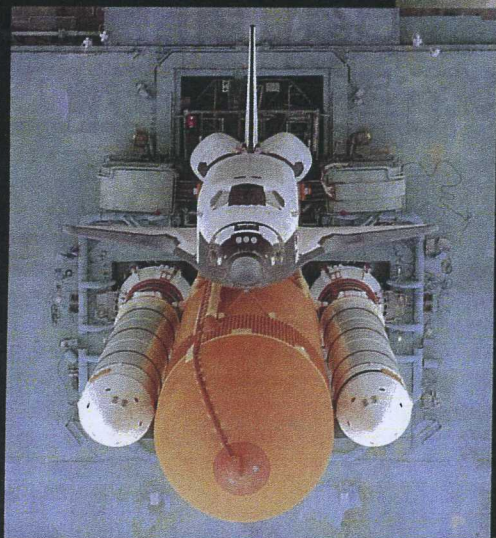
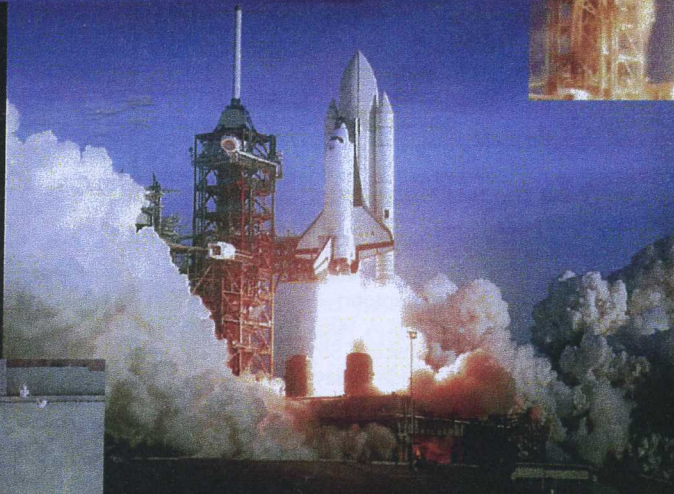


# ORBIT



It has ceased to be



.....it has shuttled  
off it's mortal coil

# The Apollo 15 Cover Scandal *by Umberto Cavallaro*

In a feature which first appeared in the April-June 2010 issue of *Ad Astra* the web journal of the Italian Astrophilatelic Association, its editor reveals in considerable detail the full story of those covers which today sell for so much money.

The Apollo 15 flown covers are among the best known collectibles from the Apollo Era, mainly because of what Jim Irwin recalls as "the problem we brought back from the Moon".

The crew of Apollo 15 carried out one of the most complete scientific explorations of the Moon: the first lunar roving vehicle was operated on the Moon to extend the range of exploration; some 180 pounds of lunar surface samples were returned for analysis. Yet Fifteen is best remembered as the crew that carried envelopes to the moon and the whole mission is remembered for the "great postal caper".

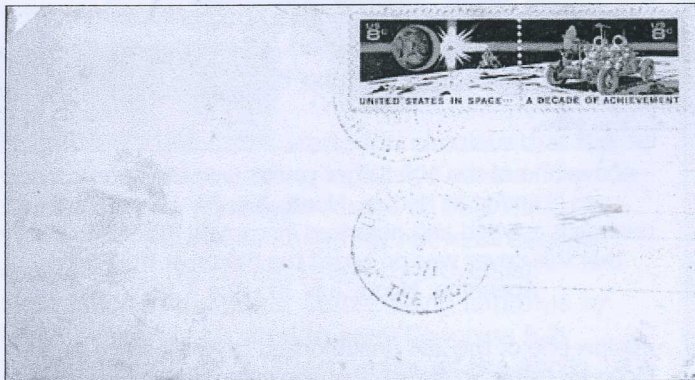


Fig 1. The official U.S.P.S. cover postmarked on the Moon.

Apollo 15 was not the first mission to carry covers: dozens were carried on each flight from Apollo 11 onwards and, as Commander Dave Scott recalls in his book, the whole business had probably been building since Mercury, through Gemini, and into Apollo. People had a fascination with objects that had been carried in space, and they became more and more popular, and valuable, as the programme progressed. Right from the start of the Mercury programme, each astronaut had been allowed to carry on board a certain number of personal items.

NASA was in the habit of authorizing astronauts to carry certain personal items on manned flights, known as Astronauts' PPK (Personal Preference Kits). All such items had to be listed and approved by Deke Slayton, the Head of the Astronaut Office, prior to launch, and were intended for private use or as personal gifts after the flight, and could not be employed for commercial

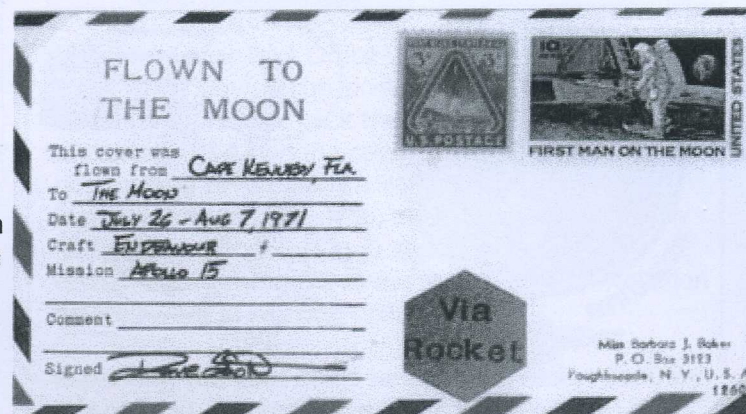
purposes or personal gain. Astronaut kits typically included badges, jewellery, coins, medals, flags, stamps, postal covers, currency, printed materials, and similar easily packed, lightweight mementoes. As the flight became more significant, the number and type of items increased.

Aside from personal mementoes, each crew had carried medallions whose number had grown steadily on each mission. In his book, *The All-American Boys* astronaut Walter Cunningham reveals that it was rumoured around the Astronaut Office that Apollo 14 carried on board a personal package weighing forty-two pounds. Before that flight, the Franklin Mint had even advertised the proposed sale. After the flight the commercial deal was never completed and all went quiet, nothing about it being published in the media. But some members of the U.S. Congress were unhappy of the situation.

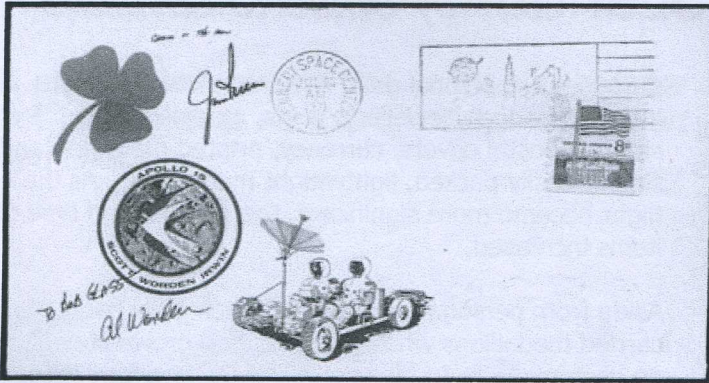
In that context, the "lapses of judgment" of the Apollo 15 crew became fatal: Dave Scott went too far, carrying on board a total of 641 postal covers (including the two official covers) of which only 243 were listed and authorized before the flight, and 398 were not -- secretly carried on board Apollo 15 by Scott in a pocket of his space suit. Had they been listed as being in Scott's PPK, they would probably have been routinely approved for inclusion in the preference kit.

The 243 listed and authorized covers include:

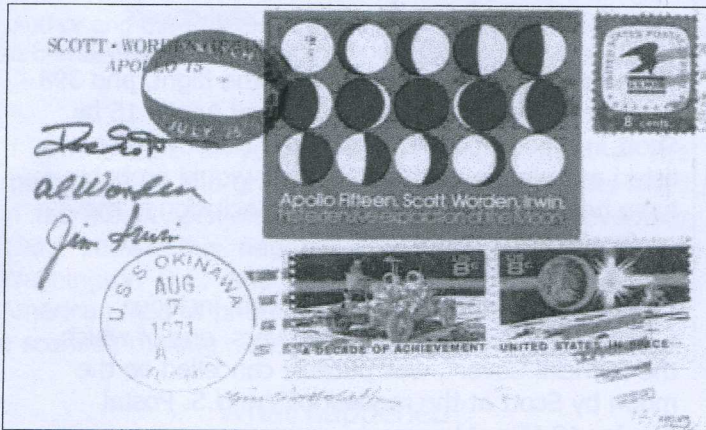
- 2 official U.S. Postal Service covers, one of which, the "Official Cover", was publicly cancelled on the moon by Scott at the request of the U.S. Postal Service 10 (Fig. 1);
- 1 Wright Brothers commemorative cover, dated 1928 and autographed by Orville Wright, which was carried by Worden for a friend;
- 1 cover bearing a First Man on the Moon stamp and a Bliss Centennial three-cent stamp, carried by Irwin for Barbara Baker (Fig. 2, below);



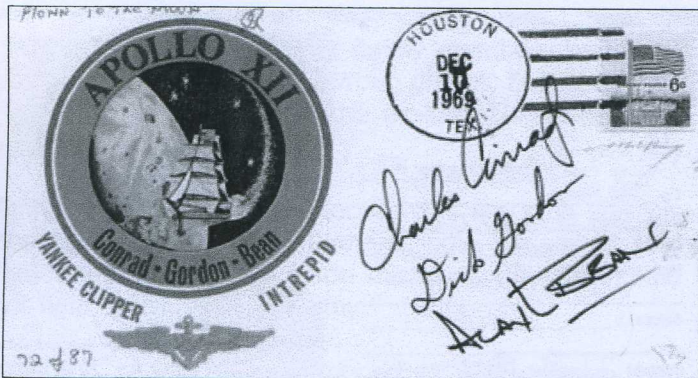
8 Shamrock covers carried by Irwin (as below)



144 Herrick's "Moon Phases" covers carried by Worden (Fig. 4), printed with a cachet showing 15 phases of the moon. On the *USS Okinawa*, the Apollo 15 recovery ship, the astronauts placed two eight-cent stamps, purchased on board by Worden, on each of these covers and they had the covers cancelled by the shipboard post office. The astronauts later autographed these covers while flying back from Hawaii to Houston. Sixteen covers were torn or damaged and were destroyed. Because of the furore created by the Apollo 15 covers incident, NASA confiscated 61 of these 144 'Moon Phases' covers.

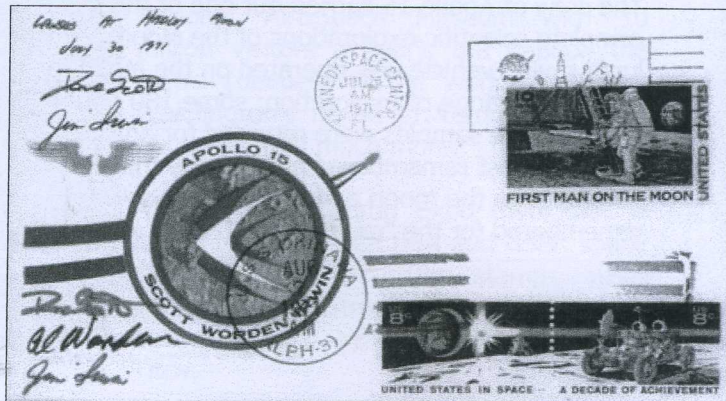


87 Apollo 12 covers (Fig. 5) that, for unknown reason, did not fly on that mission and which were carried on Apollo 15 for Mrs. Barbara Gordon, a stamp collector, then wife of Richard Gordon, Apollo 12 astronaut, who at was the back-up pilot for Apollo 15.



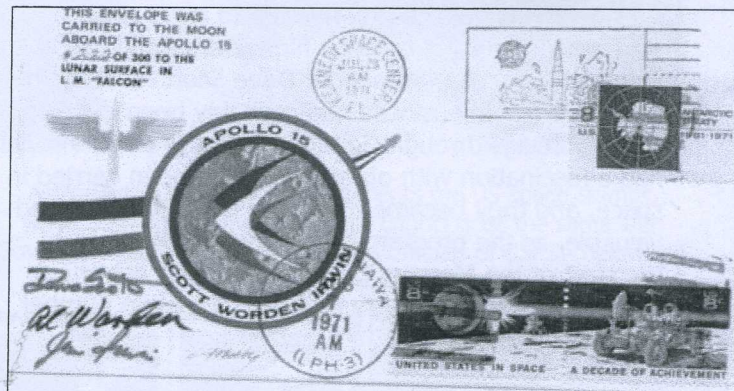
The 398 unauthorized covers (initially there were 400, but 2 were damaged and discarded) are lightweight envelopes carrying, as a cachet, a replica of the official Apollo 15 patch overprinted with an Air Force wing and propeller emblem.

The idea of these additional covers was suggested during a cocktail party by Eiermann, a salesman for the heat-shield contractor, who had frequent business and social contacts with NASA personnel and astronauts. He suggested to fly 400 lightweight covers: 100 for each of the astronauts and 100 for his friend Sieger, the German stamp dealer. The cacheted covers were provided by Al Bishop, a friend of many astronauts, then at the Howard Hughes organization. He had already provided covers for the previous flights, since Apollo 12.



Above one of the 100 Sieger covers with the handwritten note "Landed at Hadley, Moon, July 30, 1971. On the reverse is a typed and notarised inscription "This is to certify that this cover was on board the Falcon at the Hadley-Apennine, Moon, July 30 -Aug 2 1971"

Below one of the 298 unauthorised covers, carried to the Moon by David Scott with the inscription "This envelope was carried to the Moon aboard the Apollo 15. #.....of 300 to the Lunar Surface in L.M. "FALCON".



The crews usually returned to Bishop a couple of flown covers, signed, with gratitude. "To my knowledge - Cunningham reports, in his well documented book - Bishop never sold any and never made a dime off his relationship. He was simply a fan. To Al Bishop, Apollo 15 was no different from any other flight, except for a phone call he received from Hal Collins, the Astronaut Office manager at the Cape.

Collins told Bishop that the crew would like to know whether he could obtain some very lightweight envelopes for them. Al said that he'd be happy to do so. He was unaware then that many of them would be smuggled on board the next lunar flight. Al was trusted. That's why many of us imposed on him with our problems, special requests and, sometimes, matters which we would rather not share with NASA".

This time Al was badly used : he emerged as a scapegoat and his name was dragged as though he was the Mr. Big of an international stamp conspiracy. The covers were cancelled at Kennedy Space Center several days before July 26, 1971. The date of the post office machine canceller was moved forward. Additionally, twin eight-cent stamps were purchased by the astronauts on the *USS Okinawa*, the Apollo 15 recovery ship, and affixed to these covers – as for the Herrick's covers. In the shipboard post office the covers were then cancelled and date-stamped August 7, 1971. The astronauts finally autographed these covers while flying from Hawaii to Houston.

Soon after the flight the astronauts gave Eiermann the 100 covers – after agreeing that there was to be no commercialization or advertising of these covers and that nothing would be done with them until after completion of the Apollo programme.

But after a while, news started to circulate that the German dealer was selling in Europe covers flown on Apollo 15, for a reported average of US \$1.500 each. The reports infuriated Congress, not least because congressmen had to read such controversial information in the press, before being informed by NASA, which is obligated to keep Congress fully informed of its activity. Recollection of the Apollo 14 medallions incident must have echoed in the minds of certain members of Congress many of whom were not fans of NASA anyway. NASA started an internal investigation. This was the most controversial development of the Apollo Programme and, although most astronauts were involved to some degree, NASA made an example of the Apollo 15 flight crew. "It was turning into a witch-hunt" recalled Scott, "Our bosses had abrogated their responsibilities and we were left alone on a very wet day".

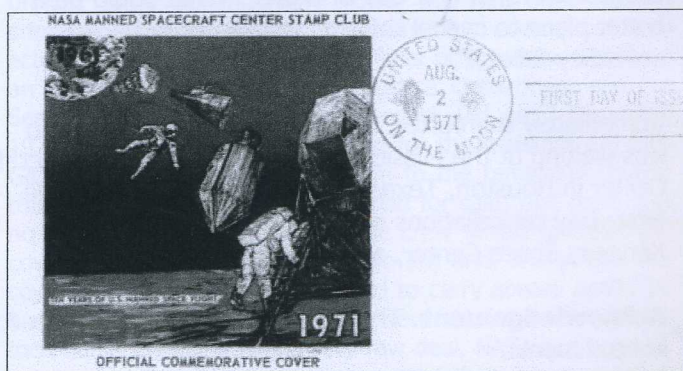
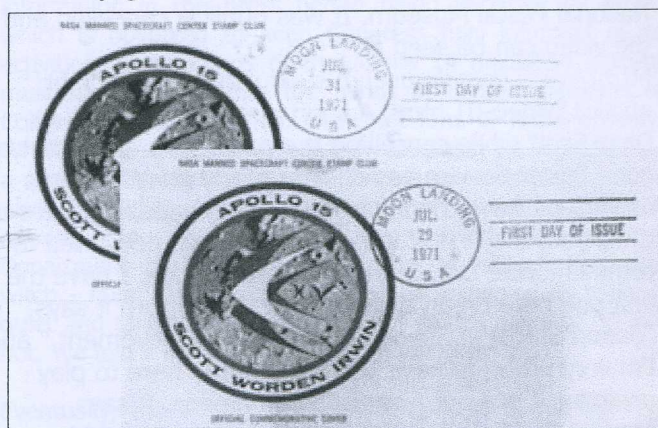
It is ironic that, after addressing a joint session of Congress as heroes, in less than one year the three astronauts of Apollo 15 had to go back in front of these same senators in disgrace, because of this envelope scandal.

After this "incident", NASA prohibited, from Apollo 17 on, the flying of covers or stamps during a space mission (they were not on time to block the covers carried on Apollo 16), The only exceptions have been, since then, the items flown in cooperation with the US Postal Service, i.e. the 266.000 covers carried in 1983 in

the payload bay of the Space Shuttle *Challenger* on STS-8 and the 500.000 \$9.95 Express Mail stamp created by Paul and Chris Calle in 1994, flown on *Endeavour* STS-68 in recognition of the 25th anniversary of the Apollo 11 Moon Landing. The huge number of such items carried in space discourages speculations and these items still are widely available for few dollars.

So far, fewer than 1000 envelopes in total have flown to the Moon. No other American covers will flow to the Moon in the foreseeable future. Perhaps the next "Moon covers" will bear Chinese or Indian stamps ?

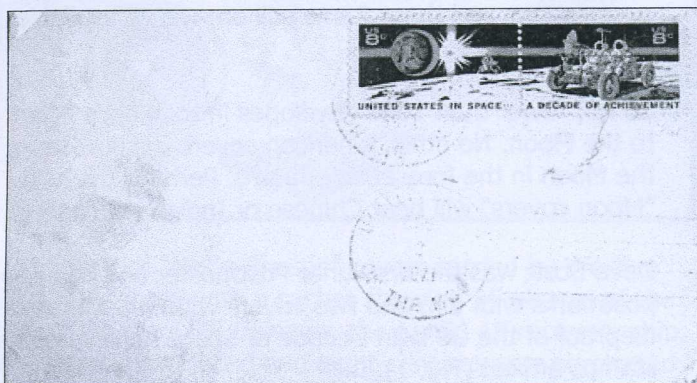
Dave Scott was the first lunar Postmaster and had two postmarks with him and two covers with imperforated dieproof of the US twin Decade of Space Achievements stamps affixed (Fig. 1). He had one postmark with "Moon Landing, USA" (Fig. 8, below) and another with "United States on the Moon" (Fig. 9 bottom).



The First Lunar Post Office was opened on August 2, 1971 when David Scott postmarked only the official cover (and brought back the official backup-cover uncanceled). A handful of covers had however been postmarked before launch with both postmarks. Dr. Matthew Radnofsky – who, in his laboratory, already had simulated cancelling in space for Apollo 11 – tested both postmarks to ensure that the cancellation devices were in working order.

Especially, the date could be changed easily. Contrary to Apollo 11, covers without stamps were used for

these tests. Apollo 15 Lunar Cancellation Proofs are much scarcer than Apollo 11 ones. "As by now, I am aware of only 17 items" states famous astrophilatelist Walter Hopperwieser. Covers with proofs of the Apollo 15 moon postmarks have been recently sold at Regency Superior and Aurora auctions.



The official Apollo 15 cover, postmarked on the Moon (see Fig. 1, repeated above) is displayed at the U.S. National Postal Museum. It was publicly cancelled and the video can be seen at

<http://www.postalmuseum.si.edu/stampstakeflight/apollo15video-01.html>. A short speech was given by Dave Scott while cancelling the cover: "To show that our good Postal Service has deliveries any place in the universe, I have the pleasant task of cancelling, here on the Moon, the first stamp of a new issue dedicated to commemorate U.S. achievements in space. I have the first one here on an envelope. At the bottom it says, "United States in Space, a decade of achievement," and I'm very proud to have the opportunity here to play postman. I pull out a cancellation device. It says, "August 2, 1971, first day of issue... What could be a better place to cancel this stamp than right here at Hadley Rille...!"

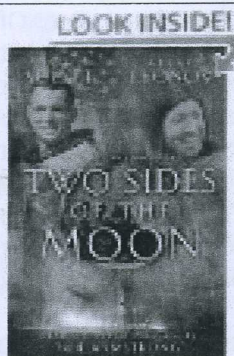
Immediately thereafter, the Postmaster General, who was waiting at the Mission Control at Manned Spacecraft Center in Houston, Texas, gave the signal to start the First- Day cancellations at post offices in Houston, Kennedy Space Center, and Huntsville.

**Acknowledgement:** Thanks to Walter Hopperwieser for his comments.

### *Two Sides of The Moon*

by David Scott and Alexei Leonov

The text opposite from the above book has been referred to by Umberto Cavallaro in preparing his above piece



## Some Notes About Space Mail



Commenting on Brian Vincent's article in the June 2010 *Orbit*, ASSS member Geoff Chivers writes in an email to your Editor.....

I'm sure you won't mind me commenting on Brian G Vincent's "Some Notes About Space Mail" (page 36)?

In paragraph 2 he refers to the Apollo 15 "cover incident", leaving the impression that Scott, Worden and Irwin were guilty of some heinous crime. This has been the subject of much miss-reporting over the years. The full story of what actually happened is explained in depth at page 328 et seq of "Two sides of the moon" by David Scott and Alexei Leonov, published by Simon & Shuster. The astronauts were, of course, exonerated.

This is the quote (slightly edited to enable it to stand as an independent piece):-

"During 1972, while on a trip to Washington DC, George Low, NASA deputy administrator, asked me to stop by his office, writes David Scott. I had known George in Houston while he was Apollo spacecraft programme manager and I had great respect for him. We spent a short while exchanging pleasantries. Then George looked me in the eye and came to the point. "Well, Dave," he said, "I have to tell you I was not very proud of my performance"! His comment was the culmination of what had become known as the Apollo 15 "cover incident". This involved some first day postal covers which we had carried aboard Apollo 15, some of which were unfortunately sold by a German stamp dealer several months after the flight. As No 2 in NASA, George had been heavily involved in NASA's handling of the incident and his comment, referred to one of the poorest management performances the space agency had ever demonstrated - up to then.

The whole business had probably been building since Mercury, through Gemini, and into Apollo. People had a fascination with objects that had been carried in space, and they became more and more popular, and valuable, as the programme progressed. Right from the start of the Mercury programme, each astronaut had been allowed to carry on board a certain number of personal items in what were known as PPKS - Personal Preference Kits. Before each flight a list of the items was prepared for Deke Slayton, who

had overall responsibility for approving them. As the flights became more significant, the number and type of items increased. Aside from personal mementoes, each crew had carried a certain number of medallions, which they could hand out afterwards as souvenirs. The number of medallions had grown steadily on each mission - eventually some crew members had been carrying several hundred each and their weight was becoming a concern. And, as always, commercialisation began to creep in. In the end, on Apollo 14 commanded by Al Shepard, it was alleged that the crew had carried some silver medallions on board, which were to be melted down after the flight and mixed with many other commemorative medallions by the Franklin Mint to be sold to the general public. The Franklin Mint had even advertised the proposed sale before the flight. After the flight, the deal was never consummated and all went quiet; nothing about it was printed in the media. But some members of Congress had heard about it and were unhappy with the situation.

Since we were busy training for Apollo 15 (launched 26 July 1971) we knew nothing about all this. Had we known we would have been far more wary of what happened subsequently. All we knew was that Deke Slayton had halved the number of medallions we could carry. Shortly afterwards Deke introduced Jim (Irwin), Al (Worden) and me to a long-standing friend of his at the Cape called Walter Eiermann. In retrospect this seems likely to have been more than a coincidence. Deke invited us to join him at dinner at Eiermann's house one evening, several months before the Apollo 15 launch. Eiermann asked if we would like to make some money on the side by signing some stamps. "All the guys are doing it," he said. We agreed. We were also approached by several members of the Manned Spacecraft Center's stamp club, who asked us to sign many first-day covers before the flight for their members as well as for ourselves. At that time we could not buy life insurance. If we signed some covers, we reasoned, they could be held during the flight and act as limited life insurance for our families if anything happened to us. But then Eiermann proposed we carry four hundred lightweight commemorative covers, a hundred of which would be passed on to a stamp dealer in Germany when we returned. All the covers would be franked on the day of launch and franked on the day of our return. Our understanding was that the dealer would hold his hundred covers to be sold at some future date, after the Apollo programme was over. In return he would set up a \$6,000 trust fund for each of us for the education of our children. In the months of intense activity before the flight we did not give this more than a moment of thought. But we agreed. In retrospect we made a mistake in even considering it.

In the months following our mission, we learnt that the German dealer had begun to sell the covers. We let Eiermann know that we were opposed to the sale. Forget the trust funds, we said; we don't want any money. This is not what we had understood would happen. But when senior managers at NASA learnt about the covers being sold they were furious. Incomplete information was then provided to the press by NASA's Public Affairs Office and reports started to appear that we had smuggled the covers onto our flight. This was literally impossible. NASA personnel prepared us for every aspect of the flight - from our birthday suits out.

Everything we had carried had to be specially packaged by the flight support crew to make sure, apart from anything else,

that it was fireproof. Everything in our PPKs was on a list, which was certified before launch. I was never aware of any rules about what could or could not be taken in these packs. Slayton was to approve the list, so as far as I was concerned it was up to management to keep us on the straight and narrow. I assumed if the list was approved that was fine. Usually the list was certified by Deke. But before our flight, for some reason, he neither asked us personally for each of our lists, as was customary, nor signed off on the list personally. He said the flight - crew support team had already logged everything. Whereas we had purchased the covers ourselves, the Astronaut Office at the Cape had prepared the covers for the flight and had had them stamped and franked on the day of launch. Somehow however, the support team had missed them when they prepared the PPK flight manifest.

It was also reported after the incident that we had been removed from the astronaut corps. Again, totally untrue. Unfortunately, NASA managers did nothing to dispel this false and misleading information. They just tucked their heads in and let the rumours run. The reports infuriated Congress, not least because congressmen had to read such controversial information in the press before being informed by NASA, which is obligated to keep Congress fully informed of its activities. Recollections of the Apollo 14 medallion incident must have seeped into the minds of certain members of Congress, many of whom were not fans of NASA anyway. When NASA started an internal investigation we were told by a senior official in the agency that we were on our own. We were advised to get our own legal representation. A Senate hearing into the matter had been called and a justice Department investigation would follow. It was turning into a witch-hunt. NASA, we were advised, expected us to keep quiet and take the Fifth Amendment at this hearing. We did not. We told it like it was. We had nothing to hide.

Eventually, the Justice Department concluded that we had broken some administrative rules, but had done nothing criminal. NASA confiscated the remaining covers, but they acted before discovering all the facts of the case. Following an investigation by NASA, the Justice Department and the Senate, the Justice Department concluded on 6 December 1978, in a "Memorandum Opinion for the Assistant Attorney General", that NASA had no claim to the remaining covers; that the covers were never intended for sale; that there was no attempt at concealment by the crew of the fact that the covers were to be flown on Apollo 15; and, finally, that the covers would have been approved to carry aboard Apollo 15 had a request been made. We were reprimanded and we took our licks. But it was a very raw deal. NASA had hung us out to dry. Our bosses had abrogated their responsibilities, and we were left alone on a very wet day.

I spent many years trying to get full access to NASA and congressional records on the case. NASA refused to provide full disclosure. We subsequently found out there had been rumblings about profit-making on previous missions. A copy of a letter was released to me in which NASA admitted that ten other astronauts, who were not identified, had been involved in selling signed blocks of stamps and postcards for Eiermann. But the wave reached the shore on Apollo 15 and we were the ones who bore the brunt of the blame for such incidents."