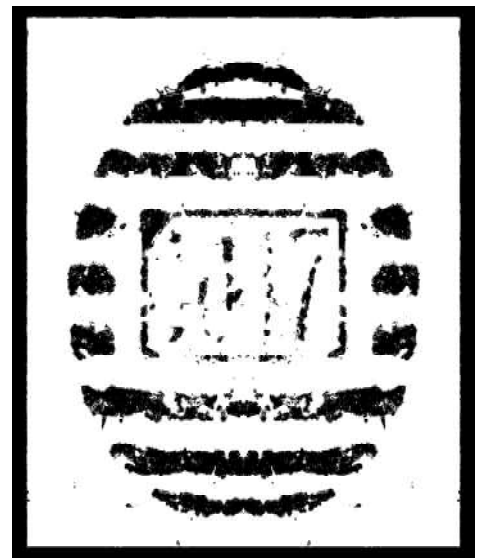


LEFT:

I then removed the bits of black perforation and the datestamp, leaving as far as possible just the BONC.

RIGHT:

I then selected all the areas of black and copied them to a new Layer. I copied this layer and horizontally flipped it over itself, creating a composite of the full BONC. I did not flip the central numeral rectangle.



RESULT:

The result is mixed and inconclusive. I was disappointed that I was unable to see the BONC numeral more clearly but then, to be fair, there was very little to work within the first two numerals.

One needs to be wary of making judgements based on what one thinks one sees (or should be there!). Often these may be optical illusions. For example, this would appear to be a four numeral BONC in which the two middle numerals look like '0 1'. It may be but this effect of the '0' is partly due to the curve made by the stamp's perforations that had caught dirt and ink.

Despite the BONC right above looking rotund compared to the partial image left, it fits over the image. Importantly, this experiment shows that there is potentially space for four numerals within the rectangle.

This is useful to know. The next question must be "What four numerals ending in '7' could it be?"

A Process of Elimination for a Four Numeral BONC ending in '7'



MY BONC '1017'.



DAVID'S BONC '1147'.

My first choice was BONC '1017'. I wrote as much to David Mordant, a leading BONC specialist whose monograph *'The Barred Oval Numeral Cancellers of the Cape of Good'* is now available as a free resource on the SA Philately Club website. I hoped that he would confirm my suspicion that the 'Hyacinth Cover' bore BONC 1017. David's answer took me by surprise. He replied, saying "I have looked at my BONC reference collection, done measurements on an exploded version of your strike, and settled on 1147 as the most probable. It is definitely 'one, one, something, seven'. Measurements indicate the second last numeral is probably a 4. I have put it in the Master Copy and will probably put in a qualification "needs confirmation" in the comments section. So let's leave it like that until another cover turns up."

I suddenly found myself sympathising with Bartholomew Dias who was blown out to sea by a storm, out of sight of land for a month, then north-east again to find that once the storm had calmed the land now appeared on the wrong side of the ship. Wow! How did that happen? It was very pleasing to know that I was being listed as "the discoverer" but to be honest, I certainly didn't think I had found anything. We were no closer to knowing what the BONC numeral was. Still, David had opened my eyes to the third numeral being a '4' based on spacing and what we could see, a vertical 'pillar'. His idea of looking at the spacing that the numeral occupied made me think - and doubt what he had said about this being "definitely 'one, one, something, seven'". There was too much space between the first two numerals.

Robert Goldblatt (*'Postmarks of the Cape of Good Hope', 1984*) and David Mordant (*'The Barred Oval Numeral Cancellers of the Cape of Good Hope from 1863 to 1963', 2020*) both list BONC numerals no higher than '2001'. Therefore, if this BONC number is a four numeral one, (as my experiment suggests), the first numeral is either a '1' or a '2' and the number cannot be any higher than '2001'.

The First Numeral

As the number ends in a '7', it cannot start with a '2'. We both agree the first numeral is a '1'.

The Second Numeral

David is of the opinion that the second numeral is a '1'. The large space created by the second numeral does not suggest two '1's standing side-by-side to me. It is conceivable that the tall straight pillar we believe we see is a '1' but my PhotoShop experiment suggests that the second numeral is a wide number rather than a narrow '1'. At first I thought this second numeral a '0' on account of the space that only a wide numeral could occupy and also what looked like a curving line. I dismissed this after I realised that the stamp's perforations had influenced the appearance of this curve. Nevertheless, the idea that it was a '0' persisted.

Given the space to be filled, it could also be a '4' but only two four numeral BONCS are known starting '14' - '1402' and '1412'. As my BONC numeral ends in a '7', it cannot be either of these. The only numeral it could be is either David's '1' - or something else. While

I bow to David's expert judgement, I still cannot quite discount a '0' filling the space.



The Third Numeral

This, the second last numeral, looks like a '1' but it has a wide space before the pillar of the '1' which is close to the last obvious '7'. The only numeral with a tall RHS pillar that can fit such a space is a '4'. This was David's opinion. I agree with him in this conclusion.

The Fourth and Last Numeral

About this there is no doubt. It is clearly a '7'.



On the basis of David's expertise which suggested "one, one, something, seven", I felt I had to accept BONC 1147. But then I spoke to Bob Hill about BONC 1047.....

Yet Another Surprise

I phoned Robert Hill, fishing for information on this BONC. “Both Goldblatt and Mordant list BONC 1147 against ‘CAPE’ ie. it existed but it was not known where it was used,” I said, adding that I thought “the BONC might also be 1047”. There was a pause. “Oh”, says Bob, “BONC 1047. That’s interesting. I have two sheets of BONC 1047 on piece, all very late use, roundabout the Royal Visit in 1947, plus one on cover. I will make some copies and send them to you.” Then, talking from memory he proceeded to tell me all he knew of this remarkable BONC that was last recorded used in Cape Town in 1963.

The Peripatetic BONC 1047



Circa 1900. CATHCART use of BONC 1047 on 1883 1d rose-red.

BONC 1047 was first used in Cathcart to replace BONC 301. Its recorded use in Cathcart is September 1899 to December 1902. It was used in April 1900 at Henderson’s, a nearby hotel. It was returned to the GPO Stores in Cape Town some time after 1902. Its short life suggests it was in good condition, better than others with longer working lives in busier POs. It is possible that before or during WW1 GPO Stores made BONC 1047 available to Simonstown.

Goldblatt (*Postmarks of the COGH*) lists it as used in Stellenbosch, presumably before 1910. “BONC 1047 found use as an obliterator at the Cape Town Post Office” says (*Postal Cancellers of the CGH. Vol. 1. The BONC of 1864*). (Frescura and Nethersole). Its period of recorded use in Cape Town is April 1926 to April 1963. Cape Town’s use of BONC 1047 grew exponentially during the Royal Visit in 1947 when it was used to cancel and obliterate uncanceled stamps that had travelled through the post, as well as lightly or partially struck ones.



Robert Hill

1947. CAPE TOWN. 1d red obliterated with BONC 1047 after entering postal system uncanceled.

Use of BONC 1047 during the Royal Visit

Robert Hill



Circa 1947.

CAPE TOWN use of BONC 1047 to obliterate uncanceled or insufficiently cancelled stamps on posted mail.

It would appear from BONC 1047's use in Cathcart, Henderson's, Stellenbosh and Cape Town that it was used wherever there was a need. Why not Simonstown in 1915?

Robert Hill



Robert Hill



How do these BONCs compare?



Left. Photoshop experiment superimposed over the 1915 BONCscan from which it was made. It fits.
Right. Recreation of the 1947 BONC image superimposed over the original scan. It fits.



Left: The result of superimposing the Photoshop experiment over an 1893 COGH 1d red Cathcart BONC 1047.
It fits.

Right: The result of superimposing the Photoshop experiment over a 1947 Union 1d red and black BONC 1047.
It fits.



CONCLUSION: It is my belief that the GB KGV 1d red stamp on the 'Hyacinth Cover' bears a partial strike of BONC 1047. Even if this is incorrect, this cover still has three remarkable features.

- 1]. I is a proving piece for the flagship of the Cape Station's 'PASSED BY CENSOR' mark.
- 2]. It is one of only a few examples of the Simonstown PAQUEBOT mark of 1915 on cover.
- 3]. It is the only known example of a BONC other than 27 used in Simonstown.

While it is my belief that the partial strike is BONC 1047, I cannot state categorically that it is. I agree with David Mordant that we must leave it open - 1147 or 1047 - until another cover turns up to confirm which one it is.

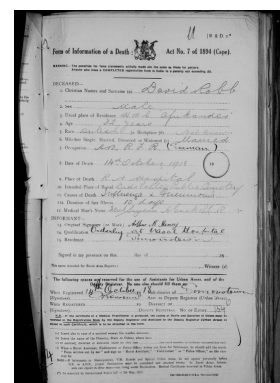
Last Post



2016. The grave of 'ROBB', the sender of the Hyacinth cover, a victim of the Spanish Flue Epidemic of 1918, in Dido Valley Cemetery, Simonstown,

Able Seaman David Robb

Birth: 1886 Age: 32
 Race: British
 Rank: AB Seaman RFR (Royal Fleet Reserve).
 Status: Married
 Served: HMS Hyacinth (to 8 Oct 1918), HMS Afrikander.*
 Place of Residence: HMS Afrikander
 Date of Death: 13 Oct 1918
 Place of Death: Royal Naval Hospital, Simonstown
 Cause of Death: Influenza and Pneumonia
 Duration of Illness: 10 Days
 Burial Place: Dido Valley Cemetery
 Plot: Naval Allotment, Row B, Grave 13.



* David Robb was taken ill aboard Hyacinth and transferred to HMS Afrikander, a shore depot or 'stone frigate', then taken to the Royal Naval Hospital, Simonstown, where he died. Spanish Influenza swept through WW1's military camps. Unlike Covid just over 100 years later that targetted the elderly, the unique feature of this influenza pandemic was its high mortality rate among healthy people, especially those in the 20-40 year age group.

Our thanks and acknowledgement to Peter H and to www.findagrave.com for their research.



THE END

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02/11/2023

If you have questions and want to contact the Club, please contact:

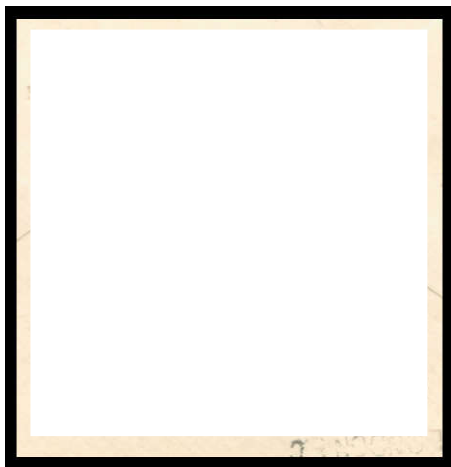
"Postmaster" <postmaster@southafricanphilatelyclub.com>

www.southafricanphilatelyclub.com

The Hyacinth Cover: 1915



1915. Cover. Passed by Censor mark from aboard HMS Hyacinth. Received SIMONSTOWN '28 APR 15'. GB 1d red obliterated with unknown BONC and boxed rectangular PAQUEBOT mark applied.



The cover is an item of HMS Hyacinth embossed stationery. Sealed 'ROBB'.

PAQUEBOT

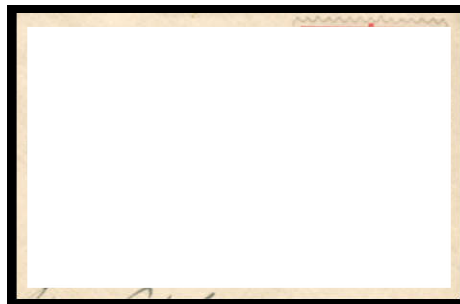
Simonstown Omnibus Rectangular Paquebot Mark only known used in 1915. This is an extremely scarce Simonstown postmark.



HMS Hyacinth 'PASSED BY CENSOR' cachet. (Gould 6B74).



Simonstown large Double Circle Datestamp: 1915



Prior to the discovery of this cover, Simonstown's only known BNC was '27', used from 1863 - 1901



This remarkable piece has pride of place in my Simonstown collection. First, it proves that the PBC was used on HMS Hyacinth. Second, it is one of only three known covers, perhaps four, to show use of the original Omnibus rectangular Paquebot mark in Simonstown during WW1. (All date from 1915.) Prior to the discovery of this cover there had been no reason to believe that any BNC (Barred Oval Numeral Cancellor) other than '27' was used in Simonstown. Research suggests that the indistinct BNC shown is 1047, a BNC with a rich and widely varied history of use right up until the Royal Visit in 1947. It is the discovery of this BNC, the first 'non-27' recorded for Simonstown, that gives me the greatest pleasure.