

Airmail Pilot Bill Hopson

William C. Hopson was less than impressed with photographs of himself.

Submitting a photo to the Post Office Department's Airmail Service in the early 1920s, he wrote:

Enclosed please find photo of bum pilot ... When finished with picture just post in cellar, it's guaranteed to keep away all rats, mice and other vermin.¹

Hopson had 741 hours of flight time when he became an airmail pilot on April 14, 1920. He trained at Hempstead, Long Island, and won a pilot's incentive contest sponsored by Otto Praeger, the Second Assistant Postmaster General. Hopson flew 413,034 miles, more than all but two of the service's 44 pilots, logging 4,043 hours in the air.

Like many airmail pilots, Hopson flew the British-designed De Havilland (DH-4B) biplane. Its front cockpit, transformed into a cargo hold, could carry about 500 pounds of mail, and the plane cruised at 95–100 mph. Although considered reliable, DH-4Bs tended to stall, and their high landing speeds made them difficult to land in short fields. But, wrote Hopson, they "are the only suitable ships for mountains in all weather."²



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For most of his career, Hopson flew the Omaha-Chicago leg of the transcontinental route. In 1925, he flew into a severe storm near Anita, Iowa. An air pocket dropped the plane almost to the ground before Hopson regained control. By then, his landing gear and lower wings had harvested about 75 bushels of corn. The plane turned over, pinning Hopson underneath. Surrounded by cornstalks and deluged by rain, he fired his revolver into the air to attract attention. The official report said:

The Pilot was only slightly injured, the mail wet in spots, and the plane practically a washout.³

Between weather and primitive instrumentation, each airmail trip was an adventure. As Hopson wrote:

The best system of flying bad weather is not so much to go rip roaring through nasty weather, but to use your head for something else besides a hat-rack, and fly where bad weather aint.⁴

In 1925, base pay for beginning airmail pilots was \$2,000 to \$2,800, depending on how much night flying they did. Pilots also earned five to seven cents per mile flown, double for night flight. Pilots agreed, in writing, to fly in all kinds of weather.

Hopson's last flight for the Department was on August 27, 1927. On September 1, contract carriers began transporting all airmail. Hopson left the Airmail Service two days later and was hired to fly National Air Transport's Contract Air Mail Route 17 between New York and Chicago. This was the Allegheny route, one of the most difficult because of limited safe places for emergency landings.

Hopson died October 18, 1928, when his plane crashed into the top of a tree on a hill near Polk, Pennsylvania, during a bad storm. One man, grateful that Hopson had saved his life during an earlier flight, wrote a tribute that appeared in *The St. Louis Times* on October 20, 1928:

It was a dark, rainy, cloudy day on the New York end of the air mail. No planes through in two days. I wanted to get home to my family in California. I insisted on going. It wasn't bravery — it was dumb ignorance, and an unlimited confidence in all air mail pilots.

"We will try to get through if you insist," Pilot W.P. Hopson said. And we got through, clear to Cleveland.

Thursday he didn't get through. I kinder feel like his skill saved my life. So "Hoppie," Old Boy, here's hoping you are piloting the best cloud the Boss has got in his hangar up there, and you don't have to worry about low ceiling, engine missing, head winds, or even whether the old rip cord will pull in case —.

Yours,
Will Rogers

¹ William C. Hopson to Second Assistant Postmaster General, April 11, 1921, Air Mail Service Personnel Files, Record Group 28, National Archives and Records Administration.

² Hopson to Duard B. Colyer, Air Mail Service, September 4, 1920, Air Mail Service Personnel Files, Record Group 28, National Archives and Records Administration.

³ D. B. Colyer, *News Letter. Week Ending September 26, 1925*, Air Mail Service, Omaha, Nebraska, September 26, 1925, Record Group 28, National Archives and Records Administration.

⁴ Hopson to Colyer, May 1, 1925, Air Mail Service Personnel Files, Record Group 28, National Archives and Records Administration.