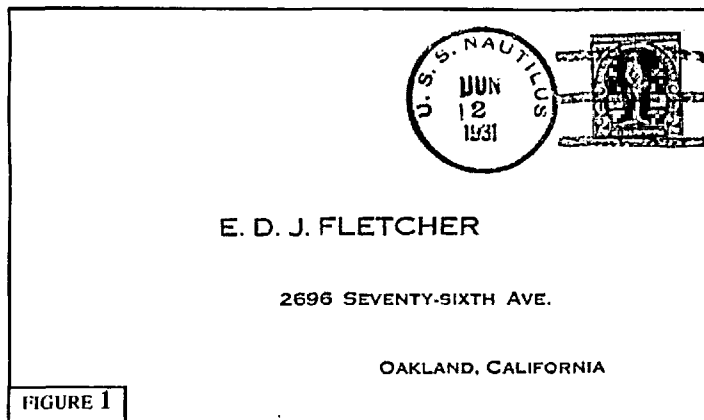




NOTE: "B.U.T." is intended to provide snippets of additional information, or extracts of pertinent, existing facts about expeditions and their postal history that may cause us to muse, or be amused, by some unusual element of polar history/philately.

Figure 1 was cancelled aboard the US Navy's submarine *Nautilus* on 2 June 1931. That was a time when it was possible for a USA submarine to have its own regular onboard post office.¹ That also was a time when a USA submarine named *Nautilus* was preparing to be the first submarine trying to slip under the ice at the North Pole. B U T --



that North Pole-bound submarine named *Nautilus* was not *this* submarine. The boats were similar in some respects. Each bore the same name.² Both were diesel powered contemporaries and each saw US Navy service. B U T --

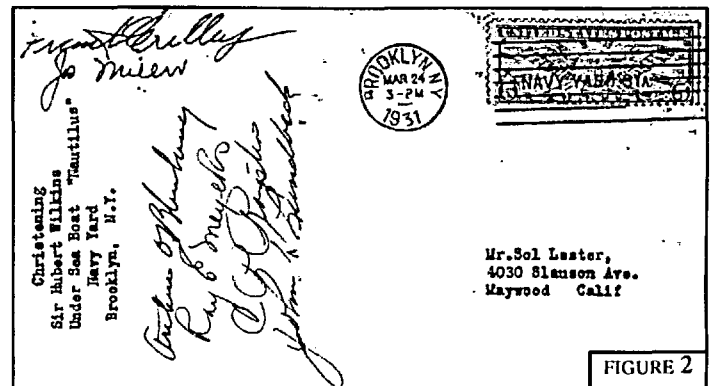
the first submarine named *Nautilus* to try for the North Pole was not originally named *Nautilus*.³ Neither was it a commissioned US Navy submarine when it made its historic Arctic cruise.

Famous Australian polar personality and explorer Sir Hubert Wilkins had a dream of sailing a submarine under the North Pole.⁴ He leased for \$1 an obsolete US Navy submarine that was scheduled for scrapping. It had had the prosaic name *O-12*. Technically it no longer was an *in commission* USN vessel, when undergoing modification in 1931 at Mathis Shipyard, Gloucester City, N.J., for its Arctic mission. Alterations took place across the Delaware River from *O-12*'s former "reserve" status berth at the Philadelphia Navy Yard.

This historic North Pole attainment expedition's tale and postal documentation have been explained numerous times in *Ice Cap News*. Former submarine commander and ASPPer Captain Robert Rawlins, USN Retired, is renown for his highly praised and awarded *Nautilus* (toward the North Pole) exhibit, shown often in national philatelic competition. He also has used his extensive research to publish authoritatively on the subject.

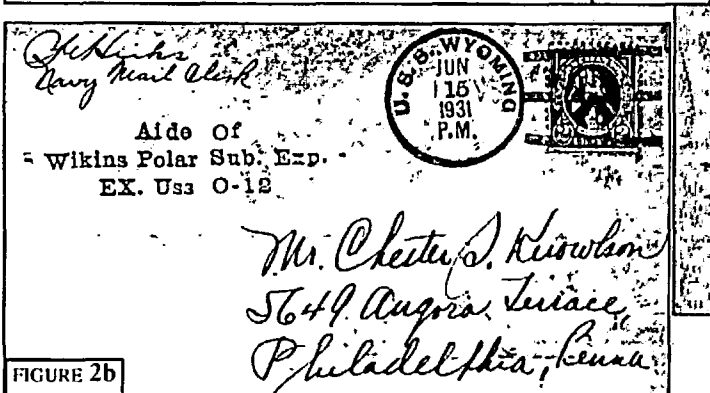
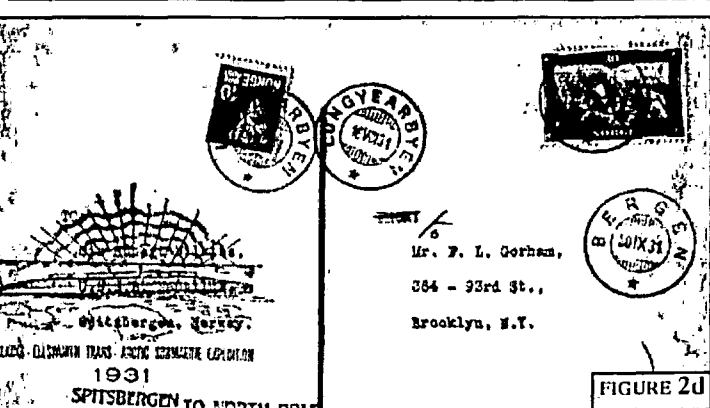
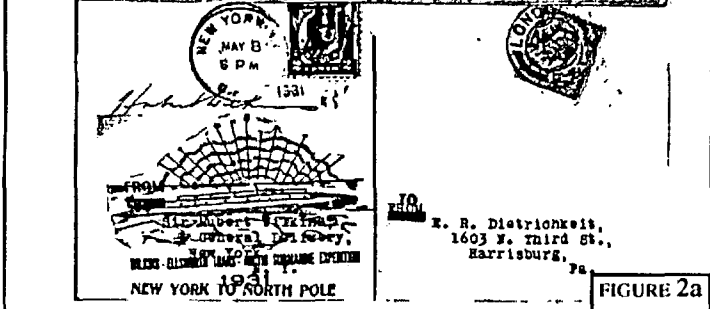
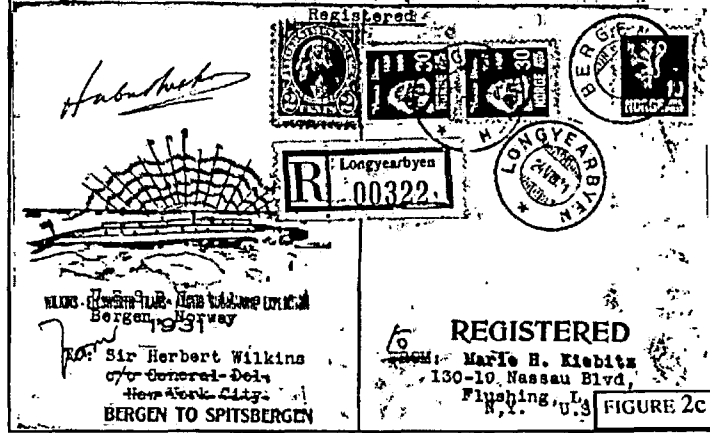
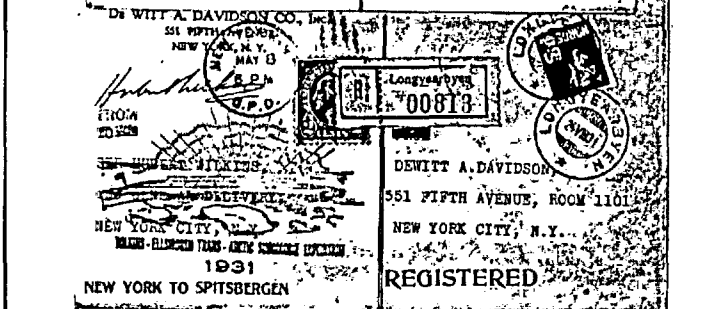
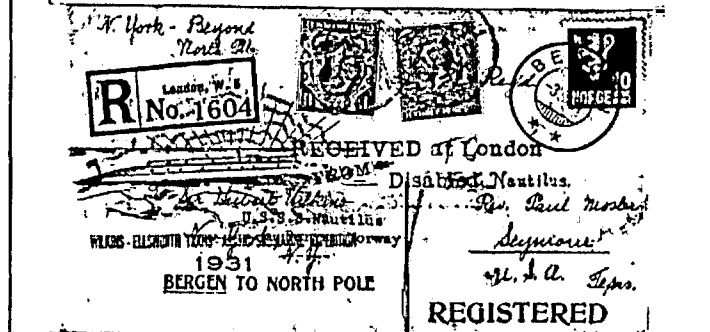
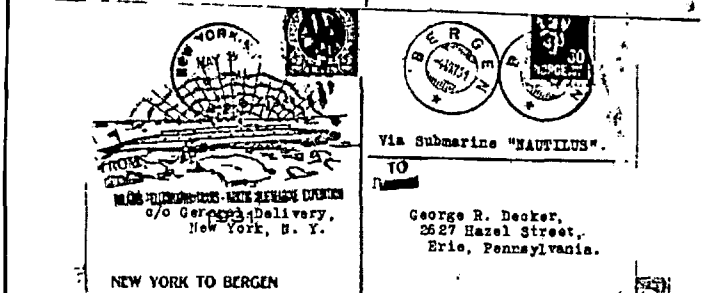
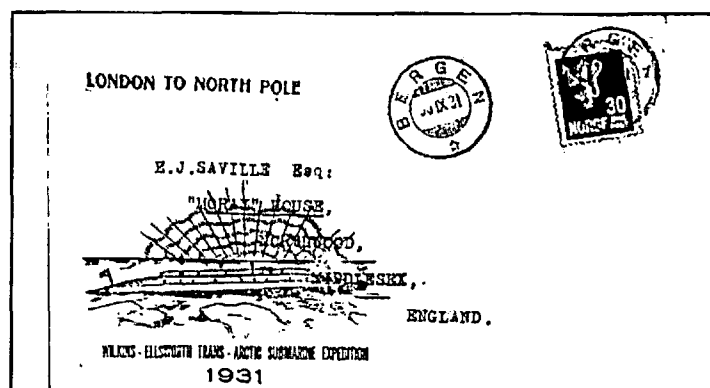
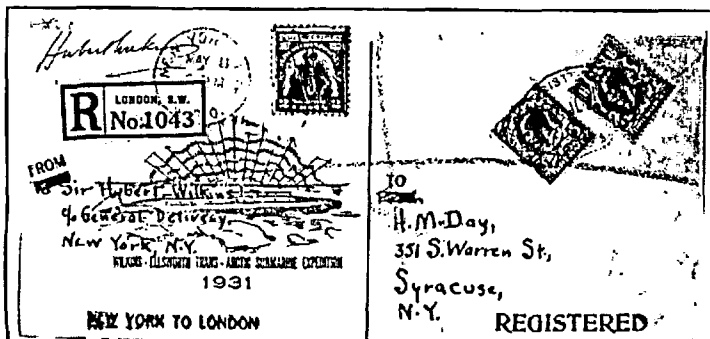
Bob Rawlins wrote that a distant, 17th C. relative of Sir Hubert is believed to have first conceived the idea of a submarine voyage to the North Pole. Even though Wilkins was not the first to believe this was possible, he was the first to make a serious attempt.

A stringent US Navy budget at the beginning of the Depression, and ship pruning conditions of the Washington Naval Treaty, led nearly all O-class submarines to the scrap yard by 1930. Only *O-12* was left at the Philadelphia Naval Shipyard for a possible scientific assignment. Thereafter it too was destined for deletion.



After some structural conversion for her Arctic attempt, *O-12* was christened *Nautilus* 24 March 1931 in a well attended ceremony at the Brooklyn Navy Yard (fig. 2). A few unfortunate events before proceeding 4 June 1931 on her historical destiny from Provincetown, Massachusetts, were ill, though accurate omens to the nature of her North Pole cruise.

A highlight of this North Pole submarine cruise is its polar postal history. Wilkins had solicited subscriptions for a set (or portion of the set) of four multi-cancelled postings documenting various legs of the trip. Four different (regular or registered) pieces of mail from the United States recorded anticipated legs of its route: New York-London (UK), New York-Bergen (Norway), New York-Spitsbergen (Svalbard) and New York-North Pole (fig. 2a). A breakdown in the Atlantic necessitated a mid-ocean tow (fig. 2b) and extended repair time at Devonport, England. This allowed for what presumably was an additional "European" and late arriving US mail subscription to document: London-North Pole,



most elusive. These anomalous routing varieties deserve further examination in a future article.

After a protracted stay in the United Kingdom undergoing repair, *Nautilus* continued on to Bergen. The unscheduled layover in England and arrival at Bergen, Norway, allowed for some "under repair" and "underway" crew mail (fig. 2c). Then it was on to Spitsbergen from

FIGURE 2b

FIGURE 2c

FIGURE 2d

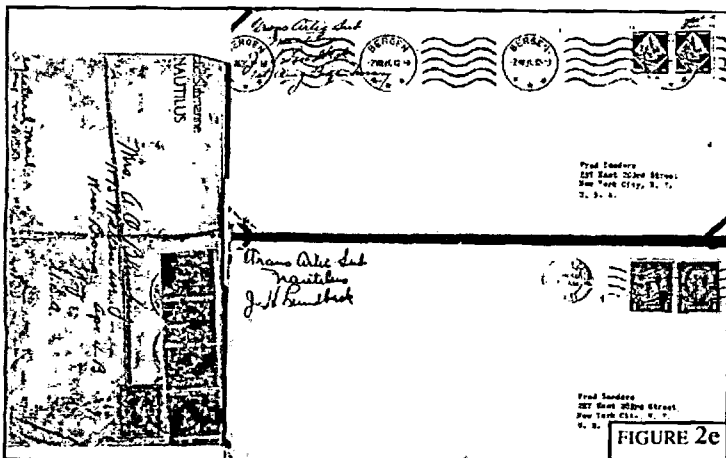


FIGURE 2c

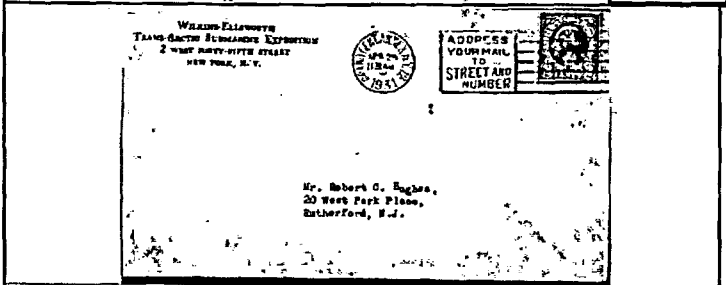


FIGURE 2f

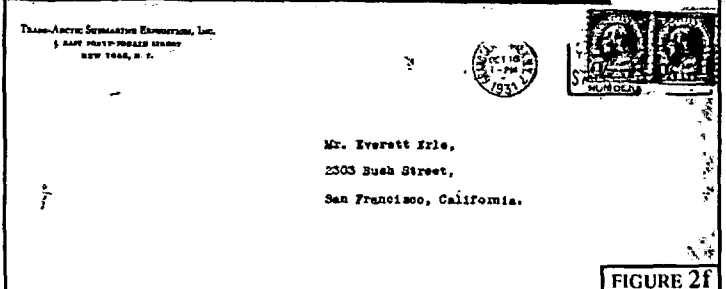


FIGURE 2g

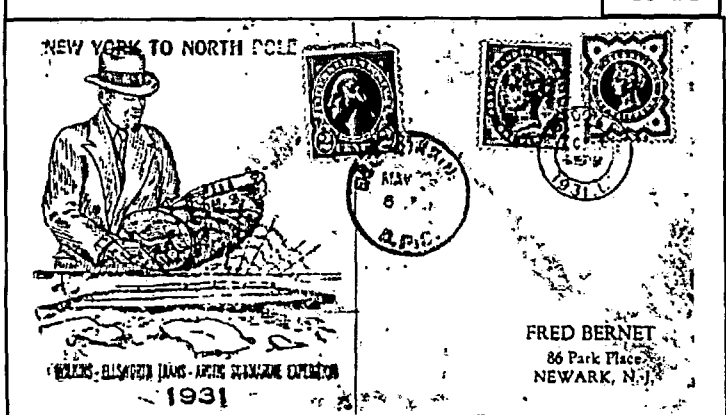


FIGURE 2h

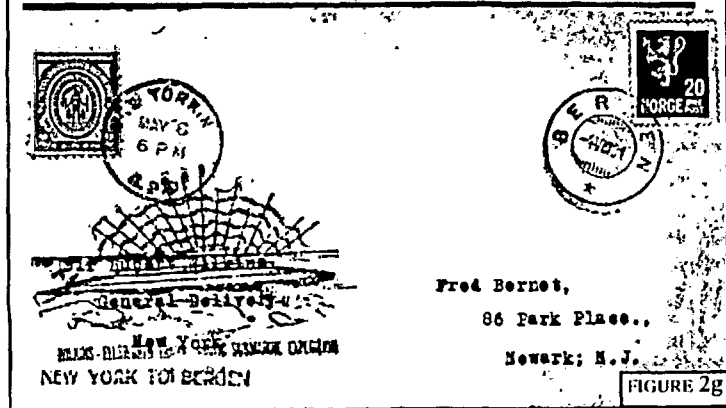


FIGURE 2i

where the boat tried unsuccessfully to edge under the ice for the North Pole before returning to Bergen. There it was scuttled in a fjord on November 1931 by direction of the US Navy.

The cruise never got to the North Pole or even that close to it. This was before a time when this technically was feasible. It most likely was fortunate that the submarine did not get far under the ice from Spitsbergen. That probably saved the crew's life.⁵

Far more successful was the postal history side of this voyage. Already mentioned are christening, towing, subscription and crew mail. There also were various types of official stationery and official use SL cachets. Cancellations on expedition stationery can be found postally documenting both its predeparture and post-return phases (ex. fig. 2f).

A variety of cancellation dates and types are seen on its subscription mail. This is most likely because it was not all serviced at the same time as expedition staff tried to fulfill its host of subscription mail obligations.

This expedition also has two, easily detectable "Roessler" forgeries (fig. 2g). The late ASPPer Robert Schoendorf first published an exposé of these in the Jan-Feb 1977 *Ice Cap News*. Unlike some other philatelic forgeries, these have become quite acceptable among those with an interest in this expedition's postal history. They are eminently desirable by many of those with this interest.

Obviously the *Nautilus* documented by figure 1 is not the same *Nautilus* that Sir Hubert Wilkins tried to take to the North Pole in 1931. B U T --

that is not to imply that it too does not have a polar pedigree. It most definitely does. That *Nautilus'* polar credentials came just shy of twelve years from the date in its figure 1 cancellation. The first US Navy submarine named *Nautilus* would earn its polar stripes in the Arctic Aleutian Islands during World War II.

Unlike its named predecessor, this *Nautilus* would not be alone in its polar activities. Figures 3-3c postally document examples of other US Navy ships and units that also were involved in the retaking of Attu island in May 1943.

Figure 3, cancelled aboard the aged destroyer USS *King* (DD-242) during the Attu Campaign (18 May 1943), is a forlorn reminder of the ship's elderly state. *King* was regarded as well past its prime. So while other US Navy vessels were closer to the ferocious action ashore on Attu, *King* patrolled farther away as a screen against possible enemy rear attack from the sea. It encountered no opposition. Neither did it

receive a battle star for its distant support.⁶

The ship's presence documented by figure 3a suffered another sort of indignity from an honorable participation in the Attu Campaign. It was there. Served well. However, it is absent from the officially published US Navy history that records ships that participated in this event.

Supply ship USS *Spica* (AK-16) was approaching Dutch Harbor, Aleutian Islands, Alaska, when figure 3a was serviced. She was performing one of her recurring, routine logistical missions. B U T --

historical events would overtake her and make this Aleutians arrival far from routine. It was shortly after beginning the invasion of Attu (11 May 1943) when *Spica* drifted into Dutch Harbor. This was one of the headquarters sites for US military activities then unfolding many miles away in the western Aleutians. An advance party for a Navy CB (construction battalion) unit needed to be at Attu. Some senior Army officers also had this necessity. B U T --

they had no way of getting there from Dutch Harbor, until *Spica* appeared. According to its listing in the US Naval Historical Center's *Dictionary of American Naval Fighting Ships*, there also was a need for AK-16's larger than typical sickbay (medical facility). Its onboard barber, Jimmie Spencer, then a seaman first class, recalls arriving at Attu about two weeks before fighting ended. He came on deck to see US Army Air Corps P-38 fighters zooming overhead as they headed for targets ashore.

The only *Spica* crew member to go ashore was a coxswain who piloted a landing craft conveying the six or so Army officers to Attu from the ship. During his stay at Attu, Seaman Spencer recalled a famous "Army officer" coming aboard for a few hours. He is better known for his previous (and subsequent) career as actor George O'Brien. Presumably, he had something to do with the two prisoners who were brought aboard. One was treated in the ship's infirmary.⁷

Unlike USS *King*, USS *Spica* did get a battle star for its participation in the Attu Campaign. B U T --

not an entry in the official US Navy Attu Campaign history for its assistance. This probably was because the author of the official history recorded those vessels that were listed in the order of battle for the Attu action. Of course, *Spica*'s impromptu participation would not have been in any preplanned orders.

The advance US Navy CB party brought by *Spica* to Attu might have included the sender of figure 3b. It is cancelled from the same place and about the same time (13 May 1943) as when the crew member associated with figure 3a also had been in the vicinity of the US Navy

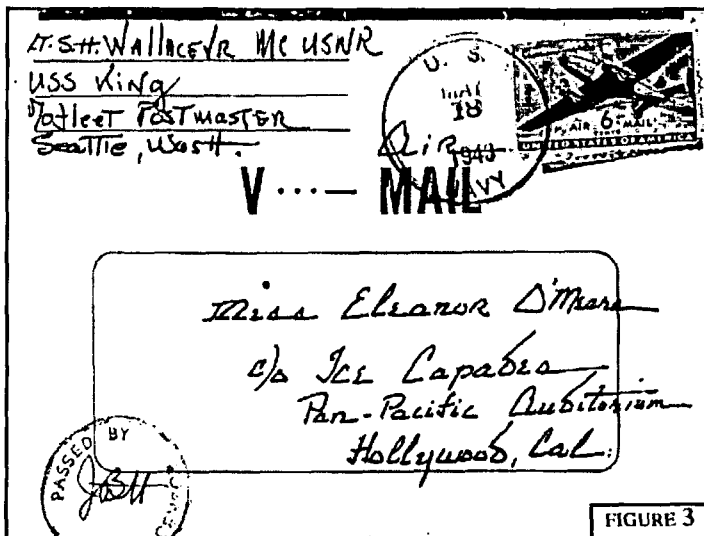


FIGURE 3

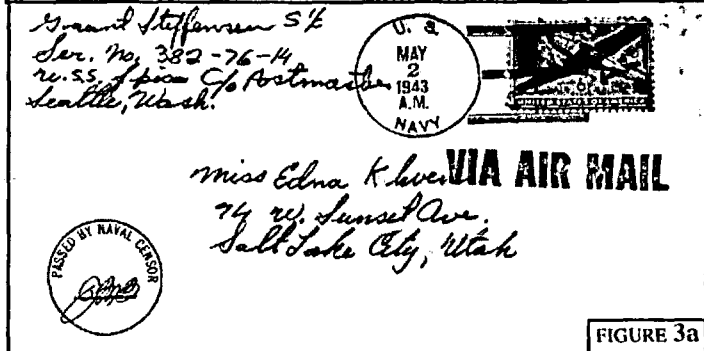


FIGURE 3a

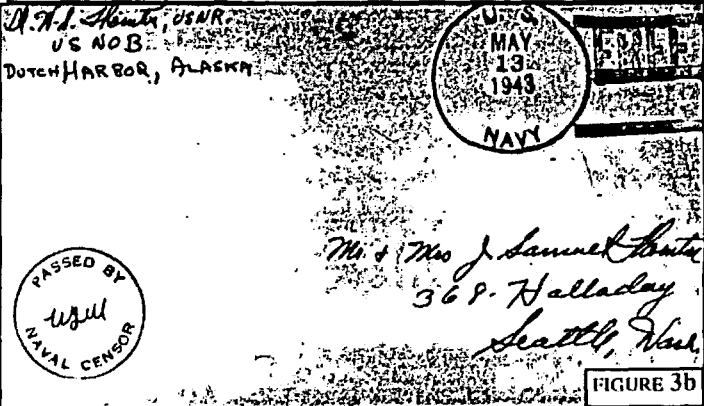


FIGURE 3b

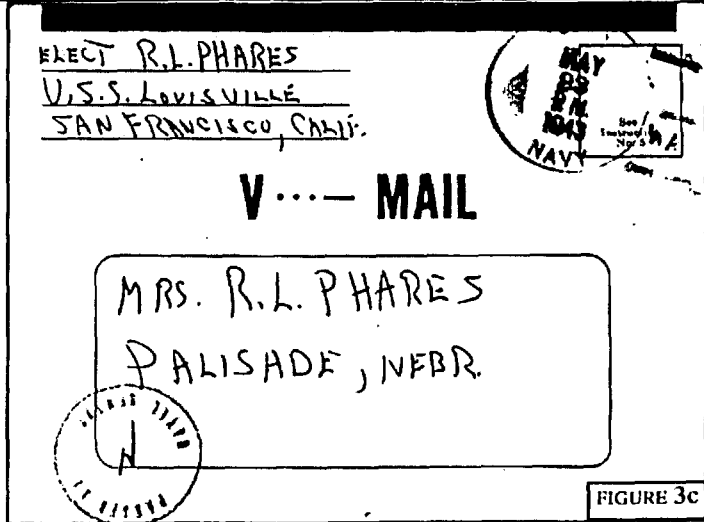
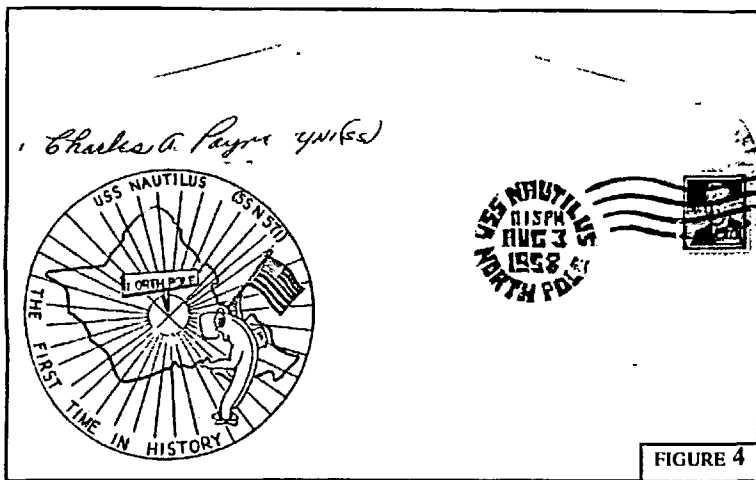


FIGURE 3c



Post Office, Dutch Harbor, Aleutian Islands, Alaska (13 May 1943). The battle for Attu already had been raging for two days.

It bears a US Navy censor stamp in the lower left and an unusual handstamped "FREE" between its datestamp's killers. US Navy Post Offices converted to generic "U.S. Navy" nonspecific cancellations upon United States' entry to World War II.

Similar to figure 3, figure 3c also is unprocessed V-Mail from a naval participant in the Attu Campaign. Such overseas mailings would have been diverted to regional photographic imaging centers for processing as negatives onto rolls of film. These then were flown to one of three centers in the USA. There the individual correspondences were printed from their film rolls. They finally were mailed separately to their addresses in the form of an enclosed photographic positive.

This allowed thousands more letters to be sent in cargo space. The military tried to encourage space-freeing V-Mail.⁸ It got air mail treatment at no cost to the mailer. Those qualifying for free posting, though choosing not to use V-Mail, still could get air mail service, if they paid for it (at a concessionary air mail rate). US service personnel mail not prepared for V-Mail nor franked for air mail went postage free by surface. It can be assumed that some US armed forces' surface mail from the field was flown at the convenience of the military. Most, though, did go by surface and took longer than air mail/V-Mail to be delivered. B U T --

all letters prepared for V-Mail servicing did not receive full V-Mail service. It depended upon availability of processing equipment and proximity of overseas centers to perform the imaging. We can assume that there was not a nearby processing center for those on Attu. In that case, their letters prepared for V-Mail servicing (using the appropriate forms) simply continued directly on to their destinations as if being ordinary mail.

Figure 3c is from an electrician's mate aboard the US

Navy's heavy cruiser *Louisville* (CA-28) during its bombardment support of those retaking Attu (11-30 May 1943). *Louisville* had its own post office that onboard serviced this sailor's mail with its generic cancellation on 23 May 1943. That was seven days before the Attu fighting ended.

USS *Louisville* earned two of her thirteen WWII battle stars in the Aleutians. First she served in the "Northern Covering Group" for the Attu Campaign. This was followed by fire support for the following Kiska Campaign that included preparatory shelling.⁹

USS *Nautilus* was in this company. B U T --

its North Pacific polar duty began differently. Its type of contribution in the early hours of the Attu Campaign today would be called unconventional warfare or special operations. Then it just was experimental and hazardously innovative.

The "experiment" began with a temporary reorganization of the core fighting unit destined for Attu in May 1943. The 7th Infantry Division (7th ID) had been training in California for commitment in comparably weathered North Africa. Imagine the surprise of the troops when they were told aboard their transports from the USA West Coast on the afternoon of 24 April 1943 that they were headed for the cold, damp muskeg of the Western Aleutians.¹⁰

The 7th ID had just been reformed for desert mechanized warfare. Now it was back to being light infantry. Among the temporary changes was a bolstering of its reconnaissance/unconventional warfare element. 7th Infantry Division had had a scout company and a similarly sized reconnaissance troop. Merging these assets, Major General Albert E. Brown's division now had a provisional scout *battalion*. The 410-men provisional scout battalion was led from its inception by a trusted, resourceful (and soon to be heroic) 7th ID veteran, Captain William H. Willoughby.

The division's organization looked more conventional during its subsequent deployments in the Pacific during WWII.¹¹ However, for Attu it would have an unconventional disposition. Though normally a division's eyes and ears, for the Attu Campaign the recon elements also would have an important offensive role.

Less one reconnaissance troop platoon (that initially would be committed elsewhere during the amphibious landing), this provisional battalion alighted before the other divisional landing forces. Of course, first the recon element would take a look around after its landing. Then it assumed a vital blocking mission.

Moving east from Scarlet Beach, northwest Attu, it

removed enemy forces from high ground to its front and ensured that defenders did not withdraw into the rugged mountains behind landing sites at Massacre and Holtz Bays. They lost half their force between 11 and 14 May. Many succumbed to illness and the harsh elements. B U T --

they masterfully would succeed with grit and inspired leadership. However, first they had to surreptitiously come ashore.

This is where *Nautilus* would earn its polar plaudits. Captain Willoughby took his scout battalion to Dutch Harbor, as the rest of the pre-invasion 7th ID stayed cramped aboard transports that had brought them to Cold Bay, Aleutians, on 30 April 1943. For a week it was rigorous amphibious training for the scouts.

They surely had had their fill of amphibious landing training. The entire division had done enough of that in California. However, this was different. Captain Willoughby knew how essential was their mission. He wanted them seasoned for the muskeg and frigidly damp environment they were about to encounter.

A storm delayed destiny until 11 May. At 1 A.M., two submarines arrived off Scarlet Beach, NW Attu with 244 men more than their normal ship complement. One hundred and sixty-five men of the battalion's 7th Cavalry Reconnaissance Troop would land there shortly thereafter from a destroyer. Large US fleet submarines *Narwhal* and *Nautilus* landed the scouts who had boarded at Dutch Harbor.

Nautilus' Captain (Lt. Commander Brockman) made it clear to Captain Willoughby that his boat would dive *immediately* if it sighted any enemy ships. It did not matter if any of his scouts still had not jumped off. It also was clear to Captain Willoughby, that besides having to make a hasty ship departure for shore, that his troops also needed to be stealthfully quiet. He knew the enemy already was aware they were coming. B U T --

it did not know exactly how nor precisely when. Jumping into rafts alongside the two subs would be noisy. The troops' metal objects would clang and surely something would splash into the water. So they employed a different, unconventional tactic that may never have been tried previously by USA amphibious forces. It would become standard for US Navy SEALs and Army Special Forces disembarking at sea from submarines on a mission. B U T --

then it was new. The scouts aboard *Nautilus* (and *Narwhal*) lay prone in their rafts on the subs' deck. The submarine slowly dove beneath the waves as the rafts just floated free. It worked on the early morning of 11 May 1943, from two-hours row off Scarlet Beach. The

Attu Campaign was on as it was writing a new page in the annals of special operations.¹²

Nautilus took on a screening mission following its conveyance of the scouts. B U T --

this would not be the last polar exposure for a *Nautilus*. However, it would be **another** *Nautilus* that would write most indelibly into polar history.

That USS *Nautilus*, of course, on 3 August 1958, became the first vessel ever to reach the North Pole (fig. 4).¹³

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Appreciation to Bob Rawlins for continuing to share with us his vast knowledge about submarine and Wilkins-Ellsworth (W-E) *Nautilus* operations as well as his remarkable NP-Spitsbergen cover from the W-E expedition.

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ENDNOTES

1. US Navy submarines have not had permanent post offices for many years. We shortly will see an example, however, that "one-day only" exceptions to postally document extraordinary events have been made during their non-post office period.
2. The first real submarine named *Nautilus* also was built by an American. Steamboat pioneer Robert Fulton in 1800 revised American David Bushnell's (1742-1824) earlier concept for an underwater attack boat. Fulton constructed an experimental model for the French in 1801. It was designed to nudge an explosive device into another vessel. The French lost interest in Fulton's innovation. It was not fast enough to approach its English prey during the (then) Napoleonic Wars. He then floated his *Nautilus* to France's enemy and sank one of Britain's vessels in a successful demonstration. Although brig *Dorothy* sank from *Nautilus'* emplaced torpedo, the Royal Navy also was not impressed enough to buy it. Over a century would pass before there would be another (American built) submarine named *Nautilus*.
3. There were two other *Nautilus* submarines between Fulton's and those that later entered US Navy service in the 20th Century. One was not real. French science fiction author (1828-1905) Jules Verne's fictitious submarine in *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* bore that name in his 1869 novel about an underwater craft that even made a polar transit (though to the South Pole). Two Englishmen (Campbell and Ash) in 1886 pioneered the concept of an electric driven submarine. Their prototype also was named after this relative of the octopus (*Nautilus*).
4. Sir Hubert had a residence since 1939 in rural north cen-

(continued on page 67)

Letter with postscript sent by Christian Salvesen

CHR. SALVESEN & CO.,
ESTABLISHED 1846.
29 BERNARD STREET, LEITH,
40 BERNARD STREET, GLASGOW.
GRANTON HOUSE, 848 TRINITY, GRANTON.

TELEGRAPH ADDRESS "SALVESEN"
TELEPHONE NOS 455-4 516

29 Bernard Street

Leith 11th September, 1911

Herr. Captain Johansen,
"Isberthorne",
c/o Herr. Rob. E. Klemm Jr.,
Saxburg.

Deres 2 breved af 8 ds. er modtagne og forstår vi fra Herr. Klemm at resten af kullene var ventet at blive indlaestet idag, hvorefter kuglatoerlingen ikke skulde tage lang tid. Vi behaerter at et saet aede-lastermer, 1 natkikkert, saekjelligt udstyret, og endal mailla loberne rig samt korter for turen tiltraenges og bedes De anskaffe i Saxburg hvad behaevs. Sidelasterne saa De anskaffe i selge boerd af Trandes bestemmelser, saa at disse kan blive brugt, efter at Isberthorne har fuldendt sin reise, saa en af vore transportagenterne. Mailla riggen ser vi gjerne, at De tager fra Valtorek & Robertson eller kan De fornye skibet fra de folk, som De selv kjender for at vaere paalidelige. Vi sendte Dem representantet Isberthornes certifikat af registrering, som efter britiske bestemmelser indlaetres bands nationalitets bevis og maalebrev. Det skulde vaere os kjaert at hore efter Deres lykkelige ankomst, at Herr. Driftbestyrer Henriksen kunde finde bestjaeftigelse for Dem paa stationen, som vi overlader dette arrangement helt til Herr. Henriksen. - Vi har idag faaet bestaet om, at baetker baandpressemaekinen ikke bliver faerdig til afsendelse for den 28 ds., og derfor kan maalides ikke

CHR. SALVESEN & CO.,
ESTABLISHED 1846.
29 BERNARD STREET, LEITH,
40 BERNARD STREET, GLASGOW.
GRANTON HOUSE, 848 TRINITY, GRANTON.

TELEGRAPH ADDRESS "SALVESEN"
TELEPHONE NOS 455 & 516

29 Bernard Street

11/9/11

Herr. Capt. Johansen.

-2-

til afrejsning med Isberthorne, da vi haaber at skibet vil have begyndt sin reise paa den tid.

Med en agtelse

Christian Salvesen

De faaendest ikke flere felt med mine Isberthorne. Mandatet kan bestaa af - de syvte gaes med uden Paasminsting; de har alle kuglatoer og udstyret til at arbeide paa forlængst paa Stekthornen

(continued from page 65)

tral Montrose, Pennsylvania, USA, and was an influential advisor and employee of the United States Government from 1942. For many years he also resided in New York City. However, he retained his Australian citizenship until his death in 1958. Of course, as a US citizen, he would have been obliged to discontinue use of his British knighthood title.

5. All but one, who died in an accident before leaving the United States.
6. It eventually would receive a WWII naval battle (campaign or service) star. Awarded to US Navy ships for meritorious service in combat or suffering under battle conditions, USS *King* earned a single WWII battle star for its shelling two months later in the next Aleutians campaign -- on Kiska.
7. Jimmie Spencer, telephone interview with author, 20 February 2003. From a distance, Seaman Spencer must have thought O'Brien was wearing US Army fatigues. They do resemble US Navy "utilities." George O'Brien really was a senior US Navy officer. The WWI US Navy veteran served during WWII as a decorated beachmaster in the Pacific. He very likely was the beachmaster on Attu. Beachmasters control ship to shore movement on landing

beaches subsequent to their securing by combat units.

8. Great Britain in WWII earlier had introduced a comparable system ("airgraphs") to the United States' V-Mail.
9. *The Aleutians Campaign June 1942-August 1943*, (Washington, DC: Naval Historical Center, 1993), 85-117.
10. Brian Garfield, *The Thousand-Mile War* (Fairbanks, AK: University of Alaska Press, 1995), 262. Unless otherwise cited, the rest of the Attu Campaign details came from this source.
11. Bruce Gardner and Barbara Stahura, *Seventh Infantry Division*, revised ed. (Illinois: Turning Publishing Co., 1997), 11.
12. Alaska and (native) Eskimo Scouts also played roles in the Aleutians Campaign. They too would be considered unconventional warfare troops. Eskimo (Aleut) Scouts would do some pre-invasion reconnaissance. Alaska Scouts (consisting of Alaska backwoods inhabitants and experts familiar with living in the Alaska wilds) were dispersed among the landing battalions.
13. See Hal Vogel, "B.U.T.," *Ice Cap News* (March-April 1987), 70-75, for details on this historic polar cruise and its postal history.