

Airmail

The Post Office Department's most extraordinary role in transportation was probably played in the sky, a role little known today except to pioneers of American aviation.

The U.S. government had been cautious in exploring the airplane's potential. In 1905, the War Department considered three separate offers by Orville and Wilbur Wright to share their scientific discoveries on flight, then declined for budgetary reasons. Although by 1908 the Wright brothers had convinced many European nations that flight was feasible, the U.S. government owned only one airplane, and that crashed.

The Post Office Department, however, was intrigued with the possibility of carrying mail through the skies and authorized its first experimental mail flight at an aviation meet on Long Island in New York in 1911. Earle Ovington, sworn in as a mail carrier by Postmaster General Frank Hitchcock, made daily flights between Garden City Estates and Mineola, New York, dropping his mail bags from the plane to the ground where they were picked up by the Mineola postmaster.

Later, in 1911 and 1912, the Department authorized another 31 experimental flights at fairs, carnivals, and air meets in more than 16 states. These flights convinced the Department that the airplane could carry a payload of mail. Officials repeatedly urged Congress in 1912 to appropriate money to launch airmail service. In 1916, Congress finally authorized the use of \$50,000 from steam-and-powerboat service appropriations for airmail experiments. The Department advertised for bids for contract service in Massachusetts and Alaska but received no acceptable responses.

In 1918, Congress appropriated \$100,000 to establish experimental airmail routes. The Post Office Department urged the Army Signal Corps to lend its planes and pilots to the Department to start an airmail service. Carrying the mail, the Department argued, would provide invaluable cross-country experience to student flyers. The Secretary of War agreed.

The Post Office Department began scheduled airmail service between New York and Washington, D.C., May 15, 1918, an important date in commercial aviation. Simultaneous takeoffs were made from Washington's Polo Grounds and from Belmont Park, Long Island, both trips by way of Philadelphia.

During the first three months of operation, the Post Office Department used Army pilots and six Army Curtiss JN-4H ("Jenny") training planes. On August 12, 1918, the Department took over all phases of airmail service, using newly hired civilian pilots and mechanics and six specially built mail planes from the Standard Aircraft Corporation.

These early mail planes had no instruments, radios, or other navigational aids. Pilots flew by dead reckoning. Forced landings occurred frequently due to bad weather, but fatalities in those early months were rare, largely because of the planes' small size, maneuverability, and slow landing speed.

Congress authorized airmail postage of 24 cents, including special delivery. The public was reluctant to use this more expensive service. During the first year, airmail bags contained as much regular mail as airmail. To better its delivery time on long hauls and to lure the public into using airmail, the Department's long-range plans called for a transcontinental air route from New York to San Francisco. The first legs of this transcontinental route — from New York to Cleveland with a stop at Bellefonte, Pennsylvania, then from Cleveland to Chicago, with a stop at Bryan, Ohio — opened in 1919. A third leg opened in 1920 from Chicago to Omaha, via Iowa City, and feeder lines were established from St. Louis and Minneapolis to



Lt. James C. Edgerton,
**Lieutenant James C. Edgerton,
Washington, D.C., May 15, 1918**

Lieutenant James C. Edgerton flew the second leg of the first New York to Washington, D.C., airmail flight, from Philadelphia, on May 15, 1918.

Chicago. The last transcontinental segment, from Omaha to San Francisco, via North Platte, Nebraska; Cheyenne, Rawlins, and Rock Springs in Wyoming; Salt Lake City, Utah; and Elko and Reno in Nevada; opened on September 8, 1920.

At this time, mail was carried on trains at night and flown by day. Still, the new service was 22 hours faster than the cross-country all-rail time.

In August 1920, the Department began installing radio stations at each airfield to provide pilots with current weather information. By November, ten stations were operating, including two Navy stations. When airmail traffic permitted, other government departments used the radios instead of the telegraph for special messages, and the Department of Agriculture used the radios to transmit weather forecasts and stock market reports.



February 22, 1921, marked the first time mail was flown both day and night over the entire distance from San Francisco to New York. Congress was impressed. It appropriated \$1,250,000 for the expansion of airmail service. The Post Office Department installed additional landing fields, as well as towers, beacons, searchlights, and boundary markers, across the country. The Department also equipped the planes with luminescent instruments, navigational lights, and parachute flares.

In 1922 and 1923, the Department was awarded the Collier Trophy for important contributions to the development of aeronautics, especially in safety and for demonstrating the feasibility of night flights.

On February 2, 1925, Congress passed "An Act to encourage commercial aviation and to authorize the Postmaster General to contract for airmail service." The Post Office Department immediately invited bids from commercial aviation companies. By the end of 1926, 11 out of 12 contracted airmail routes were operating.

The first commercial airmail flight in the United States occurred February 15, 1926. As commercial airlines took over, the Post Office Department transferred its lights, airways, and radio service to the Department of Commerce, including 17 fully equipped stations, 89 emergency landing fields, and 405 beacons. Terminal airports, except government properties in Chicago, Omaha, and San Francisco, were transferred to the municipalities in which they were located. Some planes were sold to airmail contractors, while others were transferred to interested government departments. By September 1, 1927, all airmail was carried under contract.

Charles I. Stanton, an early airmail pilot who later headed the Civil Aeronautics Administration, said about those early days of scheduled airmail service:

We planted four seeds ... They were airways, communications, navigation aids, and multi-engined aircraft. Not all of these came full blown into the transportation scene; in fact, the last one withered and died and had to be planted over again nearly a decade later. But they are the cornerstones on which our present world-wide transport structure is built, and they came, one by one, out of our experience in daily, uninterrupted flying of the mail.¹

Endnote:

1. Rita Lloyd Moroney, "Above and Beyond," *The Encyclopedia of Aviation and Space Sciences* (Chicago: New Horizons Publishers, Inc., 1967), 77.