

# Princess Matoika and the Doors She Can Open

by David A. Kent

One of the fascinating aspects of military postal history is how a simple cover, card or letter can lead the exploring collector into many different fields of history and culture.



Here's a Real Photo postcard of a World War I troop ship, a black-and-white photograph in the shape of a postcard. Scratched into the negative is "Princess Matoika" and "Ship That Brought us Home." The card was mailed from Newport News, Va. on Apr. 29, 1919. The message reads: "Dear Aunt: Arrived safely Sunday at Newport News, going next to Camp Upton then home in 10 days. Sincerely, Paul."

Real Photo cards were introduced in 1902 by the Eastman Kodak company. By the end of World War I numerous firms were making them, and "Ship That Brought Us Home" cards were widely peddled to doughboys returning home from France after the war. They no doubt represented treasured memories for the soldiers, and they are equally appreciated historic records for us today.

What was the *USS Princess Matoika*, and for that matter who was the princess?

European countries first began establishing overseas colonies in the 1400s. Germany was late to the colony business, and by the late 1800s its empire builders realized that they needed a presence in Asia, and created a German settlement on the coast of China near the city of Tsingtao which they called Kiautschou. In 1900 the Hamburg-America Line built a ship for its Far Eastern service which it named *SS Kiautschou*. In 1904 she was traded to the North German Lloyd Line and renamed *SS Princess Alice*. She sailed both transatlantic and then the Far East trade routes until the outbreak of World War I.



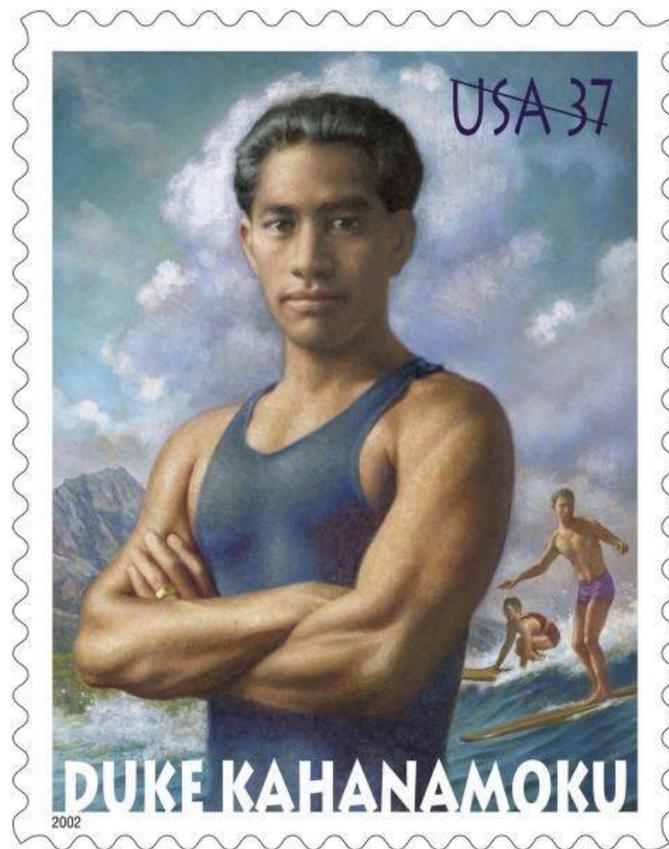
Wars were a bit simpler then, before the days when terrorist groups of no stated nationality arose. A country was either a “belligerent” (in a formally declared war) or neutral. A neutral nation could not give assistance to a belligerent, even fuel or food to a merchant ship of a warring country. When war broke out, some merchant ship crews took advantage of this rule, seeking refuge by sailing into the harbor of a neutral country. Under international rules, they were interned and had to remain there. Depending on the nature of the war, and which side they were on, this could be an advantage to the crew.

After World War I broke out in 1914, *SS Princess Alice* sailed into the neutral port of Cebu in the Philippines, and was promptly interned. However, when the United States entered the war in 1917, the ship became “enemy” property and was seized, her crew becoming Prisoners of War. Their ship was taken over by the U.S. Navy, which named her *USS Princess Matoika*. This obscure name is actually one of several names for a famous Native American figure better known as Pocahontas. Some Native American tribes, it seems, had customs of giving people several different names, which carried different meanings and might be used in different contexts. Matoika was Pocahontas’s early childhood name.



During the war the ship carried more than 50,000 troops to and from France. In 1919 she was transferred to the Army. In early 1920 she was used to repatriate the remains of Americans killed in the war, the coffins recently excavated from temporary graves in French cemeteries.

World War I caused terrible destruction in Europe, and in an effort to help its cities recover, the 1920 Olympic Games were awarded to Belgium. The U.S. Olympic Committee asked for help in transporting its athletes to Europe, and in July 1920 the Army assigned the *Princess Matoika* to carry the team to Antwerp, although she had not been fully cleaned up after her two “mortuary ship” voyages. The Olympic team was outraged by the conditions on the ship, and published its grievances in an action known today as the Mutiny of the *Matoika*. Among the leaders of this protest was Duke Kahanamoku, a noted native Hawaiian swimmer (several Olympic medals), and also a leader in popularizing surfing outside of Hawaii.



By early 1921 the Army no longer needed her, and *Princess Matoika* was returned to commercial service as a passenger liner. In 1922 she was renamed *SS President Arthur*, and sailed briefly for the American Palestine Line, offering commercial passenger and cargo services, but also bringing Jewish refugees to help reestablish the nation of Israel. This effort was not financially successful, and in 1925 she was acquired by the Los Angeles Steamship Co., which named her *SS City of Honolulu*. She sailed between California and Hawaii for the next five years, but the liner caught fire in Honolulu Harbor in 1930. She was deemed too expensive to repair and was scrapped in Japan in 1933.

504:—"CITY OF HONOLULU" LEAVING SAN PEDRO, LOS ANGELES HARBOR, CALIF.

