

## The story of Niuafu'ou and its Tin Can (Canoe) Mail Service 1882-1983

## Introduction

Niuafu'ou, with Niuatoputapu and Tafahi, is a part of the Niuva islands group, the most northerly of the Polynesian 177 - island archipelago of the Kingdom of Tonga, 383 miles from the capital Nuku'alofa. It had a population of about 1,300, but is currently only about half that number.

It is the peak of an active sub-oceanic volcano with neither beaches, harbours nor good anchorage. Passing ships had to anchor a long way off shore, and only during the non-hurricane season - June to October - were

small boats intermittently launched with difficulty from a gantry to take cargo to and from these ships. There is no evidence that any mail ever accompanied the cargoes.

In 1882, William Travers, working on Niuafu'ou for Osterman, Dervy & Co. of Sydney wanted to communicate with the outside world, but unfortunately, postal communications did not exist. He arranged with the Tongan Postal Officials to have the mail packed into 40lb kerosene cans/biscuit tins, for the natives to swim the mail to and from passing ships.

### The Tin Can (Canoe) Mail Service (TCCM) was born.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century the service became philatelicly promoted, proving to be a popular, colourful and innovative way of delivering messages. It was the **ONLY** way mail could be delivered and received until an airstrip and terminal was constructed in 1983.

### Scope of the Exhibit

This exhibit opens with the story about the origins of Niuafu'ou, its geographical location, history, discovery and Tin Can Mail pioneers. There follows the development of its Tin Can (Canoe) Mail Service through the height of its popularity in the 1930s, through World War 2, the volcanic eruption in 1946 and its suspension, and resumption in 1962. Included are covers to and from many unusual and rare destinations and origins, and censored, delayed and expedited mail during World War 2 that clearly indicate the worldwide interest in Tin Can Mail. Also shown are covers in commemoration and recognition of many notable events in its history for the 101 years from its inception in 1882 to the construction of an airstrip and terminal in 1983 and its final demise.

The exhibit comprises philatelic and non-philatelic material - maps, stamps, proofs, postcards, photographs, newspaper reports, ships' brochures, coconut souvenirs, Government Acts and Orders in Council, Philatelic Bureau information, Tin Can Mail Study Circle memorabilia, 1982 Tin Can Mail Centenary Official Cover artwork, letters, an extensive range of covers from 1930 to 1948 and from 1962, with material that is infrequently seen and/or available in relatively small quantities. Material that is rare and of importance and significance, and text that is of particular interest has been bordered and highlighted in red.

### References and degree of rarity

Reference 1. *Catalog of Tin Can Mail Cachets (2nd edition)* by Janet Klug, published by the Tonga/Tin Can Mail Study Circle, 1985. From her extensive research of several hundred covers, this identified all the Tin Can Mail cachets, inscriptions, illustrated envelopes, etc., and periods of use. Each was assigned a reference number, and code letters denoting the relative rarity from AA very common through to D rare, and DD very rare, where DD represented those that only featured once or twice. In this exhibit, reference is only made where the degree of rarity is D or DD.

Reference 2. *The collection of Martin Baxendale FRPSL.*

### Bibliography

Benson, L Laurence, *The letters of Walter George Quensell Tin Can Mailman of the South Seas, and More Quensell Letters Volume Two*; Clark, Lawrence S *Tin Can Mail*; Gell, William Edgar *Ocean and Isle*; Lewis, Todd *Karl Lewis Covers Part 2 - Foreign Origins*; Proud, Edward B *The Postal History of the British Solomon Islands and Tonga*; Ramsay, Charles Stuart, and Plumb, Charles *Tin Can Island - A story of Tonga and the swimming mail man of the South Seas*; Rogers, Garth *The Fire has jumped - Eyewitness Accounts of the Eruption and Evacuation of Niuafu'ou, Tonga*; Personal study and research in stamp catalogues, philatelic and other magazines, The National Archives at Kew, British Library - Newspaper Library, a complete run of *Tin Canner* from 1980 to 2000 and correspondence with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

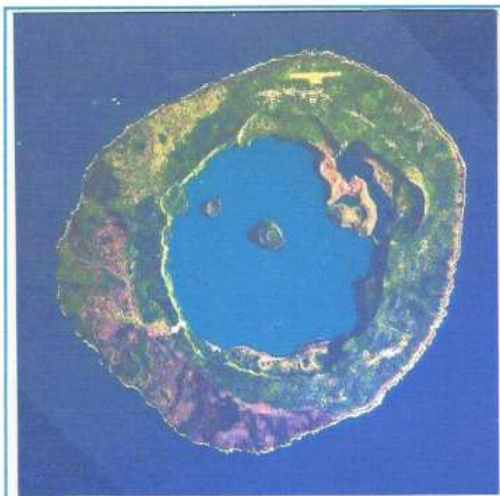
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A4 size equivalents)

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**1 Introduction to Niuafu'ou**  
**1.1 Aerial and lake views of the island**

Aerial views of Niuafu'ou. It is the steep-sided rim of a sub-oceanic volcano with a crater lake inside it. Overall diameter 7-8km. Diameter of lake 3-4km. Width of land 2km.

Satellite view of Niuafu'ou



Coloured-in aerial illustration



An example of the aerial view of the island illustrated on this incoming 1938 cover from Granville, Australia.



The volcano is one of a string of volcanoes and volcanic islands running from New Zealand to Hawaii

**1.1 Aerial and lake views of the island**

Beautiful Niuafu'ou

Miniature sheet with SPECIMEN overprint, issued in 1990, with panoramic views of the crater



The text on the miniature sheet reads -

Niuafu'ou is part of the volcanic chain stretching from New Zealand to Hawaii. Shaped like an "O", the centre is a lake 3 miles in diameter, 95ft above sea level and 275ft deep. The rim towers 870ft above sea level.

This centenary eruptions occurred in 1929, 1935, 1936, 1943 and in 1946, when it was necessary to evacuate the 1300 inhabitants. They did not return until 1958.

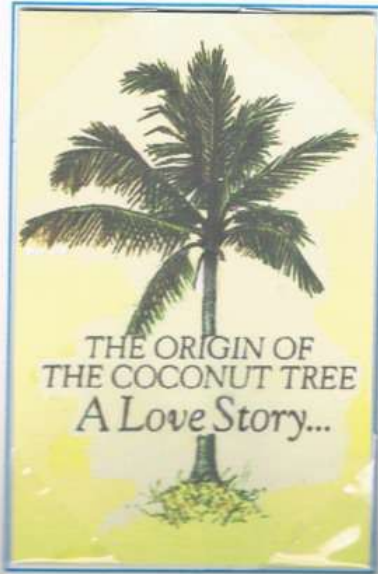
Stamp collectors have nicknamed Niuafu'ou Tin Can Island, because of the unique mail service established in 1882. Niuafu'ou has been issuing stamps since 1983.

A set of stamps in a strip of five, issued in 1993 showing the Natural History of the Crater Lake - Lake Vai La



## 1.2 The coconut trees

Niufo'ou means many new coconuts, or full of the best coconut trees.  
This is the origin of the coconut tree – a love story



Miniature sheet issued in 1991 overprinted SPECIMEN



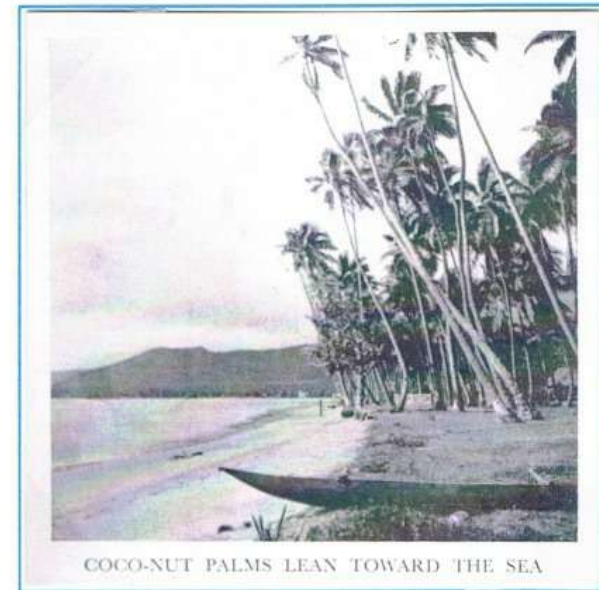
This is the story of a beautiful girl called Heina, who lived by a lake. A freshwater eel fell in love with her, and Heina agreed to marry him. Heina's parents were against the marriage and decided to kill the eel. However, the eel begged Heina to ask her parents to allow her to bury the head of the eel outside the house. Each day, Heina sat and cried where the eel's head was buried, and her tears fell on that spot. After a few weeks a green shoot appeared, and in time, developed into the first coconut palm or Niufo'ou.



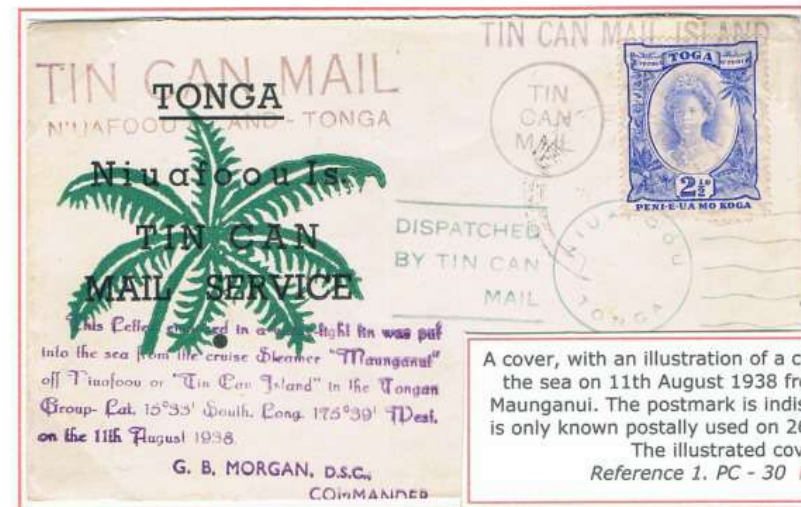
Pieces of coconut and a coaster mat made from re-constituted coconut shells

## 1.2 The coconut trees

Photograph of coconut palms leaning towards the sea and an illustrated coconut palm cover



COCO-NUT PALMS LEAN TOWARD THE SEA



This letter was put in a tin can which was put into the sea from the cruise steamer "Maunganui" off Niuafo'ou or "Tin Can Island" in the Tongan Group - Lat. 15°35' South, Long. 175°30' West, on the 11th August 1938.

G. B. MORGAN, D.S.C.,  
COMMANDER

A cover, with an illustration of a coconut palm, put into the sea on 11th August 1938 from the Cruise Liner Maunganui. The postmark is indistinct, but this cover is only known postally used on 26th August 1938.

The illustrated cover is  
Reference 1. PC - 30 *Rarity DD*

## 1.2 The coconut trees

Examples of the many uses for Coconut kernal

Confetteria Raffaello is a crisp coconut confection with a whole almond centre, the coconut coming from the Pacific Islands



**Confetteria**  
**Raffaello**

The Raffaello recipe is a harmonious blend of carefully selected ingredients: white Californian almonds and coconut from the Pacific Islands. Raffaello is simply, pure pleasure.

*Piacere Puro*

CRISP COCONUT SPECIALITY WITH SMOOTH COCONUT FILLING AND A WHOLE ALMOND

INGREDIENTS: DESICCATED COCONUT 25.5%, VEGETABLE FATS (PALM, SHEA), SUGAR, ALMOND (8%), SKIMMED MILK POWDER, WHEY POWDER (MILK), WHEAT FLOUR, TAPIOCA STARCH, EMULSIFIER: LECITHINS (SOYA), FLAVOURINGS, RAISING AGENT (SODIUM BICARBONATE), SALT.  
SUITABLE FOR VEGETARIANS

Coconut milk



MARKS & SPENCER

**reduced fat COCONUT MILK**

REDUCED FAT COCONUT MILK TO MAKE LIGHTER THAI CURRIES

เฟลิดเฟลิน

Coconut cream



TESCO  
Ingredients  
**COCONUT CREAM**

EXTRA RICH AND CREAMY. IDEAL IN CURRIES AND DESSERTS.

Calories	80	4%
Sugar	0.6g	1%
Fat	8g	11%
Saturated	6.5g	35%
Salt	Trace	<1%

One quarter of a can contains

of your guideline daily amount

## 1.3 Island location, discovery and charting

Maps showing Niuafo'ou's geographical location, and proximity to the International Date Line

Tonga is the first Pacific Island to greet the new day

Highlighted are Eua, Vava'u, Niuatoputapu, Nuku'alofa and Tafahi that feature in this exhibit



The centenary of the International Date Line was in 1984. In its simplest form, it is a straight line. In reality, however it does zig-zag to allow for local circumstances. The line changes from time to time, the last time being in 1995 when a large part of Kiribati moved to the east, so that the entire nation would be on the same side of it.



Two stamps issued by Niuafo'ou in 1984 to commemorate the centenary of the International Date Line

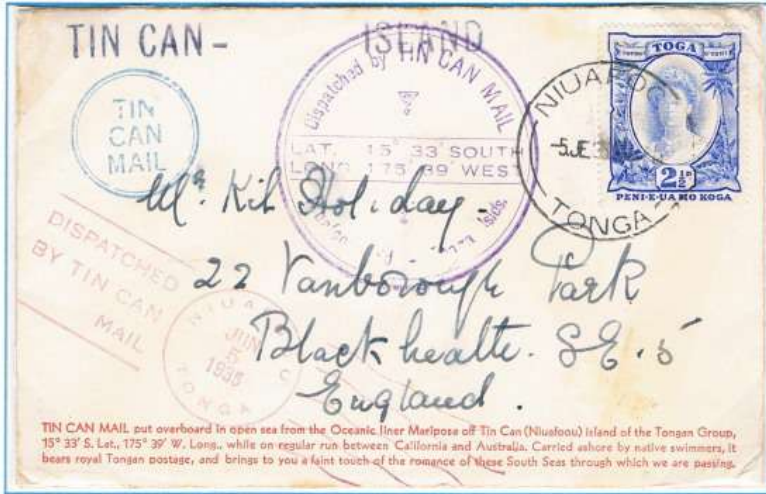


A set of four airmail stamps issued by Tonga in 1971 featuring a wristwatch, inscribed "WHERE TIME BEGINS"



### 1.3 Island location, discovery and charting

A 1935 cover to England with a circular geographical co-ordinates cachet.



This cover is postmarked 5th June 1935, and was put overboard from the Oceanic Liner Mariposa while on a regular run between California and Australia. Illustrated is an example of a circular geographical co-ordinates cachet showing the co-ordinates LAT. 15° 33' SOUTH and LONG. 175° 39' WEST. The printed wording in red at the bottom of the cover is Reference 1. SM - 9a Rarity D

OCEANIC LINE  
HAWAII - SOUTH SEAS  
NEW ZEALAND  
AUSTRALIA  
AMERICA

May 7. 1935. Meridian Day  
(Yesterday was also Tuesday  
May 7<sup>th</sup> as we are crossing the  
180°.

The first page of the Meridian Day letter enclosed in this cover and headed May 7 1935, reads - "Meridian Day. Yesterday was also Tuesday May 7th as we are crossing the 180°. The ship must have been sailing eastbound.

An interesting 9th August 1937 inward cover from the U.S.A where the address identifies the location of Niuafo'ou as being halfway between Samoa and Fiji.



Note the spelling error "Inwarb" for "Inward".

### 1.3 Island location, discovery and charting

Discovery of Niuafo'ou in 1616 by Dutch navigator and mariner Willem Schouten and Jacob Le Maire who originally named the island Good Hope Island

Four stamps and a miniature sheet issued in 1985 to commemorate the 400th birth centenary of Jacob Le Maire.

The miniature sheet has the SPECIMEN overprint

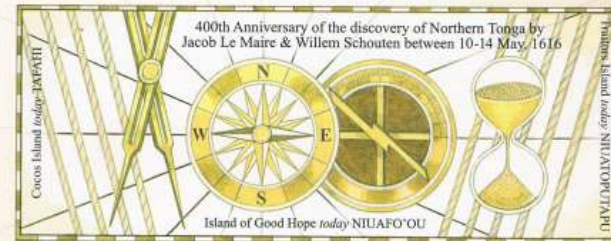
Miniature sheet issued in 1999  
Early explorers - Jacob Le Maire



Miniature sheet issued in 2016 to commemorate the 400th anniversary of the discovery of Northern Tonga by Jacob Le Maire and Willem Schouten



### NIUAFO'OU



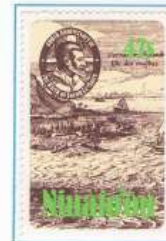
Dutch brass band  
entertaining Tongans

Tongans  
preparing  
Kava



Tonga canoes  
and outriggers

Eendracht at  
Tafahi island



### 1.3 Island location, discovery and charting

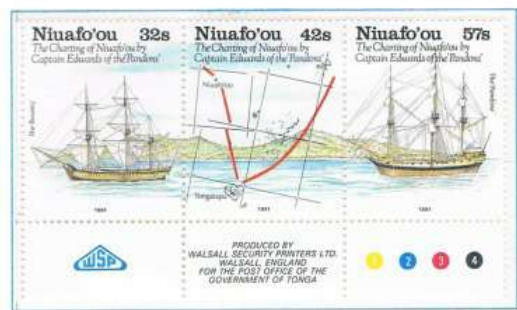
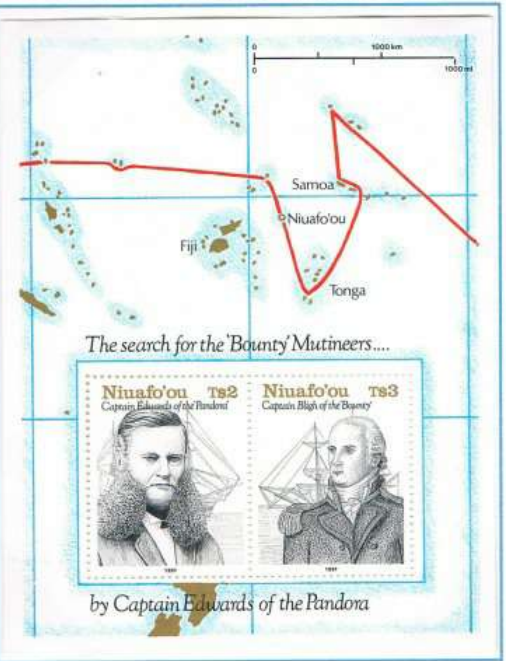
1789 Mutiny on the Bounty and 1991 bicentenary of the charting of Niufo'ou



William Bligh was the captain of the Bounty when the crew, led by Fletcher Christian, mutinied in 1789

This miniature sheet, with SPECIMEN overprint, was issued in 1989 to commemorate the bicentenary of the Mutiny on the Bounty

Three stamps and a miniature were issued in 1991 to commemorate the bicentenary of charting of Niufo'ou



Captain Edwards of the Pandora was dispatched in 1791 to capture the mutineers living in Tahiti and on Pitcairn. During this voyage, parts of the South Pacific, including Niufo'ou were charted. He sighted Niufo'ou on 5th August 1791 and named it Proby's Island, not realising that Schouten and Le Maire had already discovered it in 1616, and had named it Good Hope Island.

## 2. Introduction to Tin Can Mail

### 2.1 The first three Tin Can Mail pioneers

The early years of Tin Can Mail and participating ships

The first Tin Can Mail pioneers were William Travers 1882 - 1902, Arthur Francis Leopold Tindall 1902 - 1921, and Charles Stuart Ramsay 1921 - 1932

Brief experiments to deliver mail by Rocket were also attempted in 1901 - 1902

The ships involved in the formative years of Tin Can Mail during this period were:-

- |       |                            |         |       |        |       |        |
|-------|----------------------------|---------|-------|--------|-------|--------|
| Atua  | Matua                      | Melrose | Navua | Onalau | Opolu | Talune |
| Tofua | Ysabel (or Southern Cross) |         |       |        |       |        |

Three of these ships were featured on Niufo'ou stamps issued in a 1985 set of Mail ships



The S.S. Hauroto was involved in the 1901/1902 Rocket Mail experiments

### 2.2 1882 - 1902 William Travers

The first Tin Can Mail pioneer was William Travers

In 1882, four years before the Post Office in Niufo'ou was opened in 1886, William Travers, working for the Sydney company of Osterman Dervy & Co, persuaded the Tongan postal authorities to allow ships of the Union Steamship Company to seal mail destined for the island in biscuit or kerosene tins, which were then thrown overboard. A basket was lowered from ships to collect the outgoing mail. There was little publicity. Travers relinquished his business interests in 1902.

The native swimmers would wait on the rocks, then jump into the ocean and swim out to passing ships with the outgoing mail wrapped in greaseproof paper or oil cloths which were attached to Fau wood poles



Tin Can Mail was established. No publicity, just a need.

### 2.3 1901 - 1902 The world's first Rocket Mail

#### Experimental ship-to-shore Rocket Mail delivery

It is often believed that the first Rocket Mail delivery was made by Friedrich Schmiedl in Austria in 1931. In actual fact, it was in Niuafo'ou in 1901, when Rockets were used for experimental ship-to-shore delivery from the S.S. Hauroto. Passengers and islanders gathered to witness the delivery of mail by rocket. One such occasion, "THE SKY-ROCKET MAIL DELIVERY" was witnessed by William Geil (see Title Page -bibliography)

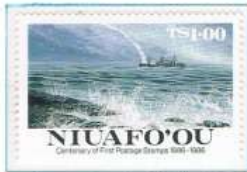
In 1985, a set of four stamps was issued to commemorate Rocket Mail, shown here with SPECIMEN overprint

Preparing to fire the rocket

Rocket in flight

Ship's crew watching rocket's descent

Islanders reading the mail



A year later in 1986, a set of four stamps was issued by Niuafo'ou to commemorate the centenary of the first Tongan postage stamps. One stamp from this set illustrated Rocket Mail.

A postcard of The S. S. Hauroto built in New Zealand in 1882. On 26th July 1919, it went missing, presumed sunk in a typhoon in the China Sea with the loss of 180 lives.



Unfortunately, the rockets frequently blew up in mid air, landed in the water and sank, landed amongst the bushes and trees and caught fire, or overshot the island and landed in the lake  
**Tin Can Swimmers remained the only solution.**

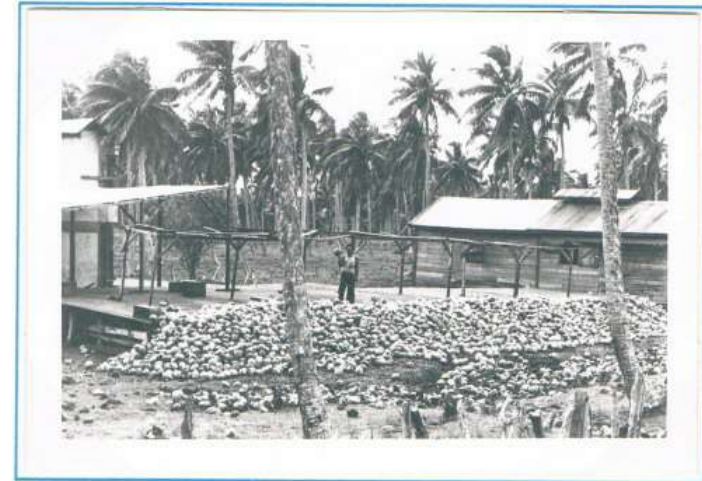
### 2.4 1902 - 1921 Arthur Tindall

#### The second Tin Can Mail pioneer was Arthur Francis Leopold Tindall



Arthur Tindall came to Niuafo'ou from New Zealand in 1902 and established a coconut plantation on the island, working as a director of Morris Hedstrom Ltd. He started the first regular service of Tin Can Mail by arranging for ships of the Union Steamship Co. to make regular visits, and in 1908, the S.S. Tofua was the first to do so. Arthur Tindall left the island in 1914 for war service, but returned afterwards. The Tin Can Mail service continued, and in 1921 he invited Charles Stuart Ramsay to the island as plantation manager. Arthur Tindall died in Auckland on 15th September 1938.

Coconuts, on Arthur Tindall's plantation, drying out into copra, the dried meat or kernel to produce coconut oil. This is the main export of Niuafo'ou.



Examples of Niuafo'ou postmarks used during the Tindall period *Reference 2*

Early 1900s



1908



1914



2.4 1902 - 1921 Arthur Tindall

Captain A.H. Davey of the Mail Steamer S S Tofua seen off the coast at A(n)gaha, Niuafo'ou



2.4 1902 - 1921 Arthur Tindall

Early 1911 postcard of the very rugged coastline of Niuafo'ou

This very early card of Niuafo'ou was written at Nukualofa on 14th May 1911, and sent to Germany.



The text on this side of the postcard includes a reference to Niuafo'ou:-

.....This is an island which is near here where the landing which you can see in the picture is very difficult.....Only sailing ships go to this place.....

The reverse of the postcard (reduced)



The 1d stamp received the rare Auckland boxed PACKET BOAT mark (Hosking 714) and a circular Auckland N.Z. handstamp dated 17th August 1911.