

Previous Articles - 64

The great 1935 Quetta earthquake disaster

By Neil Donen

At 3:03am on May 31st 1935, a devastating Mw 7.7 earthquake engulfed the Baluchistan city of Quetta. Between 30,000 and 45,000 people are estimated to have died. The presence of a large military garrison in the city enabled search and rescue work to begin almost immediately. On 4 June outgoing mail began to leave Quetta.

Between June 4th and June 14th mail was allowed to be sent post free. Most of the mail identified so far was sent by British Service personnel from the garrison to family and friends, mainly in Great Britain and India.

Three different types of covers are associated with this stamp free period. Less than 200 covers seem to have survived to today. All of the known covers have similar handwritten wording on the cover indicating the letter is from an earthquake area and is postage free.

Type 1 cover. These covers have no handstamp. There is a dated postmark which could be either a Quetta postmark, a Transit postmark, a receiving postmark or a combination of the three (See Figure 1).



Fig 1

Type 2 cover. This is a two-line red handstamp (cachet) reading "QUETTA EARTHQUAKE / POSTAGE FREE". They are uncommon with less than 10 being identified (See Figure 2).

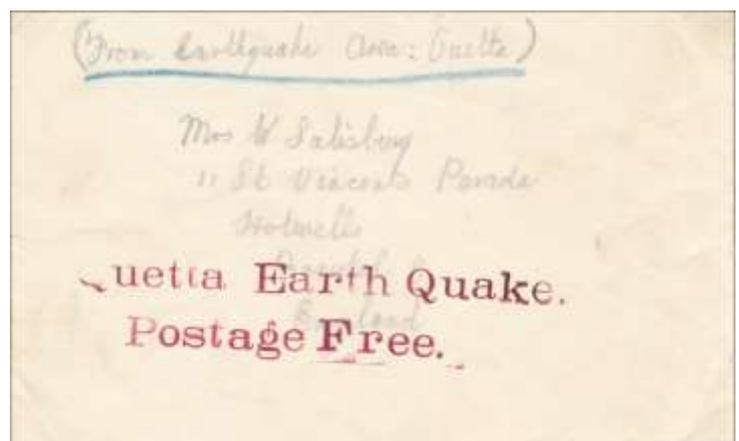


Fig 2

Type 3 cover. The single black line handstamp ("QUETTA EARTHQUAKE POSTAGE FREE") is the commonest type of cover seen (See Figure 3).



Fig 3

On June 15th paid postage was restored. Some individuals, however, neglected to apply stamps and a special three-line red handstamp was applied ("QUETTA EARTHQUAKE / FREE POSTAGE CONCESSION / WITHDRAWN"). These covers were taxed. Figure 4 is an example.



Fig 4

Almost all the regular post office workers lost their lives in the earthquake. Their work was taken over by the Railway Mail Service (RMS) personnel who usually worked at the RMS office at the railway station. They used their own cancellers. Thus, all mail postmarked during the post-free period show RMS cancel usage (Figures 5 and 6).

Fig 5



Fig 6



Sometime during July 1935, the General Indian Post Office Service again took over the mail services. As many of the regular cancellers had either been lost or damaged, an Experimental Post Office cancel (K-36) was used over the next six to nine months (Figure 7).



Fig 7a



Fig 7

I am currently documenting numbers and collating the various cancels and handstamps from the Quetta earthquake. If you have a cover which fits into one of these five categories, I would be delighted to hear from you. I can be contacted through Tony Ainscough (tony@silverjubileestamps.com).

ND – January 2019

Tailpiece

On this cover, Neil comments that it shows how the mail moved around. It was posted from Atru on 3rd June, (after the earthquake). It seems it was first redirected to Karachi, (15th June), but then sent up to Quetta, (receiving cancel of 19th June), before finally being forwarded to Kumari.

