

The Lure of Overprints: Australia's BCOF Stamps 1946–1949

The overprinting of Australian stamps for the exclusive use of troops serving in the British Commonwealth Occupation Force created a sensation in the stamp world in 1946–47. Richard Breckon considers the background to one of the more interesting philatelic stories of World War II

Following Japan's surrender in August 1945, the United States established an occupation authority under General Douglas MacArthur, who was designated Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (SCAP). Shortly afterwards, it was decided that British Commonwealth nations would participate in the Occupation, leading to the establishment of the British Commonwealth Occupation Force that comprised troops of the United Kingdom, India, Australia and New Zealand. (Canada did not participate because of its commitment to the occupation of Germany.)

The BCOF (it was generally pronounced 'Bee-cof') was formed in February 1946, with the landing of the first Commonwealth forces in Japan. The area originally allocated to the BCOF comprised the Prefectures of Hiroshima, Okayama, Totteri, Shimane, Yamagushi in southern Honshu and Shikoku—a region embracing about 20 million Japanese and an area of 57,000 square kilometres. The objectives of BCOF were to demonstrate the prestige of British Commonwealth nations and to promote democracy to the Japanese. More specifically, its tasks largely involved the repatria-

tion of about 750,000 Japanese POWs captured overseas and brought home through the BCOF-controlled ports, as well as the disposal of Japanese war materials. It was clearly understood that BCOF operated in a subordinate role to SCAP, because the Occupation of Japan was essentially an American affair.

Philatelic ignorance

At its high-point in 1946, BCOF numbered about 36,000 Commonwealth troops of whom one third were Australians. The Commonwealth troops comprised the

34th Australian Infantry Brigade Group, the 9th New Zealand Brigade Group, a combined British and Indian brigade ('Brindiv'), British and Australian Air Force units, and shore-based Australian naval personnel. The BCOF Commander was an Australian—Lieutenant-General Horace ('Red Robbie') Robertson—whose ignorance of philatelic matters is pivotal to the BCOF stamp story.

For Australia, its involvement in the BCOF was a distinctive affair. Australians had undertaken their first peacetime occupation of another country and they assumed responsibility for operating the main BCOF air and naval supply lines, stretching up to 10,000 kilometres to link Japan with Australia. Another distinctive aspect of the BCOF was the presence of about 700 families of all ranks, who were encouraged to go to Japan to live alongside the troops.

The full set of BCOF stamps on first day cover dated 8 May 1947. The re-release of the stamps was announced in advance allowing collectors among the troops to prepare covers



The strength of the BCOF had been determined in the expectation that recalcitrant elements in Japan would create trouble and that a substantial force would be needed to deal with outbreaks of resistance. This did not happen, because the Japanese were totally compliant in co-operating with the Occupation authorities. Consequently, the BCOF could be scaled down considerably in 1947–48 through troop withdrawals. The first to go, from April 1947, were UK forces, who were needed for operations elsewhere in the Empire, particularly the emerging Communist insurgency in Malaya. In August 1947, the independence of India and Pakistan led to the withdrawal of Indian troops, who had to be allocated to the two new national armies. New Zealand withdrew its forces in October 1948, as the civilian workforce back home was undermined. By this stage, the BCOF was almost exclusively an Australian operation.

Australia too planned to withdraw its troops from Japan by the end of 1950, but the outbreak of the Korean War changed matters. The BCOF continued to function, primarily as a base for combat forces in Korea. The signing of a Peace Treaty with Japan in September 1951 was followed by an end to the Occupation, although the BCOF continued as the British Commonwealth Forces Korea (BCFK) until 1955.

Postal services

Postal services in the BCOF area were provided by Australian, British, Indian and New Zealand FPOs (field post offices), functioning separately and using their own countries' stamps. BCOF Headquarters, through the Australian Base Post Office, coordinated these postal systems, ensuring that adequate services existed for exchanging internal mails between Commonwealth and American forces and the handling of incoming and outgoing air and surface mails. The stamps of each country seem to have been mutually acceptable, so that British, Indian and New Zealand stamps can be found postmarked on mail passing through the Australian BCOF post offices.

Australia's BCOF post offices were operated by No 8 Australian Base Postal Unit (8BPU), which at the end of the war was located at Lae, New Guinea. By February 1946, 8BPU had been transferred to Morotai, Dutch East Indies. For its BCOF role, 8BPU brought into use various Army Postal Service datestamps that had been gathered together at Lae, Morotai and in Japan. It is beyond the scope of this article to describe the types of Army datestamps used by the BCOF, but readers interested in obtaining further information on the subject should consult the standard work by Phil Collas, *The Postal History of Australian Forces in Japan and Korea 1945–1957*



The BCOF stamps are scarce in imprint blocks of four

The black market

(Royal Philatelic Society of Victoria, 1994).

In February 1946, the Australian Base Post Office began operating in the dock area of Kure, from where control was exercised over other Army post offices in the BCOF region. Because Kure had been heavily bombed, it was decided in May 1946 to relocate BCOF Headquarters to a nearby location called Eta Jima, which is a small island of the Inland Sea. The Base Post Office was also transferred to Eta Jima.

The Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF), operating its own BCOF postal unit, maintained a weekly courier flight, connecting Sydney to Bofu, Japan. The RAAF service used Avro Lancastrian aircraft and began operating in November 1945, restricting the services to the carriage of BCOF personnel and mails. In December 1947 the Australia–Japan service was transferred under charter to Qantas Airways and the frequency of flights was increased to twice weekly. In April 1948 the flights were terminated at Iwakuni, instead of Bofu, but by October Tokyo became the terminating point. In November 1949, Skymasters replaced the Lancastrians and in March 1950 the Qantas service was opened to civilian passengers.

Throughout the entire BCOF period, Australian forces could use the RAAF/Qantas air service for transmission of air mail, at a rate of 3d. per half ounce (14g.). The carriage of BCOF letters up to four ounces (113g.) by surface means was free. Australians in Japan enjoyed the same concessional rates of postage as did troops serving in the Middle East and the Pacific during World War II.

A major challenge that the BCOF authorities faced was enforcing the regulations against black marketing by troops in foodstuffs and military stores to the Japanese. To counter this illegal activity, stringent currency controls were put into place. The BCOF community had its own currency, using notes printed in sterling denominations from 3d. upwards and Australian coins for lower amounts. The level of funds that could be moved out of Japan was subject to restrictions, although the troops soon discovered that by purchasing Australian stamps from a BCOF post office, and then sending these stamps back to Australia, they could circumvent the controls. This happened because the stamps could be cashed in at a post office in Australia, less 5 per cent of their face value.

When they arranged to overprint Australian stamps with a BCOF inscription, the authorities believed that the stamp trafficking would be stopped, since the overprinted stamps were not eligible for repurchase in Australia. However, BCOF overprinted stamps had enormous appeal to stamp collectors around the world, who were unable to buy these stamps freely at face value. The problem of stamp trafficking immediately worsened once the BCOF stamps were issued and there was effectively nothing the authorities could do to control illicit currency movements, via this means.

Withdrawn from sale

The initial release of BCOF overprinted stamps occurred on 12 October 1946, yet within a day or so, the stamps were withdrawn from sale at all post offices in the BCOF region and sales of normal Australian stamps was resumed. The overprinting decision was approved by Lieutenant-General Robertson, who no doubt learned a few important things about stamp collecting in the days following the abortive issue of the first BCOF stamps!

The initial BCOF issue comprised three denominations—½d. orange Kangaroo, 1d. brown-purple Queen Elizabeth and 3d.

British, Indian and New Zealand stamps can be found postmarked on mail passing through the Australian BCOF post offices

Map of the area in southern Honshu and Shikoku originally allocated to the BCOF administration. (Adapted from A Postal History of Australian Forces in Japan and Korea 1945–1957 by Phil Collas)



brown George VI (SG J1/3). The overprinting was carried out in Japan by the Hiroshima Printing Company, in the presence of BCOF representatives. The overprint comprised a three-line inscription, 'B.C.O.F./JAPAN/1946' in block capital letters and it was applied in black ink. Two versions of the overprint were adopted. On the ½d. stamp the overprint is a thin, serif typeface, but on the 1d. and 3d. stamps, the overprint is a thick, non-serif typeface. Stamps overprinted were the normal supplies held by the Army Postal Service in Japan, which were obtained on requisition from the Postmaster General's Department in Australia. The issue of the BCOF stamps in October 1946 was not announced in advance and there was no official statement explaining their subsequent withdrawal.

In Australia, leading dealers and collectors learned of the existence of the BCOF stamps in early November 1946. The next month, the *Australian Stamp Monthly* announced the astonishing news. Initially, the magazine reported that the 3d. George VI stamp had been overprinted in Japan to counter black market money and that it had been placed on sale for about one day, at some point between 11 and 14 October. It also suggested that the release might have been a mistake, as the Postmaster General's Department (which had been consulted about the overprinting) had yet to give its approval. The magazine report added that it had been 'officially advised' that once the stamps were properly authorised, the BCOF overprint would be applied to about six other stamp denominations and released for sale in Japan.

Although the report in the December 1946 *Australian Stamp Monthly* features some inaccuracies, it correctly predicted what was to transpire with the BCOF stamps. On 30 March 1947 the daily BCOF newspaper *B.C.O.N.* announced that all stamps sold in BCOF areas from 8 May 1947 would be overprinted 'B.C.O.F./JAPAN/1946'. Seven denominations were involved in the issue—the three values originally released, as well as the 6d. brown Kookaburra, 1s. green Lyrebird, 2s. maroon Kangaroo and Map and 5s. claret Coronation Robes (J4/7). The thin, serif typeface was applied to the four additional denominations.

Speculation

During the interim period between their withdrawal and re-release, there was much speculation in the philatelic press about BCOF stamps. The editor of the *Australian Stamp Monthly* at this time was Phil Collas, who would join the Postmaster General's Department as its first Philatelic Officer a few years later. As the magazine's editor, Collas no doubt had various sources, but he noted subsequently that it was difficult to get any precise information on the subject of BCOF stamps at this early stage. In

February 1947 the Postmaster General's Department released a statement, although its language was imprecise, after being badgered by dealers and collectors inquiring about and wishing to purchase examples of BCOF stamps. The statement explained that the Department of the Army had arranged for the overprinting and that following the release of the stamps on 12 October 1946, 'stocks were immediately recalled pending clarification of the position as to overprinting.' It was emphasised that the Postmaster General's Department 'will not handle sales of any of these values.'

Also in February 1947, the Department of the Army released a statement saying: 'the overprinted stamps are valid only for prepayment of postage on articles lodged by troops in Japan, and that no sales of these stamps will be made other than to the local troops for their postage needs.' As the *Australian Stamp Monthly* observed, 'This is another indication that the stamps are going on sale again.'

It is a measure of how much sought-after amongst collectors the BCOF stamps had become after their initial release and withdrawal, that the *Australian Stamp Monthly* reported the sale at auction in Melbourne on 27 February 1947 of a block of four mint 3d. overprinted stamps for £7.10s., representing a 150-fold increase over the face value. Although most dealers and collectors were hopeful that BCOF stamps would be re-released, there were some who were hoping (for obvious reasons) that this would not happen or that a re-released issue would feature a different overprint, such as '1947' instead of '1946'.

Restrictions

The circumstances surrounding the re-release on 8 May 1947, meant that dealers and collectors could take certain steps to secure supplies. Nevertheless, BCOF postal staff were under orders to refuse to sell the stamps to anyone applying in writing and also to apply restrictions to troops buying the stamps. It was not possible for a person to purchase more than 10s. worth of BCOF stamps on any single day, except in special



The existence of double overprints, such as this 1s. stamp, is not surprising considering the rudimentary conditions under which the stamps were produced

circumstances approved at a higher level. The purchase limit was subsequently reduced to a maximum of 5s. worth of stamps per day. The BCOF post offices received many requests from dealers and collectors around the world seeking to purchase stamps. It was a strict regulation that all such requests were to be refused and the applicants informed that stamp sales were restricted to BCOF personnel for their use on mail in Japan. (In practice, the personnel included families of the troops.)

Nevertheless, there was a considerable amount of trafficking in BCOF stamps, spurred on by the heavy demand for stocks by the stamp trade. In his *BCOF Postal History* book, Phil Collas cited a letter written by a BCOF officer's wife who visited a post office in February 1949, immediately after the BCOF stamps had been withdrawn from circulation. The letter referred to those friends of postal workers who would line up to purchase the post office's quota of higher value stamps, soon after they had been delivered. The letter also stated 'The chap I spoke to this morning was in Eta Jima PO for a long time. He said that of all the high value stamps he sold while at Eta Jima he saw only about two put on parcels, and he sold hundreds. The boys would just queue up for them when "they got the word" that they were on sale. He couldn't sell more than 5s. to each person per day, according to instructions, but they got a quota per month and sold out in a few minutes.'

Listed by Stanley Gibbons

BCOF stamps gained immediate acceptance throughout the stamp world, because the stamps were an authorised government issue and they franked mail travelling freely in the world. As the *Australian Stamp Monthly* noted, 'the stamps will acquire catalogue ranking and any attempts by misguided individuals to depreciate their status can only be attributed to the fact that such individuals have not been able to acquire stocks'. Early in 1948, the 8th supplement to Stanley Gibbons 1947 *Part 1 British Empire* catalogue incorporated the BCOF stamps.

The stamps were relatively difficult to procure by stamp dealers in Australia and only a few dealers had stocks to advertise. Melbourne dealer Frank Thornhill was one, advertising the BCOF set at £3, almost a seven-fold premium over the face value. An even greater premium applied to a set of imprint blocks of four, which Thornhill advertised for £38. Some dealers explained that they secured their supplies of stamps through contact with troops returning to Australia from duty in Japan.

Quantities issued

Another challenge facing dealers was the uncertainty about the stamp quantities involved with the BCOF issue. There was much effort on the part of dealers and others to obtain definite information. This led to the Minister for the Army, Cyril Chambers, announcing in Parliament the individual quantities printed of BCOF stamps on 26 November 1948. The information did not represent the final production figures, as the stamps were still current, but it offered the market reassurance that the issue was scarce enough to warrant the existing prices.

All sales of BCOF stamps ceased on Saturday, 12 February 1949, after which the sale of normal Australian stamps was resumed at BCOF post offices. On 28 March 1949, Army Minister Chambers told Parliament that he had ordered the withdrawal of BCOF stamps and that a special board was set up to determine the actual numbers of stamps sold. The sale quantities officially released by the Minister were as follows:

½d.	89,670	1s.	131,055
1d.	378,750	2s.	62,651
3d.	891,643	5s.	32,508
6d.	136,133		

The figures include both periods of sale of BCOF stamps (October 1946 and 1947-49), as it was presumably not possible to distinguish between the two periods. The quantity of 5s. stamps includes the initial overprinting on thick, chalk-surfaced paper, as well as a 1948 overprinting on thin, rough ordinary paper (J7a). The thin paper printing comprised about 100 sheets (8000 stamps), but the respective quantities sold of thick and thin paper 5s. stamps cannot be separated. The unsold remainders of BCOF stamps were destroyed locally by burning, in the presence of senior officers.

Collas states in his book that he never located any official reason for withdrawing the overprinted stamps. He says that 'there appears to be little doubt that this came



Trial proofs of the lower value stamps in red ink and with the thin, serif overprint were apparently issued in the initial release of BCOF stamps in October 1946. The proofs exist bearing postmark dates after the withdrawal of the original BCOF stamps

about to a major extent because of the massive reduction in strength of Australian forces in Japan over 1948 and into 1949'.

It is of interest that throughout the period of use of overprinted BCOF stamps, normal Australian stamps continued to be sold, as the latter were needed for affixing to postal notes to make up amounts of up to 6d. over the postal note's face value. (If BCOF stamps were used for this purpose, the postal note would not be fully redeemable in Australia.)

Printing details

Both types of overprints—the thin, serif typeface (½d., 6d. and 1s.) and thick, non-serif typeface (1d. and 3d.)—were applied using an overprint forme of 160. The forme was arranged in two panes of 80 (ten horizontal rows of eight), so that a full-size sheet of stamps could be overprinted in one operation. In the case of the thin, serif typeface, two overprint formes of 160 were in use, with Forme 1 being used for the ½d., 6d. and 1s. values and Forme 2 for the 1d. and 1s. only. (The use of two overprint formes is significant, because overprint varieties are generally associated with one or other of the formes.) The 2s. and 5s. stamps, being of different sizes to the lower values, used different overprint formes of the thin, serif typeface. The 2s. value used an overprint forme of 120, comprising two panes of 60 (ten horizontal rows of six). An overprint forme of 80 was used for the 5s., comprising two panes of 40 (four horizontal rows of ten). The two higher value stamps were also overprinted as full-size sheets in single operations.

The work was undertaken by printers operating under rudimentary conditions and a wide range of overprint varieties of interest to specialists exist, including:

Wrong font for the '6' in '1946' on ½d., 6d. and 1s., only found on Forme 1, R9/4 (J1a, 4a and 5a).

Narrow 'N' in 'JAPAN' on ½d., 6d. and 1s., only found on Forme 1, R1/8 (J1b, 4c and 5c).

Stop after 'JAPAN' on ½d., 6d. and 1s., only found on Forme 1, R5/5 (J1c, 4b and 5b).

The overprint double on the 1d. value derives from one sheet, with the second impression being weaker than the first and about one millimetre out of alignment (J3a).

The blue-black overprint on 1d. (J2a) is thought to be the result of lighter pressure of the overprint forme during a particular printing.

Trial overprints

As mentioned in a footnote in the *Part 1 Catalogue*, trial overprints exist of the ½d., 1d. and 3d. values, these comprising pulls of the thin, serif overprint in black (1d. and 3d.); red (½d., 1d. and 3d.); and gold (3d.). A note in the *Australian Commonwealth Specialists' Catalogue* regarding the trial overprints states: 'It is reported that some, at least, of these proofs were issued at post offices with the first release of these values on 12 October 1946. However, the accepted (thick sans-serif) overprint on the 1d. and 3d. were also in this first release'. This might justify the proofs being considered as issued stamps, but it is not known which of the six stamp varieties were involved in the apparent release to post offices.

More BCOF proofs surfaced 40 years later, when five complete proof sheets of the overprint pulled on plain paper were placed on the market in 1987. The sheets were known to have been in the possession of a collector since 1953. Each sheet features a typewritten inscription certifying that it is the original proof sheet, either adopted or rejected for particular denominations, as well as bearing the signatures of BCOF officials and being dated on 1 October 1946. Four of the sheets feature the thin, serif overprint—two of these sheets are in black, one sheet is in red and the other sheet comprises the left pane in gold and the right pane in red. The fifth sheet features the thick, sans-serif overprint. The annotation seems to confirm that the thin, serif overprint was judged to be unsuitable for the darker-coloured 1d. and 3d. stamps and so the thick, non-serif overprint was adopted for these values.

It does seem a fitting tribute to the BCOF stamps, which had generated so much excitement in the stamp world in the late 1940s, that they could still cause interest so many years later with the discovery of the overprint proof sheets.

Note: Stamps reproduced in this article are from the Chapman Collection, Australia Post