

Golden Anniversary - Air Mail Service

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(Ed. Note—In presenting this review of early air mail flying, the JOURNAL offers a "welldone" to every air mail pilot on the 50th anniversary of this milestone in aviation history.)

Now as the Golden Anniversary of the U. S. Air Mail Service is being celebrated, it is difficult to realize the hardships of the early pioneers. As Ralph Damon, an airline executive and war time head of Republic Aviation, pointed out, interest in aviation after the first World War, was kept alive by the barnstormer, the cow-pasture flying field operator, and the aerial "Pony Express"—the Air Mail pilots of the U. S. Post Office Department. He further added that "To these aerial swashbucklers goes much of the credit for the success of the early air mail service. It took great courage and faith to pilot those flying machines—temperamental contraptions of baling wire, Irish linen and balsa wood."

While messages had long been carried by pigeons, the first aerial transport of mail has been credited to the balloon flight of Jean-Pierre Blanchard across the English Channel on January 7, 1785. Benjamin Franklin, then in France, received a letter by this method. Other balloonists came to this country, and the delivery of a letter by this means to President George Washington has been set forth as the nation's first air mail service.

In 1822, the Freeman's Journal of Norristown, Pennsylvania, suggested to the Post Office the use of "flying machines" for the delivery of mail. Apparently that rugged country was as difficult then for the stage coaches to traverse as it is now for the "air-taxis." Balloons came back in the limelight in 1859, when the "Jupiter" carried a number of letters cross country from Indiana. This was followed by the use of balloons to carry mail out of beleaguered Paris during the Franco-Prussian War of 1870.

Then came the first successful flight by Orville Wright in 1903, and soon there were plans for its peaceful uses as well as for military purposes. As it always has been the policy to transport mails by the swiftest available means, the use of airplanes was a natural development. The first mention in Congress appears to have been on June 14, 1910 when Representative Sheppard of Texas introduced H. R. 26833 for "an investigation to determine the practicability and cost of an aeroplane or airship mail route." It was referred to the Post Office & Post Roads Committee, but, like so many other bills, it died there with no further action noted.

The following year saw experiments at mail carrying by plane in England and India. 1911 also brought the first airmail service to the United States as a feature of an aviation meet held on Long Island from September 23, to 30. Mail was flown from the field to the Mineola, New York, post office, where the pouches of mail were dropped on a nearby lot for recovery by the postmaster. These flights were performed "without expense to the Department" by Earl L. Ovington, Army Captain Paul Beck, and T.O.M. Sopwith, a British sportsman, who later became known for the Sopwith Camel fighter

planes, as well as a challenger for the America Cup in yachting.

These experimental flights were considered successful. During the week, a total of 32,415 post cards, 3993 letters and 1062 circulars were carried. Even the Postmaster General, Frank Hitchcock, accompanied Captain Beck on one flight and dropped the pouch of mail at Mineola. Next year, he asked Congress for a paltry \$5000 to start an experimental service, but he was turned down. However in 1912, 31 experimental and exhibition flights were authorized in 16 states, again, without expense to the Department.

Funds for an air service were made available in 1916 from the appropriation for "Steamboat or Other Power Boat Service." Bids were asked for routes in Massachusetts and Alaska, but no bids were received. With America's entry in the war, better planes were being built, and Congress appropriated \$100,000 for an experimental air mail route between New York City and Washington. Service started on May 15 over the 218 mile route with a stop at Philadelphia. Planes and pilots were furnished by the Army for the first three months. After that the Post Office took over the entire operation, with its own equipment and personnel.

The following year saw air mail service reach Chicago, and then to San Francisco in 1920. Economy curtailed all branch lines in 1921, and only the transcontinental line was continued. Later when the carriage of air mail was turned over to private contractors, Los Angeles was connected with the "Main Line" at Salt Lake City by Western Air Express in April 1926.



Retrieved from its crash site in the Wasatch Mountains near Coalville, Utah; survivor of a near-disastrous fire while under reconstruction at Santa Paula, California; DH-4B No. 249 ended its 1968 delivery flight to the Smithsonian Institution in typical Air Mail style. Pilot J. W. (Bill) Hackbarth landed by mistake at old Bolling Field instead of Washington National Airport. Old-timers present recalled the inaugural flight of 50 years ago when "Hisso Jenny No. 38202" was delayed by an empty gas tank and ended with the pilot flying south instead of north. Hopefully, No. 249 will be free of troubles while on display in the Smithsonian. (Photo - Dustin W. Carter)