

Un-manned Satellites on Postage Stamps

35 – The Discoverer Series

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This is the thirty-fifth in a series of articles about un-manned satellites on postage stamps. This article features the satellites in the U.S. Air Force (USAF) Discoverer series. The first Discoverer was launched on January 21, 1959 and the last one on April 18, 1962. There were a total of 39 launches, a third (13) of which were failures. The Discoverer series, also called Corona satellites, were later declassified as the first Keyhole (KH) spy satellites.

“Discoverer” was the public name of the Corona series of film-return reconnaissance spy satellites, whose true mission was not officially revealed until about 35 years after the program ended. The Discoverers’ secret program was masked by scientific goals; it was kept secret even from program staff who knew nothing about Corona. Scientific instruments were even placed on Discoverer satellites, and then covertly removed before launch.

The Discoverer satellites were designed to take pictures of target countries and then eject a film capsule, which was to de-orbit and enter the Earth’s atmosphere on a parachute and be recovered by a specially-modified aircraft as it floated downward. However, the capture of the film capsules was not successful for various reasons on many of the missions. The first successful return of a capsule through the Earth’s atmosphere occurred with Discoverer-13, though in

this case the aerial capture failed and the capsule fell into the sea. Fortunately that mission carried no cameras. Discoverer-14 was the first completely successfully Corona mission, in which reconnaissance photos were taken from the spy satellite and ejected in a capsule which was then successfully recovered in a mid-air capture by a C-119 aircraft.

Because of secret nature of their mission, the Discoverer satellites were not well-known and so were not featured on many postal items. A set of three stamps issued by Libya in 1966 (Scott 297-299) shows a Discoverer capsule. There is also a local post item from Batum that depicts the recovery of a Discoverer capsule, and a souvenir sheet from Chad (Michel BL247) that shows the re-entry of a Discoverer capsule in the margin. Another capsule recovery is shown in the margin of a souvenir sheet issued by the Malagasy Republic in 1999 (Scott 1502a). 

Checklist of Discoverer Series Satellite Postal Stamps

Country	Catalog No.	Type of Item	Issued	Notes
Batum	Local	One of MS6 (a-f), also imperforate MS6 (a-f)	1997	Capsule recovery
Batum	Local	One of MS6 (a-f) overprinted in gold	1998	Capsule recovery
Chad	BL247	In (left) margin of SS1	1996	Discoverer-13 re-entry
Libya	297 (Mi210)		1966	Discoverer
Libya	298 (Mi211)		1966	Discoverer
Libya	299 (Mi212)		1966	Discoverer
Malagasy Republic	1502a	In (lower) margin of SS1 (Mi2398a) (1502) (Mi2398)	1999	Capsule recovery

*Scott catalog number, unless prefixed with Mi or BL for Michel; “i” prefix denotes imperforate version. OP - Overprint
SS# = souvenir sheet, MS# = miniature sheet, where # = stamps in sheet, and numbers in parentheses are the catalog numbers of the stamps.

A checklist of postal items showing Discoverer series satellites can also be found at <http://www.cira.colostate.edu/ramm/hillger/Discoverer.htm>, a website developed by the authors for un-manned satellites at <http://www.cira.colostate.edu/ramm/hillger/satellites.htm>
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Discoverer Stamps

