

MITCH MAYBORN

LINDBERGH *Flies The Mail to Panama*

With a sure hand on the controls, the pilot of a Pan American Airways Sikorsky S-38 lifted his plane from the wet runways into the cloudy sky, outward bound on the first leg of a 2327 mile airmail flight to the Panama Canal. The date: February 4, 1929.

The occasion was the inaugural flight of FAM 5, airmail flight from Miami, Florida to Cristobal, Canal Zone. The pilot was Colonel Charles A. Lindbergh and it was his birthday. It was also the birthday of the airplane, the second Sikorsky S-38 built, for exactly one year earlier the contract for its construction had been signed by Pan American and Sikorsky.

Lindbergh arrived at the airport at Miami at 5:15 A.M. and ate a quick breakfast at the hangar while supervising the loading of the plane. The S-38 chosen for the trip was NC-8000, c/n 14-1. ⁽¹⁾ Slowly a crowd of over 1000 gathered for the epic flight. Some of them were in evening clothes as they watched the preparations. 500 pounds of mail was loaded, made up of five sacks of letters and one sack of registered mail. When the plane was moved into the open, the crowd surged forward but halted when Lindbergh held up his hand. They were airborne at 6:08

On board, the crew consisted of Lindbergh, the pilot; Colonel John Hambleton, vice-president of Pan American, as co-pilot; and Henry L. Buskey as mechanic and radio operator. Also on board as passenger from Miami to Havana, Cuba, was Pan American's president, Juan T. Trippe.

They left the Florida mainland at 7:18 and landed at Havana, at 8:21. At Havana they were greeted by a crowd of 300, including the American Ambassador,

Noble B. Judah. Speaking to the assembly, Trippe said, "This flight is but a forerunner of airmail and passenger service which will go to Valparaiso by April 1."

Refueling at Havana took an hour and four minutes. They left at 9:25 bound for Belize, British Honduras. There was a fuel stop at Le Fe, Cuba, 180 miles west of Havana at 12:30. After refueling the fliers flew down the Cuban mainland, over the Yucatan Channel, the longest overwater hop of the trip, to the northeastern tip of the Yucatan Peninsula. There they turned and flew parallel to the coast to Belize, British Honduras, arriving there at 2:55 P.M. Total time for the 750 mile trip was 9 hours and 47 minutes.

The people of Belize were expecting them and they had not been idle. For six days prior to the flight, a crew of 20 men had labored to build a ramp for the big Pan American amphibian. Extending 175 feet into the bay and 20 feet wide, the ramp of Honduras Pine would allow planes to land in the bay, their wheels hitting the incline at the depth of four feet, and move to hard ground safely. On shore there was a 20 foot square platform. This ramp had been designed as a temporary structure until a permanent airport could be built.

Making a smooth landing in the bay, Lindbergh taxied up the ramp to shore but overran the end of the platform and the wheels of the big S-38 stuck in the soft sand.

On hand to receive the pioneer fliers was the American Consul and the Governor of British Honduras, Sir John Burdon and Lady Burdon. There was an official address of welcome given from the veranda of the Golf Club, 50 yards from the landing ramp. Hambleton spoke for the fliers, after the Governor's speech. Shortly thereafter, Lindbergh excused himself from the reception and returned to the stuck S-38 where he assisted in its extraction. The plane was not damaged and after digging out the wheels, planks were put down and the plane was pulled 15 yards to firm ground by a 10-ton tractor.

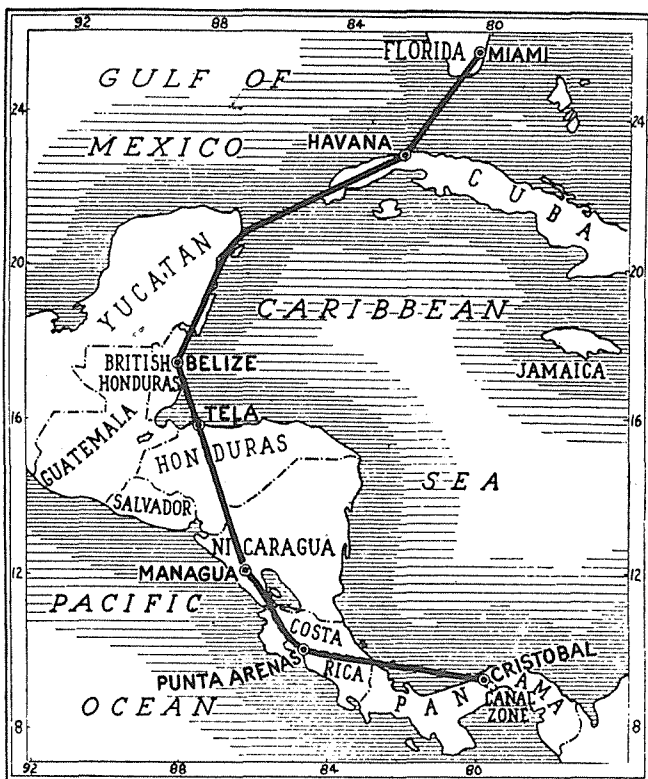
The official festivities continuing, the fliers were taken to the Government House where they were guests of the Governor and his wife for dinner. Earlier in the day, Lindbergh had given the Governor and his party a ride in the big Sikorsky, while making an aerial survey of the area for possible airport construction.

After dinner the party was taken to another reception, this time at the Polo Club. There, in a speech, Governor Burdon said, "I want to say how delighted we are to welcome you to Belize and you particularly, Colonel Lindbergh, being the first man to land a plane in British Honduras." Burdon added, "The colony is delighted to be linked with Pan American Airways, though you are earlier than we thought you would be. And, ladies and gentlemen, let me tell you that this is Colonel Lindbergh's birthday." There were rousing cheers at this announcement.

Lindbergh replied, "I want to tell you that I am glad to be back in Belize once again, and particularly on the first flight of a service linking Belize, not only with the United States but also with Central America and South America. I hope that before long these planes will not only land here once in two weeks but once each day, and I think I can assure you that before many months will have passed that that will be realized."

At 9:10 A.M. February 5, 1929, the Pan American

⁽¹⁾ See the AAHS Journal, Fall 1959, Vol. 4, No. 3, Page 165.



MAP INDICATING ROUTE TAKEN BY LINDBERGH

mail plane left Belize for the 500 mile second lap to Managua, Nicaragua. They landed for fuel at Tela, Honduras, 125 miles from Belize, at 10:43 A.M. and took off an hour later at 11:40. Since this was a survey flight as well as airmail flight, Lindbergh flew a circuitous route. Flying low over Tegucigalpa, the capitol of Honduras, they circled the city for five minutes as the residents ran into the streets and clambered on the rooftops cheering: "Viva Lindbergh! Viva Lindbergh!"

Dipping low over the airport, they set a course for Nicaragua. However, they found time to circle San Lorenzo, Honduras and Cortino, Nicaragua before landing at Managua at 3:00. Their route had taken them over the Gulf of Fonseca and the Nicaraguan Mountains.

They were not expected until 5:00 P.M. and by arriving two hours early, the crowd was small. On hand to greet the arrival of the first airmail flight was the American Minister to Nicaragua, Charles C. Eberhardt and a number of Nicaraguan officials. After the greeting and festivities, they were taken to the American Legation for the night.

February 6th was the third and final day of the flight to the Panama Canal. They took off from Managua at 6:30, landed at San Jose, Costa Rica at 8:10, left there at 8:30. Then they landed at Punta Arenas, Costa Rica and were there from 9:27 until 10:15, refueling. Again they landed at David, Panama at 12:45 and left there at 1:40. The 700 miles of flying was accomplished in six hours and 45 minutes and they landed at France Field, Cristobal, Canal Zone exactly on time, 4:00 P.M.

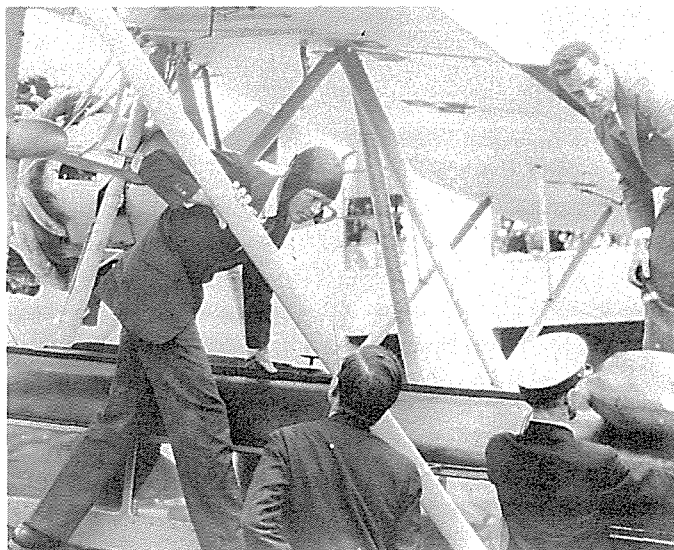
It is a good thing that they did arrive on time for the more than 2000 people gathered to greet this first flight, rushed on to the field at 3:55, five minutes before their scheduled arrival. Two minutes later, the Pan American S-38 was sighted over Gatun Lake, escorted by U.S. Navy fighters flying in formation and stunting overhead. (2)

Mobbed by the joyous crowd, police had to clear a lane for the plane to taxi to the hangar. A movie newsreel photographer called out to Lindbergh to turn around, but he said, "I haven't time now; I've got to check this mail," and proceeded to carefully perform his sworn duty. He checked the locks on the registered mail and took receipts for the mail from G. D. Bliss, postmaster of Cristobal. He then signed a report on his arrival and conferred briefly with Dr. M. F. Haralson, the Chief Quarantine Officer.

Later in the day, Lindbergh visited with his friend, Colonel Arthur Fisher, Commandant of France Field. Lindbergh had stayed with Fisher during a survey flight in 1928. That night, Lindbergh was the guest of Admiral H. A. Wiley, Commander in Chief of the U. S. Navy at Balboa.

On February 7th and 8th, he was a guest aboard the Saratoga, 70 miles at sea. Aboard the carrier, Lindbergh was left to himself, and removed from the press of crowds he relaxed and enjoyed the company of the Naval personnel. On the morning of the 8th, Colonel Charles A. Lindbergh, the mail pilot, the barnstormer, the "Lone Eagle", became the first Army pilot to fly a plane from the deck of a carrier.

Sunburned and rested, he flew directly from the Saratoga to Albrook Field, at Balboa. Later that afternoon, with a group of friends, Lindbergh flies an amphibian 40 miles offshore to the Perlas Islands where they fish. That afternoon they caught Spanish Mackerel, Kingfish, and shot Blanketfish and Sharks.



First air mail flight, F.A.M.5, arrives from Cristobal, Canal Zone, at Miami, Fla. (L.to r.) Lindbergh speaks to James M. Eaton. Col. John Hambleton at right on deck. (Photo - Pan American World Airways)

During the days of the flight down to Panama, carrying the first airmail to that country, there was the possibility that the Congress of the United States would not allow mail to be returned. However, it was announced that the mail would be allowed to return, and a previously printed special edition of stamps was quickly sold out. In fact, there over 50,000 letters, weighing a total of 803 pounds, and a Second Sikorsky S-38 was called in to accompany Lindbergh's plane on the return. (A few months later in June, 1929; the following air postal rates were in effect: First $\frac{1}{2}$ ounce from any point in the United States to Colombia, 40¢; Peru, 55¢; Chile, 70¢; and the Canal Zone, 25¢. Within the United States, 1 ounce was 5¢.)

All was ready, and the return was started February 11, 1929. Lindbergh arrived at France Field, Cristobal at 5:30 A.M. to supervise the loading of the mail and to check the plane. At 5:45 they checked out the engines. While the engines were being run up, Lindbergh was taking receipts for the loaded mail. In the prop wash, these papers were blown from the hands of Postmaster G. D. Bliss, who, with some spectators chased the scurrying papers across the field while Lindbergh spotted them with his flashlight.

At 5:55 they taxied down the field, Merritt following five minutes later. After they took off, the two Pan American amphibians disappeared quickly and were lost to sight behind a huge white cumulus cloud over Gatun Lake. They landed at David for fuel after flying 240 miles, and again at Punta Arenas after an additional 260 miles. Arrival at Managua, Nicaragua was at 1:35 P.M., 3 hours 25 minutes early. Nevertheless there was a small crowd to greet their arrival. Merritt landed 10 minutes later at 1:45. On hand to greet the mail was American Ambassador Eberhardt, who after the official greeting and dinner, took Lindbergh to meet Nicaragua's President Moncada. All United States Marine pilots had been invited to the dinner. General E. R. Badle, Commander of the Nicaraguan National Guard was also present.

(2) See photo of arrival at France Field, AAHS Journal, Fall 1959, Vol. 4, No. 3, Pg. 163.

The work and sacrifice of the pioneers was not in vain. The groundwork had been laid for the foundation of a naval aviation force second to none, which was to serve the country invaluable in two World Wars and during the intermittent periods of uneasy peace.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Grateful acknowledgement for their invaluable assistance in compiling data from which this article was written is due the following: Fred-eric K. Howard, Denver, Colo.; Paul R. Matt, Temple City, Calif.; Fred C. Dickey, Jr., Northbrook, Ill.; Alfred V. Verville, Washington, D. C.; Paul E. Garber, Head Curator, National Air Museum, Washington, D.C.; A. O. Van Wyen, Head, Aviation History Unit, Department of the Navy, Washington, D.C.; F. G. Forward, Vice President, Union Title Ins. & Trust Co., San Diego, Calif. Drawing reproduction courtesy Audrey Poberezny, Experimental Aircraft Assn., Hales Corners, Wis.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Letters from Admiral John H. Towers, dated February 25 & March 5, 1954.
AERO (AERO & HYDRO) - June 17, 22, July 1, 8, September 23, November 11, 1911; June 28, July 13, 1912.
AERONAUTICS - March, October, December, 1911; April, December, 1912.
AIRCRAFT - July, November, 1911; May, November, 1912.
SATURDAY EVENING POST - October 1, 1910
POPULAR AVIATION - March, 1937.
FLYING - January, 1942.
U.S. NAVAL AVIATION - 1898 - 1956 (U.S. Navy Department).
CURTISS AVIATION BOOK - Curtiss, Post, Ellyson, Beck, etc.) 1912.
NAVY WINGS - Miller, 1942.
GLENN CURTISS - Hatch, 1942.
SKY STORMING YANKEE - Studer, 1937.
PRACTICAL AERONAUTICS - Hayward, 1912.
PAPERS OF WILBUR & ORVILLE WRIGHT, Volume 2 - McFarland, 1953.
MITCHELL, PIONEER OF AIR POWER - Levine, 1943.
WINGS OVER AMERICA - Bruno, 1944.
HORIZONS UNLIMITED - Johnston, 1941.

LINDBERGH (Continued from Page 37)

Lindbergh and the mail arrived at Belize, British Honduras at 11:50 A.M. on February 11th, 24 hours early. They had bypassed an overnight stop at Tela, Honduras. Co-pilot for the trip from Managua to Belize, and Miami, was Marine Lieutenant Christian F. Schilt. A Congressional Medal of Honor winner and a skilled jungle pilot, Schilt had been loaned to Pan American Airways for three months as Division Superintendent. Schilt's duties would be to help set up routes and schedules through the remote Central and South American airways. Merritt stopped at Tela for several hours and then followed Lindbergh to Belize. When Merritt landed at Belize, Lindbergh noticed that the plane was getting a flat tire and it was quickly repaired.

The flight to Havana, Cuba arrived six hours late on the 12th. Exploring for future routes and refueling delays contributed to the late arrival which caused some concern for their safety. Lindbergh had landed at Coxumel Island, Mexico for fuel, but a heavy sea made refueling difficult. It took four hours

to refuel as it was necessary to work from a small boat tossing in the waves.

Late that afternoon they made a fuel stop at Le Fe Cuba, 100 miles to the west, and took off for Havana. They arrived in the dark over Havana at 7:48. Lindbergh flew over the field and they turned on all manner of improvised runway lights, gathered on the spur of the moment out of necessity. Circling the field three times, Lindbergh brought his Sikorsky in for a perfect landing.

Merritt, not exploring for future routes had landed much earlier in the afternoon. His crew consisted of: John Donchue as mechanic, and his co-pilot was Chief Petty Officer Frank E. Ormsby of the Navy.

It was on the 12th, in Mexico City, that the United States Ambassador Morrow and his wife announced the engagement of their daughter, Miss Anne Morrow, to Colonel Charles A. Lindbergh.

The arrival in Miami on the 13th was anticlimactic. On hand to greet the return of the first round trip airmail flight was a cheering crowd of 3000. However, after completion of brief formalities, Lindbergh was off again.

The return to the United States with the airmail from the Panama Canal arrived without incident, a tribute to a well planned flight, the skill of pilots and crews, and the dependability of the airplane.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

New York Times; February 5, 1929, Page 1.
"Lindbergh Takes Air Mail to Belize; Hails Forging of Continental Link as he Finishes First Lap to Panama" Photos of S-38 and Lindbergh on Pg. 2.
NYT; 2/6/29, P. 1. "Lindbergh Crosses Peaks to Managua".
NYT; 2/7/29, P. 1. "Lindbergh Delivers Canal Mail on Time".
NYT; 2/8/29, P. 1. "Lindbergh Consulted on Fleet Maneuvers: Washington Permits Mail on Return Flight".
NYT; 2/9/29, P. 9. "Lindbergh Soars from Ship to Canal".
NYT; 2/10/29, P. 10. "Lindbergh Rested as Guest of Navy". P. 1, Sec. 6 Rotogravure. Photos, "Back in his old job as mail plane pilot" and "The Gateway to the air highway through the West Indies".
NYT; 2/11/29, P. 3. "Lindbergh Reaches Managua on Return".
NYT; 2/12/29, P. 13. "Lindbergh Flies Direct to Belize".
NYT; 2/13/29, P. 1. "Colonel Lindbergh Betrothed to Miss Anne S. Morrow; Lands in Cuba after Delay", also "Lindbergh Reaches Havana in Evening".
NYT; 2/14/29, P. 2. "Lindbergh Back, Hunts Lost Flier". P. 1. "Miss Morrow Gets Flood of Messages".
NYT; 2/24/29, P. 1, Sec. 7 Rotogravure. Photos show "The Most Famous Postman in the World Delivers the Mail" and "The End of Another Brilliant Chapter in the Lindbergh Epic" which shows the crowd at France Field, Canal Zone when he landed there.
The Bee-Hive, March 1929, Pgs. 3-5. "Lindbergh 'Flies the Mail' to Panama".
Sikorsky Amphibian S-38 (1930 Model), References on Pg. 5 of this Sikorsky sales literature.

NOTE: The inconsistencies of type boldness on this and other pages arise because your Editor has not yet mastered all the printing techniques involving such simple acts as changing a typewriter ribbon.