

Antarctic philately and its role in preserving the history of South Africa's involvement in Antarctica

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Introduction to polar postal history and Antarctic philately

In the year 2020 South Africa will celebrate some 60 years of involvement in Antarctica, since SANAE I, South Africa's first base in Antarctica, was established. There have been four bases, three supply/research ships, and ongoing scientific research in meteorology, climatology, geology, geomorphology and geophysics (Cooper & Headland, 1991).

There has also been, and continues to be, cooperation with many other countries, including Norway, Belgium, Russia and Germany. Much has been written on the history of South Africa's involvement in Antarctica (e.g. Cooper & Headland, 1991; Van der Watt & Swart, 2015), but the postal or philatelic history of South African Antarctic activity, and more specifically its role in preserving the history of South Africa's involvement in Antarctica, appears to have hardly been documented. The only publications that discuss South African Antarctic philatelic activities in any detail are those of Pirie (1985) and Jurisich (2003).

According to the Polar Postal History Society of Great Britain (2020), "thematic topics covered in Polar Postal History include polar exploration and expedition related material, military mail, whaling, polar shipping and aviation and over the years this diversity has expanded into other polar interests such as thematic collecting, social history, postcards, photographs and literature". Since the earliest years of exploration of Antarctica and the sub-Antarctic islands, thousands of 'Antarctic or Polar philatelists',

essentially people with a keen interest in Antarctic activities, have followed the routes of icebreaking ships and expedition members, and explorers as far back as Scott and Shackleton carried envelopes, or 'covers' sent by philatelists. Covers are typically addressed envelopes with postage stamps attached (Lawson, 2006). Once in Antarctica these covers are stamped with the ship's cachets, base cachets, specific expeditions' cachets, and are sometimes signed by expedition members, before being posted from the first port reached on the return voyage.

In the words of Rajek (2010), "Dozens of books have been written about the history of Antarctica but one doesn't have to go to the library to read the stories that shaped the continent – a different sort of narrative can be found – the canceled marks over the stamps pinpoint not just a date in time, but also a moment in the historical development of the continent." Almost every major Antarctic achievement is preserved forever on these covers. In the words of philatelist Hal Vogel (quoted in Rajek, 2010), "These items postally document an event, an individual, an occurrence – it's almost like a time stamping of history".

Development of South African Antarctic philately – Marion Island covers

The name of Allen Crawford is synonymous with the development of South African Antarctic philately. Crawford was sent to Tristan da Cunha as a meteorologist during the Second World War. His experience on Tristan da Cunha, where he designed their first postage stamps, resulted in him being chosen as a member of the first team to man South Africa's weather station on Marion Island, one of the sub-Antarctic islands. A temporary post office was established by Crawford soon after the annexation of the island by South Africa in January 1948 (Crawford, 1982). Most of these covers can be identified by a rectangular cachet which reads 'Marion Island South Indian Ocean' on the bottom left corner of the envelopes. The official cancellation of the stamps occurred at the first port reached on the return journey.

Early Marion Island covers show little other than the name of the island, and sometimes that of the naval supply ships on which they were carried, such as the HMSAS Transvaal, the SS Gamtoos, the HMSAS Cape of Good Hope and the HMSAS Natal (Pirie, 1975; Jurisich, 2003). In 1950 the first printed envelope appeared, with a map depicting the location of Marion Island relative to South Africa, and one of the island itself. Until then all letters posted from Marion Island were cancelled at the nearest port in South Africa, usually Cape Town, but an official post office was opened on Marion Island in 1958 (Figure 1), during International Geophysical Year, and from then on mail could be cancelled on the island itself (Jurisich, 2003).



Figure 1: One of the first Marion island covers produced after an official post office was opened in 1958

SANAE I, the RSA and the SA Agulhas

By the time SANAE I, South Africa's first base in Antarctica, was established in December 1959, there was already a well-established group of philatelists with an interest in South African Antarctic activities. The first South African team to over-winter in Antarctica, under the leadership of Hannes le Grange, was transported on the Polarbjorn, a chartered Norwegian ship (Figure 2).

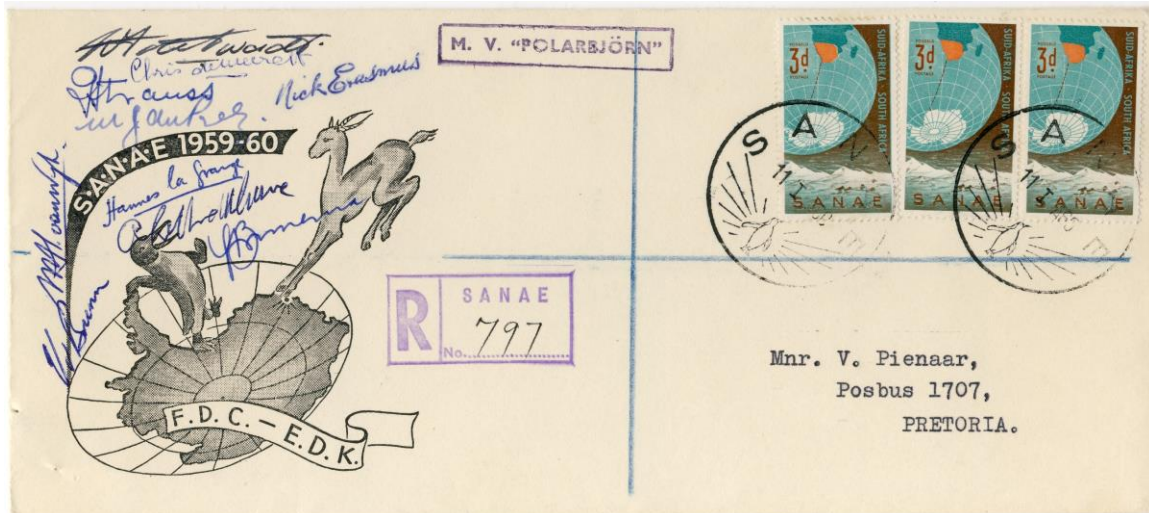


Figure 2: SANA E I cover, signed by the whole team, with South Africa's first Antarctic-themed stamp issue

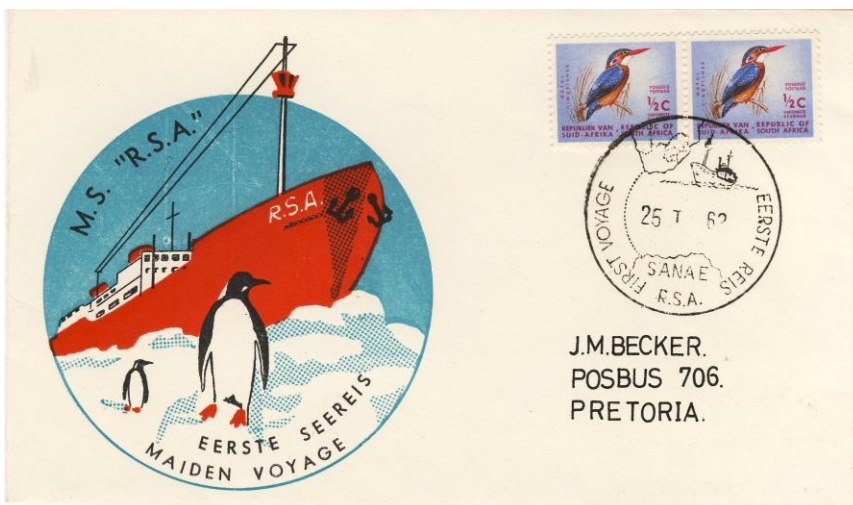


Figure 3: Cover commemorating the maiden voyage of the RSA

A post office with its own SANA E cancel was established almost immediately. A special 3d stamp had been issued by the South African Post Office to commemorate the establishment of SANA E I (Figure 2), South Africa's first Antarctic stamp issue, with a map showing the route from South Africa to Antarctica. In 1962 a new relief vessel, the MV RSA, was procured to service South Africa's Antarctic and sub-Antarctic bases (Figure 3), which by then included the bases at SANA E and on Marion Island, as well as

a small weather station on British-owned Gough Island (Cooper & Headland, 1991; Jurisich, 2003).

Most years special SANAE envelopes were printed, showing maps, penguins, seals and other designs (Figure 4), and in 1971 the second South African Antarctic-themed stamp was issued, to commemorate the 10th anniversary of the Antarctic Treaty, depicted on a hand-drawn 1973 SANAE cover (Figure 5).



Figure 4: Selection of SANAE covers from the 1960s

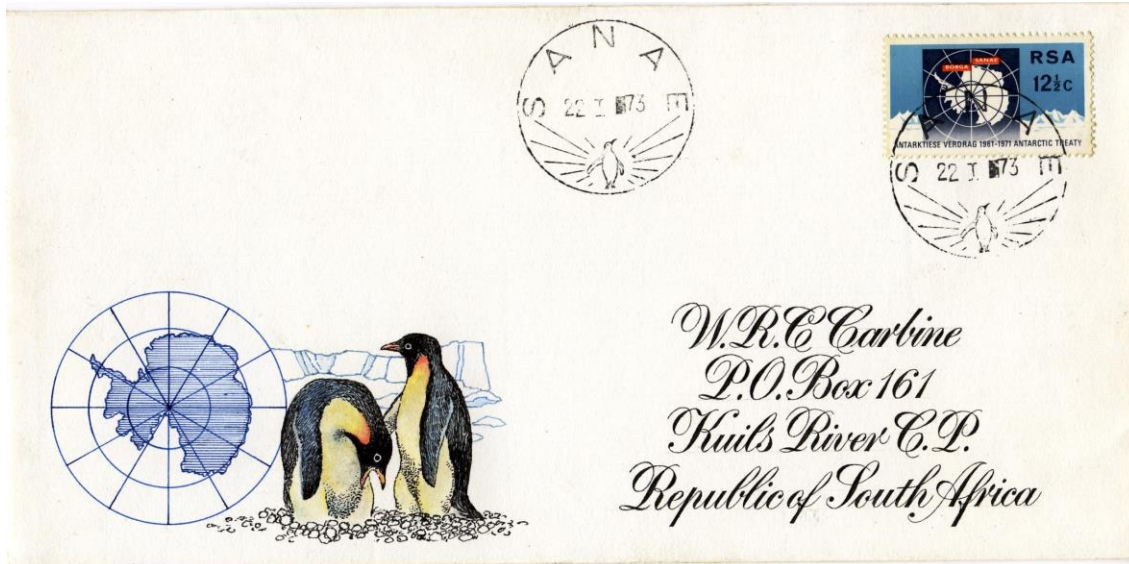


Figure 5: A hand-drawn 1973 SANA E cover depicting the second South African Antarctic-themed stamp issue

In 1978 the RSA was replaced by a new ship, the SA Agulhas, specially designed and built to undertake oceanographic, meteorological and other research in Antarctic and sub-Antarctic conditions. SANA E III base was built, and universities became involved in both on-shore and oceanographic research. The SA Agulhas was able to carry helicopters, as illustrated on a 1980 cover (Figure 6), which not only greatly assisted in off-loading the ship, but also enabled researchers and their equipment to be transported far greater distances. The same cover shows the last SANA E cancel, because later in 1980 the South African Post Office announced the closure of the postal facilities at SANA E and on Marion Island. From then onwards covers started to be postmarked with the Paquebot date stamp on arrival in Cape Town (Jurisich, 2003).



Figure 6: Cover showing helicopter use, with the last SANA E cancel

Cooper & Headland (1991) note that a study of papers from 1976 to 1991 shows a broadening of emphasis in South African Antarctic research, from earth and physical sciences on Antarctic continent to include biological research, primarily at Marion Island, and oceanographic work. This increased research is apparent on covers produced during this period, such as South Africa's participation in the First and Second International Biomass Experiments in 1981 and 1984 (Figures 7 and 8). In 1983 a new set of stamps was issued by the South African Post Office, depicting South Africa's Antarctic and sub-Antarctic weather stations (Figure 9).



Figure 7: Scientific activities undertaken during the FIBEX cruise in 1981



Figure 8: The visit by the SA Agulhas to Mawson, an Australian Antarctic base, in 1984, during the SIBEX cruise

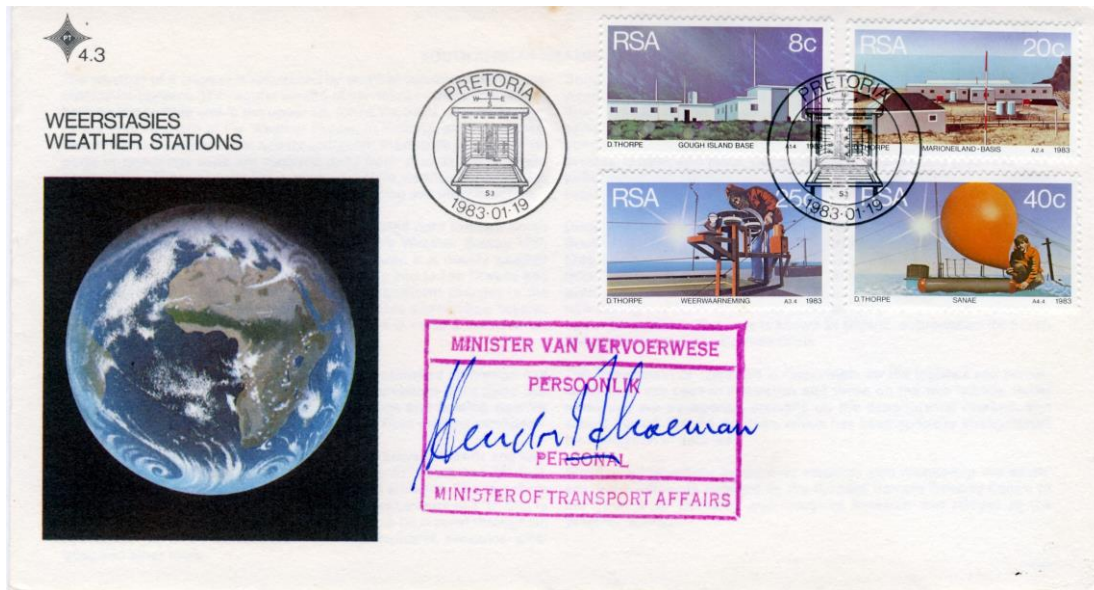


Figure 9: Stamp issue showing South Africa's Antarctic and sub-Antarctic weather stations

International cooperation between South Africa and other Antarctic Treaty countries is depicted on many covers, including a 1970 cover illustrating Belgian involvement, a 1985 cover showing cooperation with Neumayer, the German Antarctic base, and a 1987 cover showing the meeting of the SA Agulhas and the RRS Bransfield of the British Antarctic survey, in Halley Bay. In 1991 a Russian icebreaker, the Akademik Federov, was enlisted to carry building material for the new SANAE IV base, together with the newly acquired SAS Outeniqua (Figure 10). SANAE IV base was opened in January 1997. In that year the South African Post office created the Waterfront/Antarctica cachet, which was used until 2019 for the cancelling of collectors' mail returning from Antarctica.

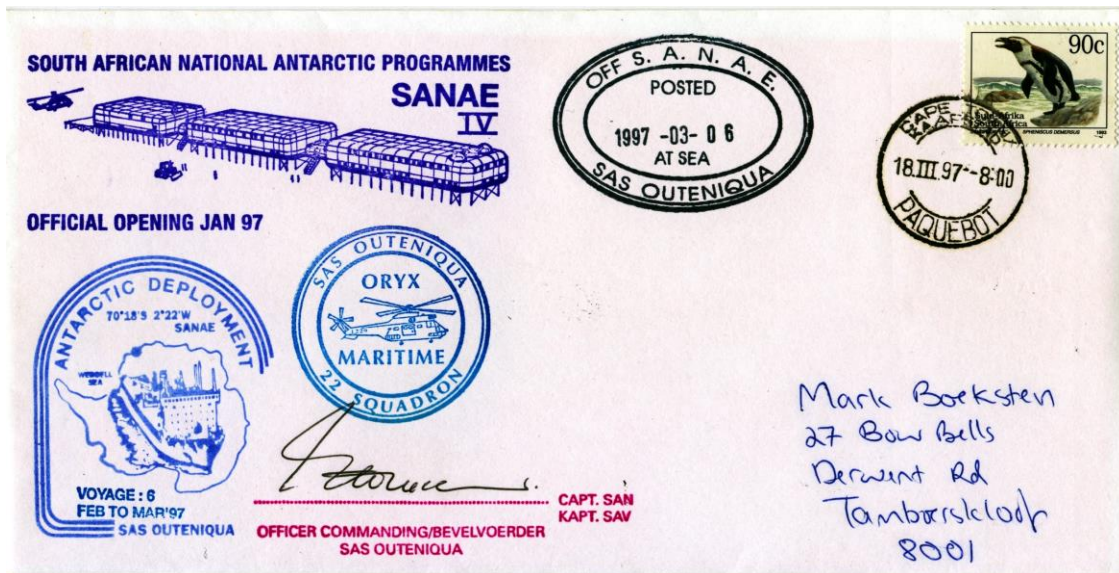


Figure 10: SAS Outeniqua cover, commemorating the opening of SANA E IV base

Voyages of the SA Agulhas II

The 50th anniversary of SANA E took place at the end of 2010, and is depicted on a specially printed cover (Figure 11). The SA Agulhas made its final journey to SANA E in December 2011 (Figure 12), and visited South Georgia on the same voyage. The following year the SANA E relief voyage was undertaken by the newly built and acquired SA Agulhas II (Figure 13).

At times the SA Agulhas and SA Agulhas II have been chartered by private organisations to carry passengers to specific destinations during their voyages to SANA E, and special covers were often made to commemorate these occasions, such as the Amateur Radio Expedition to Bouvet Island at the end of 2007 (Figure 14), and the Weddell Sea Expedition in early 2019 (Figure 15), a privately sponsored expedition to locate the remains of Shackleton's ship, the Endurance.

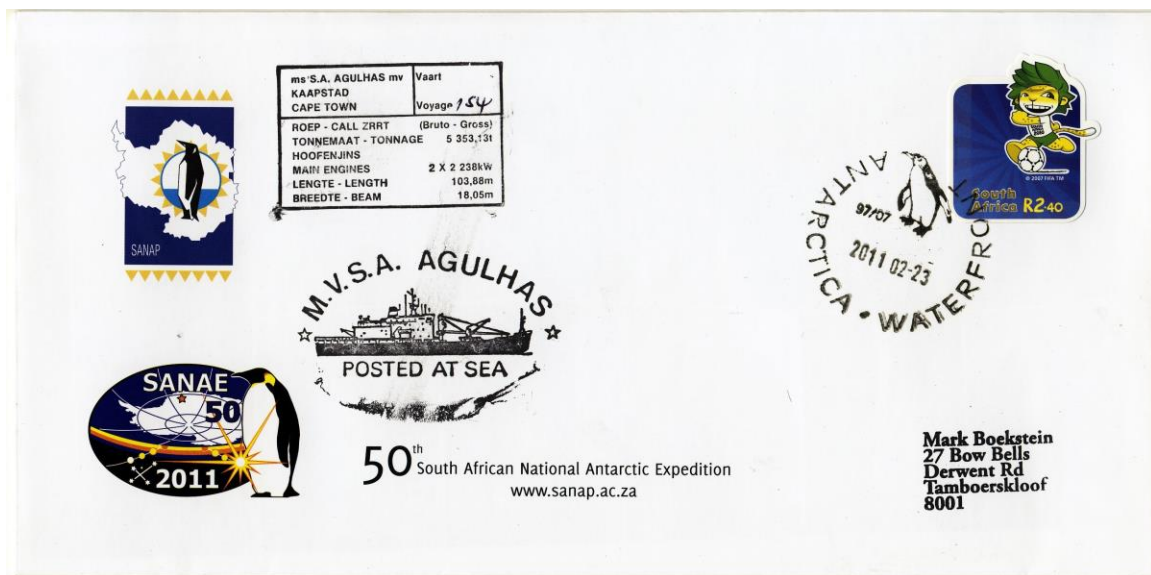


Figure 11: The 50th anniversary of the establishment of SANAE

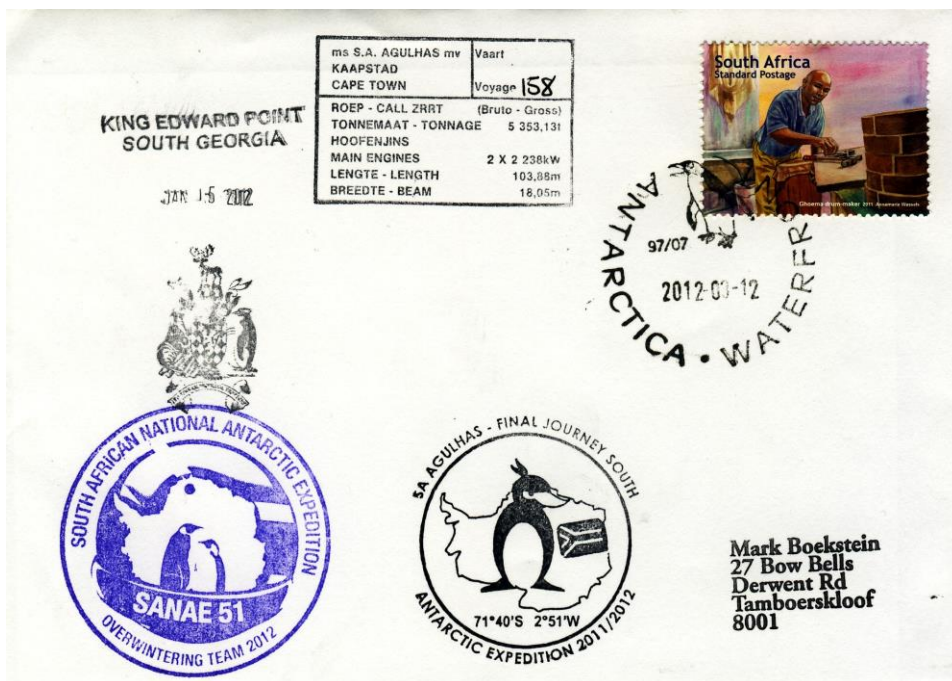


Figure 12: The SA Agulhas's last voyage to SANAE



Figure 13: The first voyage to SANAE of the SA Agulhas II

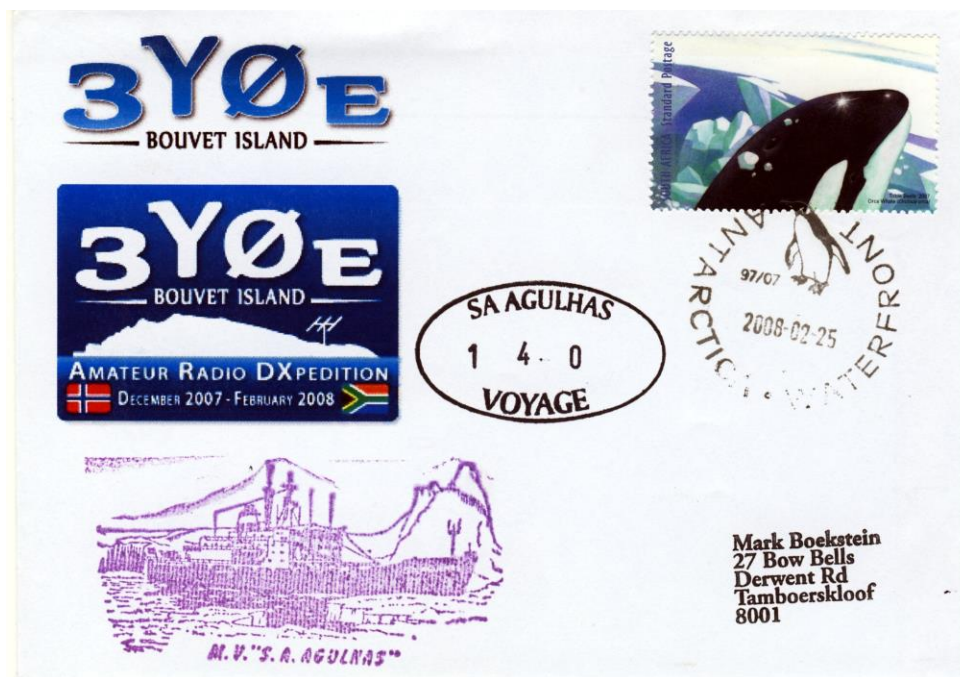


Figure 14: The 2008 Amateur Radio Expedition to Bouvet Island



Figure 15: The 2019 Weddell Sea Expedition, in search of the wreck of the Endurance

Conclusions

Since the establishment of SANAE I, the teams of technicians and scientists who man the base are replaced every year. There have thus far been 59 SANAE teams, and since the 1970s each team has designed its own logo for a rubber stamp that is used on collectors' and other mail posted from the base and the ship. In the days before the Internet, all mail from SANAE was sent to Pretoria by radio teleprinter. The letters were then printed, folded and mailed in window envelopes, all of which had been pre-stamped with that particular team's logo. Few of these envelopes survive, but those that do are of particular interest to collectors.

There was a time, at least until the late 1970s, when thousands of covers were sent by collectors and dealers to the South African Antarctic and sub-Antarctic bases for cancellation and posting (Jurisich, 2003). The Internet and satellite communication have ended the era of teleprinter letters mailed in window envelopes, and together with a lessening interest in philately, this has resulted in less and less covers being sent on the

SA Agulhas II to SANAE IV and the sub-Antarctic bases. While interest in Antarctic philately and cover collecting may be on the decline, there is no doubt that it has played a role in preserving the history of South African Antarctic activities, and the details of many voyages, the places visited, the expedition members and activities undertaken, would be completely forgotten were it not for the interest of polar philatelists.

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