

The Six Cents Orange U.S. Airmail Envelope

By Patrick Crosby

I see it all the time. An online seller of a U.S. 6¢ orange airmail envelope with borders measures the width of the “6” and if it’s 6 mm promptly says hooray! I have a \$65/\$30 (mint/used) envelope. But what the seller actually has is the cheapest of this envelope’s varieties, catalogued at \$1.75/\$1.00. Keep reading and I’ll point out how this cheapest variety could be worth \$200/\$100. [All values from United Postal Stationery Society (UPSS).]

What do the sellers do wrong? They forget that the first step for classifying the stamp is determining which of two basic dies it is. If it is Scott die 2 then it’s time to measure the width of the “6”, which could be 6½ mm, 6 mm, or 5½ mm (Scott UC3, UC4, and UC5 respectively). If it is Scott die 3 no measuring is necessary since the “6” is always 6 mm wide, and herein lies the confusion. The easiest ways to spot differences between die 2 and die 3 are shown in the chart.



Die 2. Tail rudder is semi-circular

All bars in “E” of “POSTAGE” are of equal length

Scott UC3 (die 2a)

UC4 (die 2b)

UC5 (die 2c)

Die 3. Tail rudder leans forward

Middle bar of “E” in “POSTAGE” is noticeably shorter than the 2 other bars

Scott UC6

Re-entry die. Same as Die 3 except:

Front strut on right wheel is a thin line beginning forward on the wheel

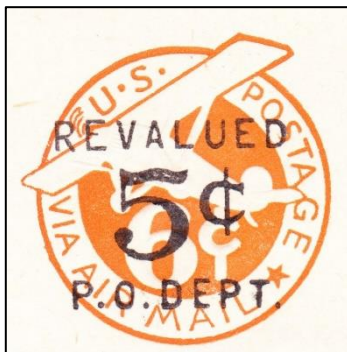
Tail rudder is separated from the tail wing by an orange line

(Scott UC6 var.) first seen in early 1944

Not mentioned in the Scott U.S. Specialized Catalogue’s long description of the 6¢ airmail envelope varieties is what the UPSS calls the “Re-entry die”. This occurs on the die 3 (Sc. UC6) letter size envelope and comes with or without a border of red and blue lozenges. Heavy usage of the printing dies necessitated one working die to be recut and this is the “Re-entry die”, easily spotted with the plane’s right wheel front strut (usually fat) being a skinny line off the forward part of the wheel.

Doug Kelsey reported in “Linn’s Stamp News” (March 7, 2005) that this six-cent airmail envelope was “...the most heavily used U.S. stamped envelope in history. At the height of its production, more than 40 million per month were manufactured and distributed to servicemen during World War II.” Although there was free surface mail provided for service personnel, airmail letters or cards required U.S. domestic rate postage.

An example of military usage of the “Re-entry die” is shown on an U.S. Army Postal Service postmarked cover with six cents postage due paid in Portland, OR, likely for a second unit of weight. Although the domestic airmail rate was 6¢ per ounce at the time, U.S. Domestic Postal Rates (p.94) also shows 6¢ “To/from overseas US military personnel, per ½ oz”. The left side of the envelope is sealed with examiner’s tape and it was “Passed by U.S. Base Army Examiner 1932”. The return address of this service woman indicates 1st Field Hospital A.P.O. 72, which was an Army Post Office in the Philippines. Also, the 235 in the postmark dial is an A.P.O. number that includes the Philippines.



The six cents orange airmail envelope was issued July 1, 1934, and there are many interesting collectible avenues at very reasonable prices. The domestic airmail rate jumped to 8¢ during 1944, then dropped to 5¢ during 1946 when the envelope was revalued to five cents with a 5¢ surcharge on top of the stamp.

Revalued to Five Cents
On all die 2's and 3
Common varieties



Revalued to Seven Cents
On all die 2's
Tough! \$50 to \$5,000

Rates were raised at the beginning of 1949 back to six cents, then a rate change to seven cents during 1958 finds our six cents orange envelope revalued to seven cents with a 1 cent surcharge to the left of the stamp. For nearly 30 years this envelope served our country and was certainly battle tested.

References:

- Dan Undersander, editor, *Catalog of the 20th and 21st Century Stamped Envelopes and Wrappers of the United States* (Chester, VA: United Postal Stationery Society 2016)
- *Scott 2019 Specialized Catalog of United States Stamps and Covers* (Sidney, OH: Amos Media, 2018)
- Anthony S. Wawrukiewicz and Henry W. Beecher, *U.S. Domestic Postal Rates, 1872-2011* (Bellefonte, PA: American Philatelic Society, 2011) [Available from APS]
- Jim Forte and Richard W. Helbock, *A Price Guide to U.S. A.P.O. Cancels of the Second World War*, postalhistory.com/Military/APO/apo_contents.htm [free to use]

Patrick Crosby is a member of the Nevada Stamp Study Society and collects U.S. postal stationery, stamps, and postcards with an emphasis on postal history.