

History of Rocketry and Astronautics

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the International Academy of Astronautics**

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Chapter 6

The Australian Rocket Societies: Rocketry Pioneers or Rocket Mail Sideshows?*

Kerrie Dougherty[†]

Introduction

The distinguished rocketry historian Frank Winter has rightly dismissed the bulk of rocket-mail ‘experimentation’ as having “no real connection with the interplanetary travel movement” of the 1920s and 30s.¹ Although drawing inspiration from this movement, the majority of postal rocketeers were less interested in the technological advancement of rocketry than they were in the creation of philatelic collectibles: items of ‘rocket mail’ that gained value from having been carried in, or even associated with a failure of, a rocket, one of the technological icons of the time. Even though many postal rockets were little more than commercial maritime rockets or home-made ‘black-powder’ devices, they still carried the cachet of high technology.

During the period 1935-41, two groups bearing the name Australian Rocket Society were founded in Australia: the earliest in Brisbane, Queensland, in 1935; the second in Melbourne, Victoria, in 1941. There is ample evidence in the aerophilatelic literature of the day that the Queensland group was primarily a rocket mail society,² but it did at least design and build its own rockets, raising

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the possibility that perhaps some genuine rocketry research had occurred in the course of their rocket post program. In undertaking research on this society, it was my hope to try and establish a clearer picture of the technical side of the society's rocket mail 'experiments,' to supplement its well documented aerophilatelic history.

By contrast with the earlier Brisbane group, the history and activities of the Melbourne-based Australian Rocket Society³ are virtually unknown. In investigating this society, I had hoped not only to shed more light on its history, but also to establish if it had any links with Australia's earliest known rocketeer, an obscure lone Victoria-based experimenter by the name of Brian Falkenberg, known only by a letter to the American Interplanetary Society in 1931.⁴

Although research has confirmed the general view that the Queensland-based Australian Rocket Society was little more than a rocket mail sideshow in the international history of rocketry, interesting new information about this group, a potential link with the Victorian-based ARS and the story of Brian Falkenberg have all come to light, which is here presented for the first time. Research into the Melbourne-based society has also raised the possibility that the Victorian ARS may never have existed in more than name.

The First Australian Rocket Society

The father of rocket mail is generally considered to be the Austrian Friedrich Schmeidl, who sought to develop a viable rocket-based postal system, to overcome the difficulties of communication in the mountainous terrain of Austria. Commencing in 1928, Schmeidl financed his research by producing and selling souvenir covers (envelopes) carried in his experimental rockets,⁵ an innovation that quickly grew into a popular and lucrative branch of aerophilatelic collecting.

In 1934, Alan Hunter Young, a young Brisbane architect, founded the Queensland Air Mail Society. He had already become acquainted with the rocket mail experiments of Schmeidel and others through the aerophilatelic journals of the day and, according to Victorian philatelic historian Charles Bromser, had entered into correspondence with Schmeidel, German mail rocketeer Gerhard Zucker and Indian rocket mail pioneer Stephen Smith (who was also a member of the British Interplanetary Society). He was inspired by their work to undertake rocket mail flights in Australia.⁶

As President of the Queensland Air Mail Society, Young organized the flight of the first Australian rocket mail, flown in Queensland on December 5,

1934. A 'mail rocket' was launched from the deck of the *S.S. Canonbar*, anchored 50 yards off shore in the Brisbane River near Pinkenba, to the north bank of the river: a standard ship's rocket was used to carry the philatelic payload, which was stored in a metal container attached to the rocket by a long life-line.⁷


AUSTRALIA 1

1 1934 December 4
BRISBANE
 Exp. Alan H Young

Cachets:
 1. Blue printed text on left half of cover.
 2. Purple octagon, rubber stamped.

Rocket stamp is on back of cover.

Most covers are signed by A.H.Young.

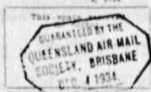



ESTABLISHED 1934
FIRST AUSTRALIAN ROCKET FLIGHT
S.S. "CANONBAR" TO BRISBANE
Commemorating the arrival in Brisbane of 11.12.34. The date of departure, Brisbane 4.12.34.

This cover was carried from the S.S. "Canonbar" in the company of and landed at Pinkenba on the Brisbane River. No responsibility is assumed for loss of contents in transit nor for postponement nor abandonment of flight due to any accident or unforeseen circumstances.

A.H. Young
President

MS J. Carlyk
Box 1508 V.
G. P. O.
BRISBANE






1A1	Stamp - purple - vertical rectangle - perf. - - - - - (3000) - - -	25.00
1A1a	Stamp - sheet of 4 - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - -	40.00 ✓
1C1	Cover, cancelled Pinkenba, Dec. 4, 34 - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - -	25.00 ✓
1C1a	Cover with air mail frank -	35.00
1D1	Cover, 25th Anniversary, postmarked, "PINKENBA, 4 DE 59".	5.00

2 1935 August 12
FRASER ISLAND
 Exp. Alan H Young

Cachets:
 1. Black printed text on left half of cover.
 2. Purple map of Australia, rubber stamped.

Some covers are signed by Young and by Y. Tanaka, capt. S.S. Maheno.





ESTABLISHED 1934
AUSTRALIA
WRECK ROCKET MAIL
FRASER ISLAND - S.S. "MAHENO"
This cover was carried by H.M.S. "Porpoise" from Fraser Island to the S.S. "Maheno" August 12, 1935.

This cover was carried by H.M.S. "Porpoise" from Fraser Island to the S.S. "Maheno" August 12, 1935.

A.H. Young
President

Y. Tanaka
Capt. S.S. Maheno





QUEENSLAND AIR MAIL SOCIETY
 BOX 1508 V,
 G. P. O.
 BRISBANE

Figure 1: Philatelic covers created for the Queensland Air Mail Society's first rocket mail flights.

A similar method of delivery was used for the Queensland Air Mail Society's subsequent rocket flight on August 11, 1935, despite the depiction on the covers of a stylized rocket, seemingly inspired by memories of *Frau im Mond*.⁸ In this instance two ship's rockets carrying philatelic items were fired between the Fraser Island, off the coast of Queensland, and the *S.S. Maheno*, which had been wrecked 500 yards off the island only a month previously (9 July).⁹ Young was joined in planning this event by Noel Scott Morrison, a "lifesaver mate,"¹⁰ who had become the honorary secretary of the society.

Presumably well aware of the profit to be made from the sales of rocket mail, Young may have intended these early flights to raise funds, via the sale of their philatelic cargo, for the construction of the *Zodiac* and its 'sister' rocket, the *Orion*. The *Zodiac* would become the first 'experimental' mail rocket launched by the fledgling Australian Rocket Society.

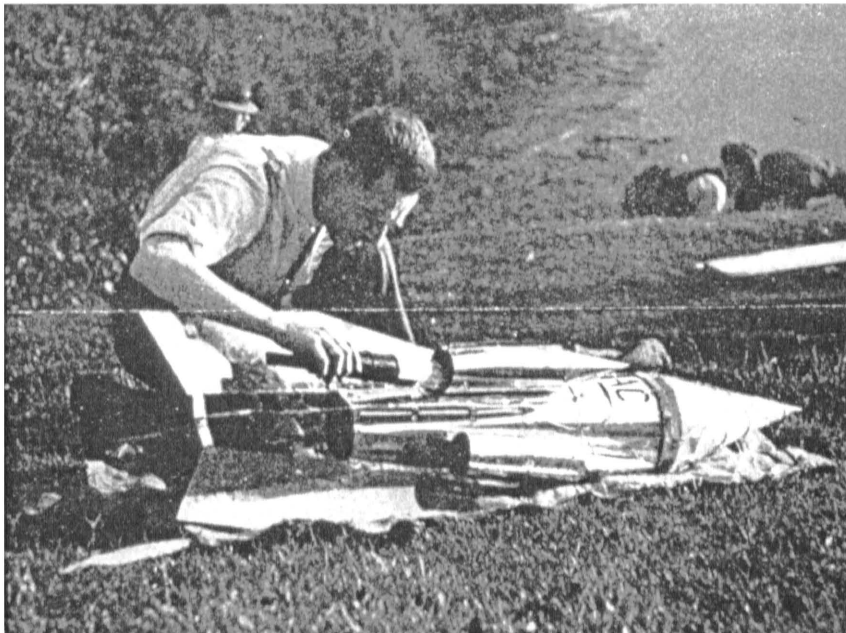


Figure 2: The ARS' first rocket, *Zodiac*, being prepared for launch, October 28, 1935.

Founded by Young and Morrison in October 1935,¹¹ the Australian Rocket Society was intimately linked with its parent, the Queensland Air Mail Society: from January 1936 the two societies shared a joint journal, *The Australian Airpost Collector*, in which Young was listed as Editor and Publisher, while Young and Morrison were President and Secretary, respectively, of both societies. Morrison also advertised in the journal as an aerophilatelic dealer.¹²

While this linkage makes clear the society's philatelic, rather than technical, orientation, there is some evidence that Young viewed himself as a genuine rocketry pioneer, with an ultimate aim similar to that of Schmeidl: to develop a rocket-powered postal delivery system, which would ferry mail to the remotest areas of Queensland at greater speeds than mail trains or aircraft¹³ or deliver "mails and merchandise from ships to islands."¹⁴ In the society's journal and in the media, he regularly described himself as a "rocket experimenter."¹⁵

From the outset, Alan Young apparently intended that the Australian Rocket Society should build and fly 'real' mail rockets, like those used by Schmeidel and Zucker. According to Bromser,¹⁶ Young obtained technical details of the Austrian and German rockets from their respective builders in 1935. In 1936, he also received information from American mail rocketeer, F. W. Kessler, of Brooklyn, New York, who worked with members of the American Rocket Society in the development of the liquid-fuelled mail rocket plane flown at Greenwood Lake in New Jersey.¹⁷ However, it appears that Young and Morrison were not highly technically skilled and they made no attempt to develop a liquid-fuelled rocket for their own rocket mail flights. Although Young claimed the title of its 'designer,'¹⁸ the Australian Rocket Society's first mail rocket, *Zodiac*, and indeed all its subsequent ones so far as is known, were constructed under the supervision of W. L. Harold McFadden.

William Leeman Harold McFadden, was in charge of the Brisbane plumbing and gasfitting firm, W. J. McFadden and Son, founded by his father. According to Dr. Gordon 'Don' McFadden, son of Harold, his father had little actual interest in rocketry, and apparently took on the rocket-building commissions purely as a commercial contract.¹⁹ The McFadden firm constructed the rocket casings, but did not provide or install the black powder charges that were used to power the rockets. Harold McFadden, however, did have some knowledge of explosives²⁰ and he may have advised Young on the manufacture of the 'home-made' gunpowder charges that were used in the *Zodiac* and *Orion* rockets.²¹

The Australian Rocket Society planned its first launch to commemorate the Silver Jubilee of King George V, although delays meant that the flight was not made until October 28, 1935. Two mail rockets were constructed, the *Zodiac* and the *Orion*, although, in the event, only the *Zodiac* was launched. Described variously as 5 ft. (1.52 m) and 7 ft. (2.13 m)²² in length, the *Zodiac* was a tube of aluminum with five charge casings attached to the exterior. Showing noticeable similarity to the design of Zucker's mail rockets, the *Zodiac* was to be fired from a wood and metal launch chute constructed at the Riverview end of the Moggill Ferry (punt) across the Brisbane River, an area remote from the city at that time: the rocket would fly 300 yards (274.3 m) across the river to Moggill. The

rocket's charges were designed to be lit simultaneously, but were "timed to explode at intervals, ensuring plenty of height and velocity for the rocket."²³

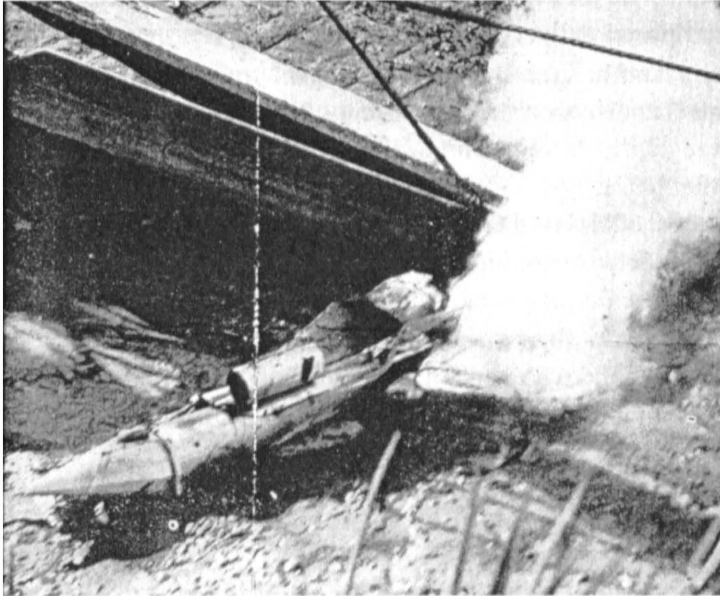


Figure 3: *Zodiac*, destroyed by the explosion of its gunpowder charges, lies alongside its damaged launch ramp.

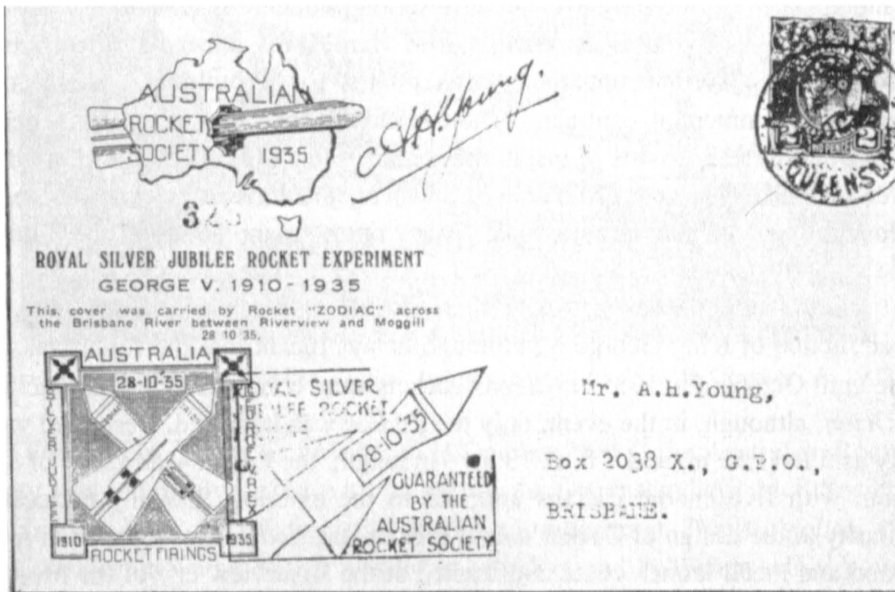


Figure 4: Rocket mail cover carried on the ill-fated *Zodiac*. Despite the failure of the flight, it was still posted as if the flight had been successful.

Unfortunately for Young and Morrison, the early morning flight was a failure, sending the 40 or so spectators, including local media representatives, scurrying for cover. Two charges backfired, while the other three, exploding at intervals, destroyed both the rocket and its launch ramp!²⁴ Although the mail items were recovered and later posted, the men decided to cancel the launch of *Orion*, which had been intended for the same day.

The *Orion*, as originally constructed, was similar in design to the *Zodiac*, but with six charges instead of five,²⁵ mounted inside the rocket casing, instead of externally.²⁶ However, following the first failure, this second rocket was redesigned and completely rebuilt, prior to its eventual launch on February 24, 1936. The ‘new’ *Orion* was constructed around a steel core, to which five “newly designed” charge chambers were bolted, using a “special apparatus.”²⁷ So far no information has been uncovered identifying what changes were made to the charge chambers, or what the special attachment apparatus consisted of: the records of W. J. McFadden and Son, which might have shed some light on the construction of the rockets, were all disposed of when Harold McFadden shut down the business and retired due to ill health after the Second World War. Described as an “aerial torpedo,” the new *Orion* was 5 ft. (1.52 m) in length, 15 in. (38.1 cm) in diameter and had a total take-off weight of 21 lbs (9.53 kg). Its gunpowder charges were this time set for simultaneous firing.²⁸

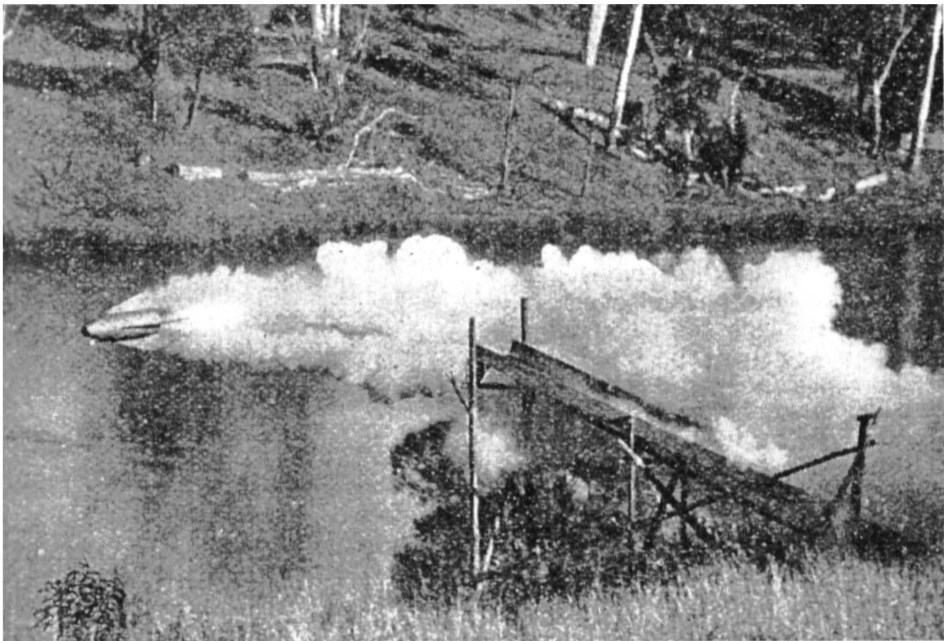


Figure 5: The *Orion* mail rocket going off course and about to crash, February 24, 1936.

A new wooden launch ramp, to replace the previously destroyed one, was constructed in the Moggill Ferry area, this time on the north side of the river: the rocket would fly from Moggill to Riverview. Unfortunately for the ARS, the flight was again a failure, apparently due to the weight of the rocket being “too much for the charges employed.”²⁹ Although the *Orion* took off perfectly, it quickly nose-dived, clipped a tree and was deflected into the river, resulting in its destruction.³⁰ The rocket mail, although damaged was salvaged and posted and this apparently led to accusations that Young and Morrison were less interested in mail rockets than they were in making a profit from rocket mail: certainly Morrison was by this time advertising himself in the *Airpost Collector* as a rocket mail dealer.³¹ As a counter to this accusation, Blaikie claims that the ARS lost \$50 on the *Zodiac* flight and \$75 on the failed flight of the *Orion*, although his source for these figures is unknown.³²

The failure of its first two ambitious rockets, led the ARS to opt for a smaller device for its next mail rocket, the *R.T.6* (the ‘6’ stemming from the fact that it was the sixth rocket mail flight Young had attempted), which was “constructed with the idea of testing certain improvements which are to be incorporated into the new rockets *R.O.3* and *R.Z.2*.”³³ Described as being 3’ in length,³⁴ *R.T.6* employed a “much less powerful charge” and incorporated “special elevator planes”³⁵ and is presumed to have similar in design to its smaller successor *R.T. 7*, launched a few months later, although an image of the rocket has yet to be located. *R.T.6* was fired across the river at Moggill Ferry on July 13, 1936. It was the Australian Rocket Society’s first successful flight, with the rocket travelling 350 ft. (106.68 m) and reaching an altitude of 400 ft. (121.9 m),³⁶ before it nose-dived into the ground on the opposite bank of the river. However, possibly because of the previous failures, it did not attract a great deal of media attention.

For its fourth rocket flight, the ARS moved its activities to the Enoggera Rifle Range, somewhat closer to Brisbane than Moggill. There, under the supervision of the police, *R.T.7* was launched on September 24, 1936, as an event in conjunction with the Brisbane Philatelic Exhibition. Press photographs of the rocket, taken on the day, show it to have been considerably smaller than its predecessors, approximately 2-2.5 ft. (0.61-0.76 m) in length: it weighed only 7.5 lbs (3.4 kg).³⁷ It would appear that for this demonstration flight Young had decided to utilize an adaptation of his previously successful *R.T.6*, rather than the as-yet-untried *R.O.3* design. Launched from a simple guide-rail that the Brisbane *Courier Mail* newspaper described as “a specially designed chute,”³⁸ the rocket reached a maximum height of 200 ft. (60.96 m) and travelled some 400 yards (365.76 m), landing within 5 yards (4.57 m) of a target mark.³⁹ Although available photographs of the *R.T.7* do not indicate that its fins were steerable, the *Cou-*

rier Mail article gives the impression that the rocket had some kind of guidance mechanism: this would be consistent with the assumption that the *R.T.7* was a smaller version of *R.T.6* and incorporated the same “special elevator planes.”

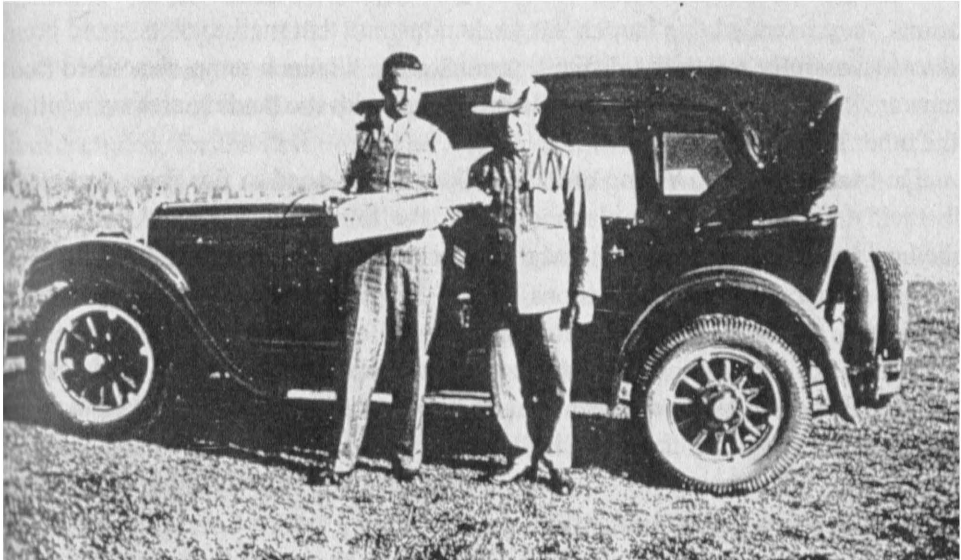


Figure 6: *R.T.7*, the ARS’ second successful rocket. It was much smaller than their earlier mail rockets.



Figure 7: *R.T.7* and its launch rail at the Enoggera Rifle Range near Brisbane. The rocket was fired here as an event in conjunction with the Brisbane Philatelic Exhibition, September 24, 1936.

By March 1937, the ARS had again moved the scene of its 'rocket experiments,' this time to a rural property at Mt. Nebo, on the western outskirts of Brisbane, where they established a "rocket firing facility."⁴⁰ It is possible that, given Young's stated interest in establishing a mail delivery service for remote locations, they intended this launch site to demonstrate that mail rockets could be used to successfully overcome difficult terrain, since a launch ramp, described as a "runway," was established on one side of a gorge with the landing area up a hill on the other side.⁴¹

On March 8, 1937, Young and his colleagues planned to fire three rockets from their new site. The long-planned *R.O.3*, the first to be launched, was described as being 3.5 ft (1.07 m) long and containing 3 gunpowder charges.⁴² There are no documented explanations for the designations given by the ARS to their rockets, although the 'R' presumably stands for 'rocket,' and 'T' for test. The 'O' and 'Z' designations are assumed to be derived from "Orion" and "Zodiac," the first two ARS 'experimental rockets,' and presumably indicate the 'technological lineage' of the rocket. Thus *R.O.3* would be the third rocket of the "Orion" type (*R.O.1* being the original, never flown *Orion* and *R.O.2* being the modified Orion that flew unsuccessfully in February 1936).

Unfortunately for the ARS, *R.O.3* was again an apparent victim of their lack of expertise in handling gunpowder charges. Although the rocket launched successfully, it quickly began tumbling end over end and fell into the gorge. Examination of the wreckage indicated that one of the three charges had pulled away from its fuse and not fired: as a result, it was decided not to launch the other two rockets.⁴³ Following this failure, the Mt. Nebo site was apparently abandoned, as no subsequent launches took place there.

Because the majority of their launch failures had involved the rocket 'nose-dipping,' from whatever cause, and crashing to the ground, Young and Morrison decided to add an "anti-nose-dip" device to their next rocket, in a bid to extend the duration of its flight. Their Heath-Robinson device consisted of a mousetrap and lead ball, located in the nose of the rocket. The idea was that, if the nose dipped, the lead ball would roll forward, striking the release mechanism of the mousetrap, which would then spring and in turn pull open a small hatch allowing a tiny parachute to be released. The parachute, in theory, would steady the nose and prevent it from dipping further. Blaikie, an obvious and not very accurate apologist for the ARS, claims the idea to have been Young and Morrison's own.⁴⁴ although there is always the possibility that they could have obtained the idea via their correspondence with overseas mail rocketeers, I have found no evidence to date of a similar device in use among other mail-rocketeers.

Apart from a description of this ingenious “anti-dip device,” very little is known of the technical side of *R.Z.2* the society’s next rocket, launched on March 23, 1937. I have been unable to locate any photographs of the rocket, and the news film of the event no longer survives in the Cine-Sound Archives. Once more at the Enoggera Rifle Range,⁴⁵ Australia’s first “parachute rocket” launch took place under the watchful eye of the Queensland Police Commissioner and representatives of the Commonwealth Department of Defence: the media contingent included, for the first time at an ARS rocket firing, the cameras of the *Cine-Sound Gazette*, the Australian equivalent of the *Movietone News*.⁴⁶ Once again, the rocket launched successfully and this time travelled for some 300 yards (274.32 m) before the charges apparently malfunctioned in some way and the rocket blew itself apart in mid-air.⁴⁷

It is interesting to note that Kronstein lists two other rocket test flights, *R.T.8* and *R.T.9*, as taking place at Enoggera following the *R.Z.2* failure.⁴⁸ Neither of these, however, is mentioned in the *Courier Mail* coverage of the event and no details are recorded in the aerophilatelic literature as they did not carry any rocket mail.

The final mail rocket flight by the Australian Rocket Society took place on May 10, 1937, with a launch at the Enoggera Rifle Range to commemorate the release of Australia’s new George VI and Queen Elizabeth postage stamps.⁴⁹ No technical detail at all is available for this flight, as it received virtually no media coverage: the rocket itself was not even allocated its own designation, although it may have been of a similar type to *R.T.8* and *9*.

The lack of information about this flight seems to be indicative of the fact that the Australian Rocket Society was about to fold. Blaikie⁵⁰ claims that, stung by criticism that they were only carrying out stunts in order to raise money from philatelic sales, and having exhausted their financial resources, Young and Morrison decided to cease their rocket experiments. This view of the demise of the first ARS is also held by Bromser and Queensland aerophilatelic historian Perce Meara.⁵¹ Whatever the actual reason for its demise, following the May 1937 flight, the ARS disappears from the aerophilatelic literature and, despite being listed in Lent in 1945, is generally considered to have become defunct by the end of 1937.

Australia’s First Rocketeer

The second Australian Rocket Society, which was to be founded a few years after the demise of the first ARS, was based in Melbourne, Victoria, a state

which was also home to Australia's earliest known rocketry experimenter, Brian Falkenberg. In researching the history of the second ARS, I was also interested in obtaining further information on the little-known Mr. Falkenberg, to establish whether or not this obscure rocketeer had any connection with the later Melbourne group.

Brian Falkenberg lived on the sheep-farming property of "Bonnie Hills," outside the small rural town of Byaduk in the prosperous Western District of Victoria. Born on November 11, 1913, Falkenberg would have been barely 17 when he wrote to the American Interplanetary Society in late 1931, requesting membership information and recounting his not very successful attempts at developing his own rocket. A science fiction fan and amateur astronomer, young Brian seems to have gained at least part of his knowledge of rocket science from the pages of *Amazing Stories* and other science fiction pulp magazines of the period. In his letter to the AIS, he refers to having first learned of its existence through a letter from the AIS Secretary appearing in the September 1931 issue of *Amazing Stories*. Youthful enthusiasm shines through the letter, as the young experimenter expresses his expectation that people will be "flying to the Moon in a few years (sic) time."⁵²

Although he had designed his own 10 in. (25.4 cm) rocket, powered by six 'flame rocket tubes' (fireworks?), Falkenberg had not successfully launched his rocket at the time of his letter to the AIS. No photograph or other illustration of this rocket survives, but it must have been an unusual contraption, as it is described as having had four wheels: and the most success that Falkenberg claimed to have achieved was to have the rocket run along the ground on its wheels, when he fired the tubes!⁵³

Exactly what other experiments Brian may have carried out, beyond those mentioned in his letter to the AIS, are not known, as he seems to have kept his interest in rocketry largely to himself. Although surviving relatives recount that he was well-known for his interest in amateur astronomy, none were aware of his having had an interest in rocketry before being contacted by the author.⁵⁴ Similarly, although the Falkenbergs were a prominent local family, the Byaduk district newspapers, the *Hamilton Spectator* and *Hamilton Tribune*, contain no reference to the budding rocketeer's experiments, even though the family is otherwise mentioned on various occasions.⁵⁵

It appears that, however keen Brian Falkenberg's early interest in rocketry, it was rapidly replaced by an even stronger interest in amateur radio. His radio call-sign, 3FA, was a very early one and goes back at least into the mid 1930s. Although relatives have been unable to suggest any particular reason for Brian's change of hobby, other than the development of a new interest, young Falken-

berg's 'defection' to amateur radio seems to have been complete, leading him to abandon all rocket experiments and relegate any further interest in rocketry far into the background in his life. Only a few books on spaceflight, and no archival material at all on his early work were found among his effects following his death in April 1997, despite the fact that his executors found ample material relating to his decades-long involvement in amateur radio.⁵⁶ In the face of his early enthusiasm, one is left to wonder whether some external factor was not involved in Falkenberg's decision to move away from the field of rocketry, but, whatever the reason, Brian Falkenberg ceased his rocket experiments, inherited the family property and sheep-raising interests and stepped out of the history of Australian rocketry.

The Second Australian Rocket Society

Brian Falkenberg's short-lived interest in rocketry does not seem to have had any bearing whatsoever upon the formation of the second Australian Rocket Society, which is listed in Lent⁵⁷ as having been founded in 1941. What, then, were the origins of this society and what were its activities?

Attempts at researching the history of the society through Victorian sources similar to those utilized in researching the history of the Queensland ARS have proved fruitless: unlike the Brisbane firings, which were covered in the local daily newspapers, searches of the indexes of the major Melbourne newspapers have so far not revealed any reports of rocket firings or other rocketry-related activity conducted by the society. The name 'Australian Rocket Society' itself does not even appear on any index so far researched at the State Library of Victoria.

This lack of awareness of the society's activities is also found in the local area in which it was supposedly based. According to Lent, the Australian Rocket Society in Melbourne was based at 219 High Street, Prahran, a Melbourne suburb approximately 5 km from the centre of the city. However, a search of the local newspaper of the period, the *Prahran News*,⁵⁸ also reveals no information about the society—from which it can be deduced that its activities (if any) had a negligible impact upon the local community! According to Prahran Archivist, David Luck, the society's High Street address is listed in local business directories of 1941 as being a fish-mongering establishment owned by one J. Grimau, although it is possible that the ARS may have rented an upstairs room in the building for its office.⁵⁹

Lent lists one J. A. Georges as the founding and current (1945) President of the ARS.⁶⁰ There is no one of this name listed as a resident in Prahran at this period, but a Jonathon A. George is listed as resident in the nearby suburb of St. Kilda.⁶¹ Given that Lent has already been shown to contain a minor inaccuracy with regard to his information on the first ARS (see footnote 11) it is possible to speculate that his J. A. George and Jonathon A. Georges are the same person. Nothing is known about Jonathon Georges, but his residential listing does not include an occupation, often indicating a man of independent means, possibly someone with enough time and money to run their own ‘society’—even if that society was little more than a one-man show catering to a personal interest.

If the lack of evidence of any rocket experimentation activity indicates that the Melbourne-based ARS was not an active astronautical rocketry group, could it have been a rocket mail society? Regrettably, the aerophilatelic literature provides no indication of any involvement by the society in rocket mail, nor is its name known to Australian philatelic historians, such as Charles Bromser. However, this does not completely exclude the possibility that the ARS may have been a rocket mail collecting group, even if it did not launch its own mail rockets. There was a large and active philatelic society in Prahran during this period, of which it is not inconceivable that Mr. George(s) may have been a member and through which he may have developed an interest in rocket mail.⁶²

On October 6, 1936, shortly after the Queensland ARS’ successful *R.T.7* rocket flight, prominent Victorian aerophilatelist Ken Atcock, conducted a rocket mail flight at Fisherman’s Bend, an industrial district of Melbourne.⁶³ According to Bromser, this flight was intended as a ‘demonstration’ launch to engender interest in the idea of a special rocket mail flight in conjunction with a major philatelic exhibition to be held in Melbourne in 1937.⁶⁴ It would appear that Atcock derived this idea from the success of Young and Morrison’s similar venture in Brisbane, where the *R.T.7* flight was conducted as part of the Brisbane Philatelic Exhibition.

To judge from his article in the Melbourne *Herald* only a few days before his demonstration flight,⁶⁵ Atcock had a strong interest in rocketry, from both a rocket mail and a space travel perspective, and was familiar with the rocket mail flights of Zucker, Tiling and other European mail rocketeers, as well as Kessler’s experiment in the United States.

There is little information available on the technical details of Atcock’s rocket mail flight, but it is believed he used a standard maritime rocket, much in the same way that the Queensland ARS did for their first rocket mail. However, despite the appearance of Atcock’s ‘pre-flight’ article, the launch itself appears to have attracted little or no media interest. It certainly did not generate the antici-

pated interest in conducting a flight in 1937, as no such event occurred. Presumably discouraged by this outcome, Atcock thereafter disappeared from the known history of rocket mail in Australia.

Whether Atcock had any influence on George(s) in the eventual establishment of the Melbourne ARS is not known, but it is certainly possible that, if George(s) had any involvement in the Prahran Philatelic Society, he may have known, or become aware of, Atcock's experiment and the Queensland ARS and been inspired to form his own rocket mail society as a result. This is, however, purely conjecture, as so little information is available.

Therefore, unless the Melbourne-based ARS was conducting rocketry experiments in secret and communicating its results only to the American Rocket Society, the lack of information about the group in any contemporary Australian sources would seem to suggest that it may have been a society in name only: one which may only have 'existed' due to the interest of its "Founder and President," J. A. George(s). If it did conduct any research, of either the rocket mail or astronomical variety, it had no impact on the general public awareness of rocketry, or on the international spaceflight movement of the day.

Conclusion

In undertaking the research for this paper, it was my intention to shed some light on the largely obscure histories of the Australian Rocket Societies, and their connection, if any, to the international spaceflight movement of the 1930s and 40s. Although research to date has confirmed the view that the Queensland ARS was a 'rocket mail sideshow' rather than a serious rocketry research group, it has also cast doubt upon the existence in more than name of the Melbourne-based group. Neither group has presented evidence of having made any contribution of note to the development of rocketry and could not even be claimed to have advanced the general public awareness of rocketry in the 1930s and 40s.

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References

- ¹ Winter, F. *Prelude to the Space Age*, Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington DC, 1983, p.109.
- ² See, for example, the regular references in the *Australian Airpost Collector*, the *Australian Stamp Monthly*, and the article "Australian Rocket Experiments" in the *Indian Air Mail Society Quarterly Bulletin*, 11 June 1937, pp. 50-51.
- ³ One of the few contemporary references is to be found in Lent, C. P. *Rocket Research History and Handbook* (New Edition, Jan. 1945), The Pen-Ink Publishing Co, NY, 1945. The Appendix lists known international rocket societies, including the Melbourne-based ARS.
- ⁴ Falkenberg, B., Letter to the Secretary of the AIS, n.d. (received at AIS 9 December, 1931), G. Edward Pendray Papers, Princeton University Library.
- ⁵ Ellington, J. T. and Zwisler, P. F. (co-eds.), *Ellington-Zwisler Rocket Mail Catalogue, 1904-1967*, John W. Nicklin, NY, 1967, p.iii.
- ⁶ Information from a telephone conversation with Charles Bromser, who has copies of some of Young's correspondence with international rocket mail experimenters in his possession.
- ⁷ Details of the flight were given in a notice in *The Australian Stamp Monthly*, February 1935, p.54.
- ⁸ Ellington and Zwisler, 1967, p.1.
- ⁹ The account of this flight given by Dr. Max Kronstein, generally accepted as the international authority on early rocket mail flights, (Kronstein, 1972, pp.45-46) contains several inaccuracies: the ship, *S.S. Maheno*, is listed as the *Mahena*, the date of the rocket flight is given as August 12, instead of the correct August 11, and the Master of the *Maheno*, taking her to Japan to be scrapped, was Tanaka, not Tanaja, as listed in the article.
- ¹⁰ Morrison is so described in Blaikie, G. "Rockets Over the Brisbane River," unsourced newspaper cutting from the series *Our Strange Past*, n.d. (c. 1970), held in the John Oxley Library, Brisbane, Australia.
- ¹¹ Lent, 1945, Appendix, lists the society as being founded in 1936. This date is followed by Winter, 1983, p.109. However, correspondence from Alan Young with ARS letterhead and dated October 1935, exists in the possession of Charles Bromser. (Information from telephone interview). An article on the *Zodiac* rocket flight in the 31 October 1935 issue of the *Queenslander Pictorial* (p.29) also refers to the Australian Rocket Society. The official cachet of the society, used to authenticate all its rocket mail, also carries the legend "Australian Rocket Society, 1935."
- ¹² *The Australian Airpost Collector*, vol. 1, no. 1, January, 1936.

- ¹³ Blaikie, *op. cit.*, who provides no source for the quote: it may be his extrapolation of the *Courier Mail* quote below.
- ¹⁴ Young quoted in the *Courier Mail*, Oct. 24, 1935, p. 14, col. 4.
- ¹⁵ See for example, *Courier Mail*, Sept 25, 1936, p. 17, col. 6; and *Australian Airpost Collector*, vol. 1, no. 3, 1936, p. 8. The 'rocket stamps' used on covers from the later ARS rocket flights include the legend "Young Rocket Experiment."
- ¹⁶ Information from telephone interview, based on correspondence from the ARS in Bromser's possession.
- ¹⁷ Winter, 1983, p. 83.
- ¹⁸ "Brisbane's Rocket," *Queenslander Pictorial*, 31 October 1935, p. 29.
- ¹⁹ Information from telephone interview.
- ²⁰ During the Second World War, Harold McFadden was charged with the important task of blowing up bridges along the 'Brisbane Line' in the event of a Japanese invasion. Information from telephone interview with Don McFadden.
- ²¹ Blaikie, *op. cit.*
- ²² Blaikie describes the rocket as being 7 ft. long, while Kronstein, 1972, p. 46, gives its length as 5 ft. Both sources are known to contain inaccuracies, but newspaper photographs of the rocket show it to be closer to 5 ft in length.
- ²³ *Courier Mail* Oct. 29, 1935, p.14, col.4.
- ²⁴ *Courier Mail*, *ibid.*; *Queenslander Pictorial*, *op. cit.*
- ²⁵ Kronstein, Dr. Max, "The Pioneer Development of the Postal Rocket, ix: The Rocketpost Experiments in Australia, 1934-37," *The Airpost Journal*, Vol. 44, no. 2, November 1972, pp. 46-48.
- ²⁶ The original *Orion* is depicted on postcards, showing Young posing with the rocket, that were made for carriage on the planned jubilee flight.
- ²⁷ Young, A. "Australian Rocket Experiment: Postponed Orion Firing," *Australian Airpost Collector*, March, 1936, p. 6-7
- ²⁸ *Courier Mail*, Feb 25, 1936, p. 12, col. 3.
- ²⁹ *ibid.*
- ³⁰ Young, *op. cit.*, p. 6.
- ³¹ See advertisement in *Australian Airpost Collector*, February, 1936 p. 4. Rocket mail items offered for sale in this ad included stamps and covers from Karl Robertti, another mail rocketeer whom Winter (1983, p. 109) describes as "suspect."
- ³² Blaikie, *op. cit.*
- ³³ Young, A. and Morrison, N. "Australian Rocket Firing," *The Indian Air Mail Society Quarterly Bulletin*, Vol. IX, no. 3, Sept. 1936, reprinted in *The Bulletin*, Vol. 27, no. 11, February 1973, pp. 83-84.
- ³⁴ Krontstein, 1972, p. 47.
- ³⁵ Young and Morrison (reprint 1973) p. 84.
- ³⁶ *Courier Mail*, Sept. 25, 1936, p. 17.

- ³⁸ *ibid.*
- ³⁹ *ibid.*
- ⁴⁰ Kronstein, 1972, p. 48 gives the location of this launch site as “Camp Mountain,” a designation which Ellington and Zweisler, 1967, p. 4, followed from his original report.
- ⁴¹ *Courier Mail*, March 8, 1937, p. 15, col. 8
- ⁴² *ibid.*
- ⁴³ *ibid.*
- ⁴⁴ Blaikie, *op. cit.*
- ⁴⁵ Kronstein consistently misspells this name as Enoggora. Ellington and Zweisler further compound the mistake by giving the name as ‘Engorra’ in their catalogue, p. 4-5.
- ⁴⁶ Kronstein, 1972, p.62.
- ⁴⁷ *Courier Mail*, March 24, 1937, p. 18; Kronstein, 1972, p. 48.
- ⁴⁸ Kronstein, 1972, p.62.
- ⁴⁹ *ibid.*
- ⁵⁰ Blaikie, *op. cit.*
- ⁵¹ Bromser and Meara, in telephone conversations.
- ⁵² Falkenberg, letter, 1931.
- ⁵³ *ibid.*
- ⁵⁴ Information from telephone conversations with Mary Falkenberg (sister-in-law) and Bill Falkenberg (nephew).
- ⁵⁵ Research on these local newspapers for references to Brian Falkenberg was carried out by Ms. Helen Moor of the Hamilton History Centre.
- ⁵⁶ Information from a telephone conversation with Bill Falkenberg, executor of Brian Falkenberg’s estate.
- ⁵⁷ Lent, 1945, Appendix.
- ⁵⁸ Research on this local newspaper for references to the ARS was carried out by Mr. David Tuck, Archivist of the Prahran Archives, a division of the local government of the City of Prahran.
- ⁵⁹ Telephone conversation with David Tuck.
- ⁶⁰ Lent, 1945, Appendix.
- ⁶¹ Information from a telephone conversation with David Tuck.
- ⁶² Information from both Bromser and Tuck in telephone conversations.
- ⁶³ Eustis, H. N. *The Australian Air Mail Catalogue*, (rev. edn.), Dubbo Review Publishers, 1965, p.62.
- ⁶⁴ Bromser, telephone conversation.
- ⁶⁵ Atcock, Ken, “Rockets and their Future”, *Herald*, Saturday October 3, 1936, (no page number on available cutting).