

# AMERICAN PHILATELIST

Journal of the American Philatelic Society

January 2011



# LUNAR NEW YEAR REVISITED



# AMERICA

## *in the Line Islands*

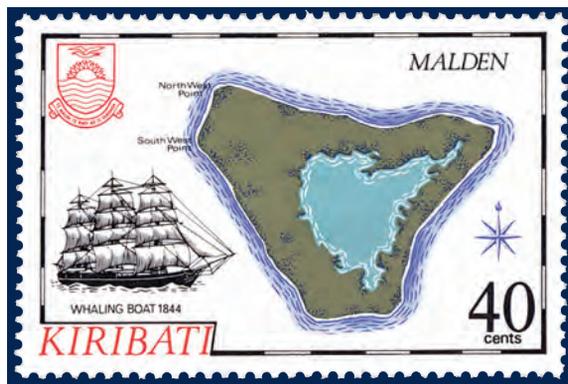
by Steve Pendleton

Deep in the South Pacific lies a mighty chain of far-flung atolls. Since on a map the islands appear to form a crude line, they are called the Line Islands. Today, most of them belong to the nation of Kiribati. Many philatelists recognize them as once being part of the Gilbert and Ellice Islands colony. Only a few are claimed by the United States; however, many of them combined have had American post offices, or at least a U.S. postal presence.

The islands are divided into two groups, the Northern and Southern. To the north are Kingman Reef, Palmyra, Washington, Fanning, Christmas, and an outlier, Jarvis. Kingman, Palmyra, and Jarvis are all American possessions, although there has been an American presence on each of the rest.

In the south are Vostok, Flint, Starbuck, Malden, and Caroline (better known today as Millennium); except for Malden, no postal history is known from any of them. They have appeared, however, on Kiribati map stamps: Vostok, Flint and Caroline share Kiribati Scott 479 (Caroline also appears on Scott 742), while Starbuck is shown on Scott 487 and Malden on Scott 478.

The Northern Line Islands have, especially considering their isolation, a very complicated postal history. There were New Zealand postal agencies on Washington and Fanning, while a local post operated on Christmas. In 1939 the post offices were taken over by the Gilbert and Ellice Islands. In the 1970s they were briefly





operated by the Gilbert Islands. Kiribati has serviced them since independence.

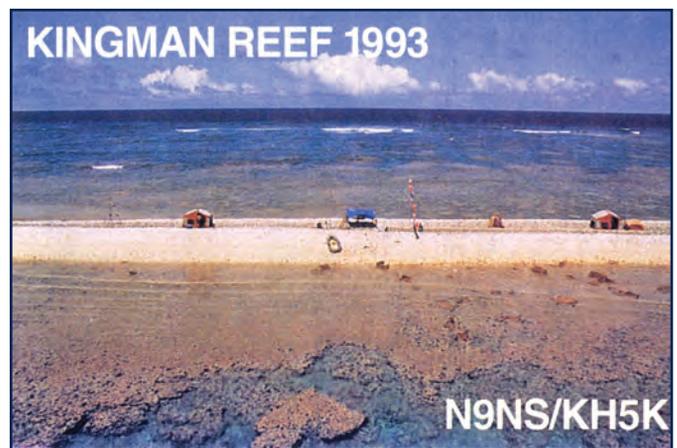
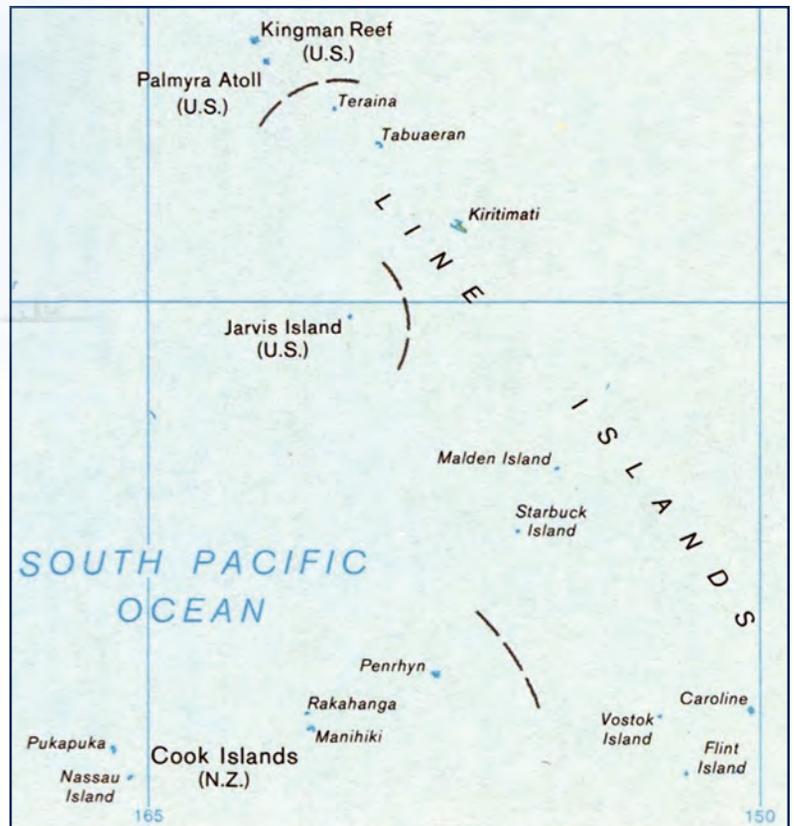
However, we are concerned here with United States postal activity. It pretty much covers the gamut of possibilities — names in killer bars of passing ships, Naval base covers, APO numbers for wartime airfields, cachets for visiting military or scientific expeditions, flight covers, even a civilian post office complete with cancels. There’s literally something here for everyone.

### Kingman Reef

The northernmost, and smallest, Line Island is Kingman Reef. It lies to the north of Palmyra and actually isn’t an island at all. It is a sunken atoll, with a tiny speck of land which is (usually) dry. At about one thousand feet long by twenty feet wide, there’s scarcely enough dry space on which to pitch a tent. When Kingman became important in the 1930s, it wasn’t because of its size. It was due to its lagoon.

The first postally recorded visit was made by the USS *Astoria* on July 20, 1934. As was customary then, the location was recorded within the ship’s canceller killer bars. Unfortunately, the clerk misspelled the name “Kingsmans.”

The next postal emission from Kingman was correctly spelled at least. Pan American Airways began to consider the reef as a stopping point for its planned clipper service from the United States to and from New Zealand. For this to work, however, the stop had to be occupied by a supply ship. The *North Wind* was dispatched, and took up station. On March 23, 1937 the PAA clipper, with Captain Edwin Musick commanding, arrived. One cover is known with a crude “REC’D-AT / KINGMAN REEF” Two others were cacheted with a similarly crude “FROM / KINGMAN / REEF,” but kept aboard the ship.



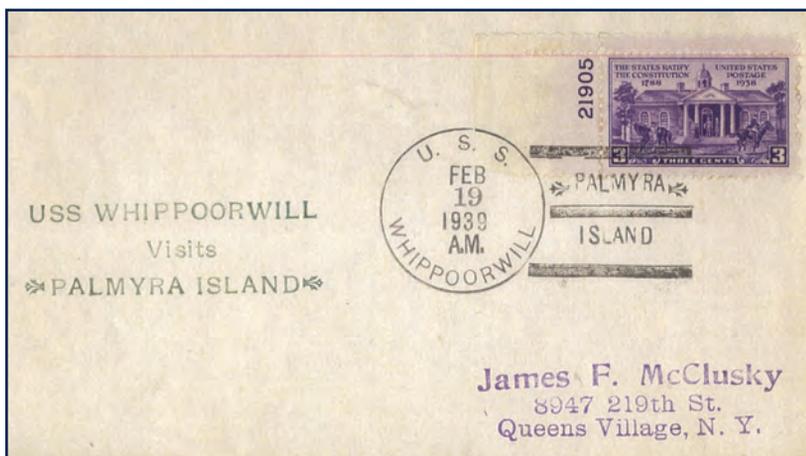
How small is Kingman Reef? This 1993 QSL card gives a pretty good idea.



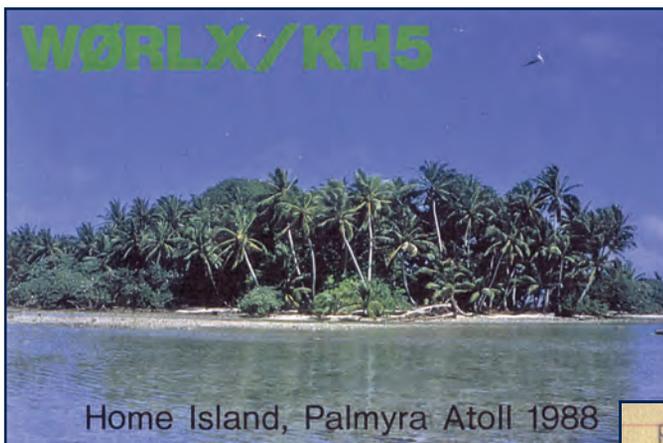
USS *Astoria* visits Kingman Reef — the island’s name is misspelled in the cancel.



First mail flight New Zealand-San Francisco stops at Kingman December 1937.

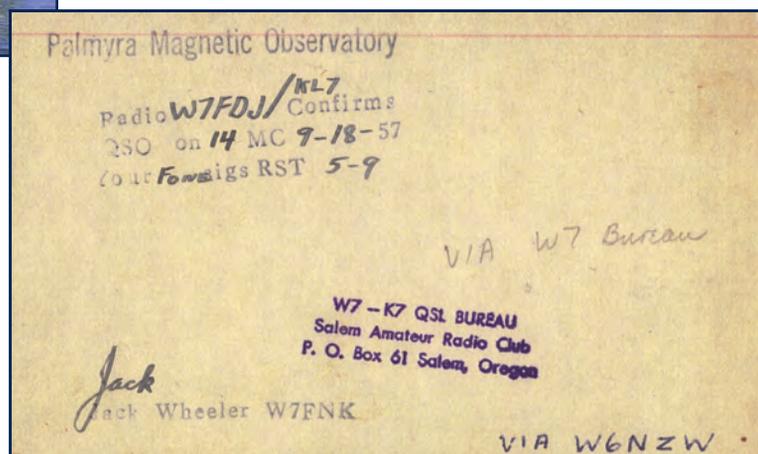


USS Whippoorwill visits Palmyra February 9, 1939.



QSL card shows one of the tiny islets that make up Palmyra.

Civilian marking from Palmyra 1957, during International Geophysical Year.



A new postal mention of Kingman was made in December 1937. The *Samoan Clipper*, with Capt. Musick again at the controls, made the San Francisco-Auckland flight. The return flight was the first air mail flight between the two countries. Covers aren't known to have been cacheted at Kingman, but there are several printed cachet varieties that show the stop.

The next Kingman flight ended in tragedy. On January 9, 1938 the *Samoan Clipper* left on Honolulu. After a stop at Kingman the plane went on to Pago Pago, American Samoa. On January 11 the plane exploded over the ocean, and all aboard were lost.

Since then Kingman has seen few visitors. A 1981 DXpedition (ham radio) broadcasted for eight days and in 1993 another DXpedition landed as well. They had QSL cards<sup>1</sup> to note the visit — both of which showed just how small the reef is.

## Palmyra

A fairly short distance southeast of Kingman lies Palmyra. Historically it was little more than a cluster of islets totaling perhaps 600 acres. It wasn't used by PAA, but was visited on many occasions by American ships, such as the USS *Whippoorwill* in 1939.

Palmyra never had a civilian post office. There was the civilian Palmyra Magnetic Observatory on the island in 1957–58 as part of the International Geophysical Year (IGY), but it only had a one-line cachet. A small detachment of American scientists were there in 1962 as atomic bomb observers. They had a one-line cachet with the letters "PLIS" (PaLmyra Island). A DXpedition in 1988 also provided pretty pictures of a jungle-covered islet. More recently, a "local post" has operated in Hawaii and has created Palmyra Island postmarks. However, there is no evidence that these ever were used on that island.

The most important aspect of the Palmyra post is military mail in the World War II era. During the late 1930s the U.S. Navy believed the island could serve as a base and, accordingly, construction of an airfield was begun in November 1939. This involved dredging a shipping channel and the construction of an unpaved air strip.

The U.S. Marine Corps used No. 535 on the atoll from March 3, 1941. This was for the 1st Marine Battalion, which served as the island garrison. One postmark type is known. Number 130 was used beginning April 18, 1942, and a Naval Construction Battalion used No. 803. Some 1942 sailors' mail was routed through Honolulu, where it received a civilian postmark.

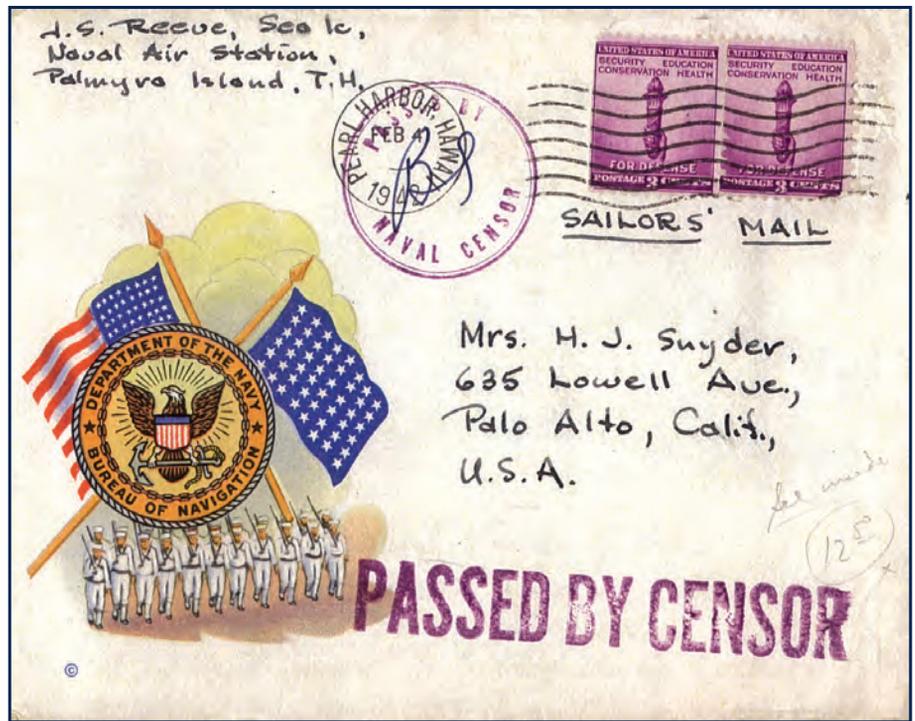
On October 10, 1942 APO No. 458 began operations on Palmyra. This number was used until May 1944. There are two varieties of APO postmarks known. Naval No. 309 also was used beginning in 1943. Its postmark is known until the base was deactivated in late 1946.

Palmyra never saw hostile action, but was a godsend to pilots flying aircraft across the Pacific. The island's original owners spent years after the war trying to have it returned. They finally were successful — only to sell it to the Nature Conservancy, which oversees it today. It is considered a prime example of an old-time atoll environment.

### Jarvis Island

The last American-claimed Line Island is Jarvis. It is the southernmost of the Northern islands and is about as close to the classic "desert island" as one can get. Its only historic use has been as a source of guano-bird droppings used for fertilizer. It's never had permanent inhabitants nor any postal arrangements. Nevertheless, there are a few postal souvenirs — none particularly easy to find.

Jarvis is not an atoll, so it wasn't considered a front-runner as a potential clipper base. However, Pan Am wanted to examine all possibilities, and in 1935 the schooner *Kinkajou* was chartered to check out some of the Line Islands. The voyage was called the "Oceanic Islands Survey" and was led by Dr. Francis Corman. Jarvis was visited

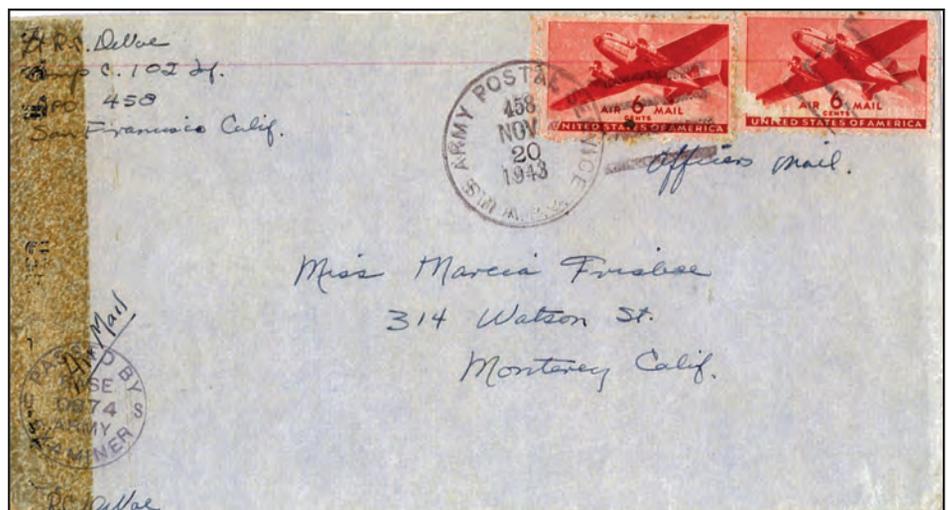


Sailors' mail from Palmyra before the APO.

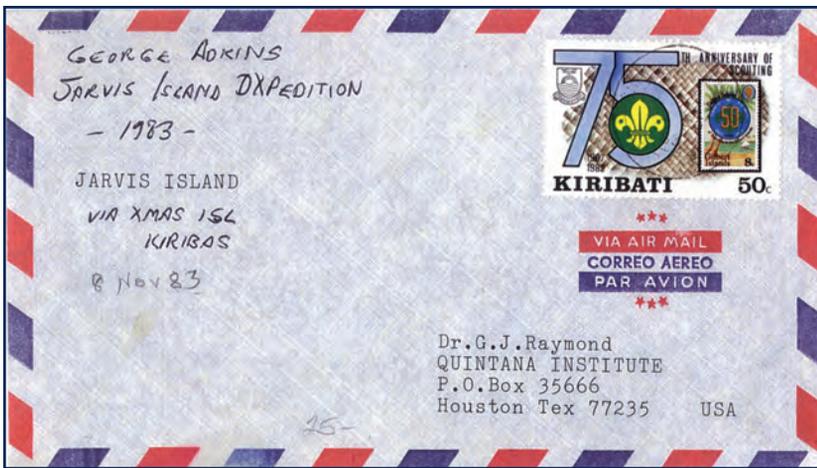
.....

**The most important aspect of the Palmyra post is military mail in the World War II era. During the late 1930s the U.S. Navy believed the island could serve as a base and, accordingly, construction of an airfield was begun in November 1939.**

.....



APO 458 used on Palmyra in November 1943. Note censor tape on left.



Cover from 1983 Jarvis Island DXpedition, canceled at Christmas Island.



Only known postal marking from Jarvis IGY station in 1958.

.....  
 Until quite recently, the only other  
 American connection to Fanning  
 was the weekly visit of a cruise  
 ship sailing from Hawaii.  
 .....



Word War II military mail from Fanning Island.

on December 29, 1935. A letter is known from that day with a one-line “Jarvis Island” cachet. Its destination was Honolulu.

Between March 26, 1935 and February 1942, Jarvis was the site of one of the “colonies” the United States planted on some of the more isolated Pacific islands. Groups of young Hawaiian men were recruited from the Kamehameha School in Hawaii for this task. They were transported to the islands and supplied mainly by the U.S. Coast Guard cutter *Itasca*, with the help of some other ships. A few pieces of mail are known from these settlers, although there are no special postal markings. There are covers from some of the *Itasca*’s voyages.

These settlements were known to the Japanese. With the outbreak of war, the one on Howland Island was bombed and two people killed. The remainder of the men were evacuated from their various isles.

The only known cachet used on Jarvis was from an oceanographic expedition that spent about a year and a half on the island in 1957–58. It used a two-line marking reading “JARVIS ISLAND / SPECIAL PROJECT STATION.”

I have acquired one other Jarvis item. In 1983 a DXpedition made a short visit to the island. A cover from this group exists with the date of November 8, 1983 and a typewritten notation. However, the cover was actually canceled at the Kiribati post office on Christmas Island.

### Fanning Island

For most of its history Fanning Island has been an exclusively British operation. It was run as a coconut plantation and had a cable station on the “All Red” line. A New Zealand postal agency had been in operation since 1902. Stamps of New Zealand were used until the office was taken over by the Gilbert and Ellice Islands postal administration in 1939.

Fanning had been bypassed by Pan Am in the 1930s, possibly because the lagoon was unsuitable for clipper aircraft. There was, however, plenty of room for an airfield, since Fanning has about 13½ square miles of land. This proved useful in World War II, as the United States found another island suitable for supporting the ferrying of aircraft to the Pacific theatre of war. APO 967 was opened February 14, 1943 at the airfield. It

remained in use until July 3, 1945. Also in use as mailing addresses were Navy nos. 128, 134, and 135.

Until quite recently, the only other American connection to Fanning was the weekly visit of a cruise ship sailing from Hawaii. While this certainly aided the local economy, no special postal activities are known.

### Christmas Island

Christmas is by far the largest Line Island. In the early twentieth century it served as a coconut plantation. That company's private stamps are among the best-known local issues. During the 1930s it was visited by American warships on a number of occasions: one of these was commemorated by the USS *Philadelphia* in 1940.

Despite its size, the island wasn't used in the 1930s as an aircraft stopping point — although it has a lagoon, it is full of coral heads. Nevertheless, like Fanning, during World War II it proved useful as an aircraft ferrying base. On February 11, 1942 APO 915 was opened; this airfield was used even after the war, with up to sixty men stationed there, until October 12, 1948. Murphy<sup>2</sup> records four different types of cancel, all single-ring datestamps.

This wasn't the last American presence, however. In the late 1950s Great Britain did a lot of atomic bomb testing in the vicinity. In 1962 the United States also used the island as a tracking base and testing site. The group assigned to the island was known as U.S. Task Force 8, and from March 1 to August 30, 1962 its assigned military number was APO 86. Three cancels are known: two are machine types and one is a handstamp.

After the testing was done, a small number of civilian personnel were hired to safeguard the material left behind. From September 15, 1962 to September 21, 1963 a civilian contract office of the Honolulu post office was open for their use. Mail was sent using U.S. postage by daily flight to Hawaii. A single-ring datestamp and a double-ring utility marker are known. A few Americans helped clean up the remains in 1966, but they didn't have a post office.

### Washington Island

The last Line Island normally has been used as a coconut plantation and has had very little to

APO 86 was located on Christmas Island during atomic tests.



USS *Philadelphia* visits Christmas Island in July 1940.

.....  
**Christmas is by far the largest Line Island. In the early twentieth century it served as a coconut plantation. That company's private stamps are among the best-known local issues.**  
 .....



APO 915 served as a rest and refueling stop for planes flying between Hawaii and Australia-New Zealand.





Civilian post office served caretakers on Christmas Island; note two cancels.

.....

**Much of this material is extremely rare — in some cases, unique. That makes it all the more interesting to find such souvenirs of a fascinating time and place.**

.....



1981 DXpedition doesn't find much room on Kingman.

## The Author

Steve Pendleton, a retired teacher, has collected Antarctica and Pacific and ocean isles for more than thirty years. He has had more than 550 articles published in philatelic and regional magazines. He also has made two voyages to Easter and Pitcairn Islands.

do with military affairs. There is only one known American connection. During the 1962 testing a two-man team arrived on Washington; their job was to test for possible fallout from the bombs. How long they stayed is not recorded; however, mail is known with an APO 86 cancel dated June 15, 1962. It also bears a cachet owned by the island plantation manager, Bill Frew.

## A Final Comment

Much of this material is extremely rare — in some cases, unique. That makes it all the more interesting to find such souvenirs of a fascinating time and place.

## Acknowledgment

Some of this information and material would not have been available were it not for the collecting efforts of the late Dr. Gale Raymond. We never met personally, but corresponded for years. He knew far more about little islands than I will ever learn.

## Endnotes

1. QSL cards are exchanged by amateur radio operators to mark a successful two-way communication. These postcard-sized greetings can be homemade or professionally printed and are highly collectible. Since they normally travel through the mail, for the stamp collector *and* ham radio operator, they offer the best of both collecting worlds.
2. Robert Murphy, *A Postal History/Cancellation Study of the U.S. Pacific Islands* (State College, PA: American Philatelic Society, 1983).

## References

- Anon. *Pacific Islands, Vol. II. Eastern Pacific* (London: Naval Intelligence Division, November 1943).
- Baxendale, Eric (editor). *U.S. Pacific Islands Bulletin* (England), Issue 24–57; *website* [www.postmark-micronesia.pwp.blueyonder.co.uk](http://www.postmark-micronesia.pwp.blueyonder.co.uk)
- Costentini, George, and Norman Gruenzner. *U.S. Numbered Military Post Offices 1941–1994* (United States: Military Postal History Society, 1994).
- Fitchett, Keith. *Gilbert & Ellice Island Philately* (England: Pacific Islands Study Group, 2002).
- Graham, Richard. "WWII in the Pacific: The Line Islands," *Linn's Stamp News* (Sidney, OH), September 26, 1983.
- Krupnick, Jon. *Pan America's Pacific Pioneers* (Missoula, MT: Pictorial Histories, 1997).
- Murphy, Robert. *A Postal History/Cancellation Study of the U.S. Pacific Islands* (State College, PA: American Philatelic Society, 1983).
- Vernon, D.H. *Gilbert & Ellice Islands Colony Handbook* (England: Pacific Islands Study Group, reprinted 2001).
- Website*: Jane's Oceania Home Page, <http://www.janeresture.com/>.

*Visit the AP Online*  
[www.stamps.org/American-Philatelist](http://www.stamps.org/American-Philatelist)