It was a big day when the first transcontinental air-mail plane reached Curtiss Field, N. Y., on August 22, 1923.

*Flying the mail—from the days of DH-4s to DC-7s*

# Pony Express with Wings

*A first-hand account of a precarious flight over the air-mail system of 1924—from New York to Frisco and back in three weeks . . . and three planes*

**By Samuel Taylor Moore**

INAUGURATION of coast-to-coast air mail more than thirty years ago was not greeted, I suppose, with anything resembling the public celebration that attended the completion of the laying of the Atlantic cable (I wasn't around then). But the general interest certainly compared favorably with the excitement produced by the opening of direct transcontinental telephone service (which I do remember). I recall that one joker pasted himself all over with air-mail stamps—at twenty-four cents an ounce—and presented himself as a parcel post shipment. Even if the rules had permitted, passengers could not have been carried because the rear seat in the Liberty-powered DH-4s had been converted into mail compartments.

At the time I was doing free-lance magazine writing, and this was something right up my alley. There was no chance of flying over the system in a mail plane, so I finagled an Army DH through Capt. St. Clair Street, then aide to Maj. Gen. Mason M. Patrick, Chief of Air Corps. Lt. Jasper Kemper McDuffie was assigned as chief pilot.

A run-down of just how much (or how little) system there was in the air-mail "system" of 1924 may be enlightening and may also provide a bit of background for the flight itself. The most elemental radio aids were, of course, lacking. The only instruments available were a highly unreliable compass, an altimeter, and a tachom-

Air-mail service became a reality on May 15, 1918, when Maj. Reuben H. Fleet flew from Philadelphia to Washington, D. C. On arrival, he was greeted by (left) Post Office Department officials and President Woodrow Wilson. The President congratulated Major Fleet (lower left) before the mail plane was reloaded (center, below) for the return trip. Thirty years later, the event was commemorated (below) when Postmaster General Donaldson gave special mail to AF Capt. Vermont Garrison who flew it from Washington to New York City in an F-80. At right, then Maj. Gen. Lawrence S. Kuter, now four-star FEAF Cmdr.

**Today, air-mail service is taken for granted. The scene of mail sacks being loaded aboard a huge American Airlines DC-7 at Washington's National Airport is typical of the operation.**


eter. The smart pilot waited out weather.

Fourteen airfields, separated by varying distances, comprised the system. The 115-mile relay between Rock Springs, Wyoming, and Salt Lake City was the shortest. Most relays were 200 or more miles apart; none exceeded 300 miles. Plush fields had cinder runways, the others dirt or grass. Not all of the fields were relay terminals. Most of them were necessary for refueling, because if the pilot was bucking strong head winds, or got off course, the fuel supply quickly became marginal.

The original system was based on nine official relays, and every pilot knew intimately only the terrain of his own particular relay. Occasionally a pilot was shifted from one relay to another, thereby broadening his education. Few pilots, however, had ever flown all nine relays. One, Paul Collins, never made a complete trip in ten years of jockeying mail planes.

For night flying, 900 miles of the route, from Cleveland to Rock Springs, was marked by visual aids—rotating beacon lights every twenty-five miles, with fixed blinker lights on the ground between at eight-mile intervals. In mountainous terrain the beacons were hard to find. Fog, rain, and snow often blanketed the blinkers and, only less often, the beacon flashes. So-called emergency strips along the airway were represented by some fairly flat pieces of farmland where crops or tall grass might or might not be growing. Farmer caretakers, equipped with red railroad flares or with standby bonfires ready for the match, were supposed to keep an eye on the local weather in order to signal down the pilot when the skies gave portent of trouble, or when the caretaker's rheumatism began acting up. Few of these watchers had telephones, in the event that a plane dispatcher at a relay point wanted to intercept a flight because of a sudden storm warning.

The eastern terminus of the system was Hazelhurst Field, Long Island. (Later, as Roosevelt Field, it became the starting point of most of the early transatlantic attempts, successful and unsuccessful.) The first field westward was at Bellefonte, Penna., where a tiny grass strip nestled in a fold in the Alleghenies. A cinder runway in the shadow of the smokestack of the original Glenn Martin plant served Cleveland. The next field was at Bryan, Ohio, close to the Indiana line, but if head winds were only moderate the Cleveland-Chicago relay could be flown non-stop. Maywood, with a ramshackle hangar and another cinder strip, was then the busiest airfield in the Chicago area.

The first leg of McDuffie's and my flight—in September 1924— was what might be called uneventful. The events

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cies. The "wild pilot" tradition persisted for years. Most pilots were hard-working, conscientious, proud of their work and determined to make the system a success. But there was also the occasional flying Lothario who would set his plane down in a field to woo the farmer's daughter. And there was the pursuer of the fast buck who would land at one of the more populous centers on his relay, unload his mail temporarily, and take up a local boy eager to tell his neighbors that he had ridden in an airplane (it didn't matter that he could see nothing with the cover of the mail compartment down).

The first experimental transcontinental mail flight of 1921 was one-way only—San Francisco to New York. It was accomplished in thirty-four hours with only bonfires on the ground to guide the pilot, Jack Knight, on the legs flown in darkness. Two years later a four-day test flight in both directions reflected improved techniques. One east-bound flight, favored by tailwinds, was clocked in twenty-six hours, fourteen minutes. The time compared favorably with that of the Kelly-MacReady non-stop westward flight in an Army Fokker that same year.

Then, in 1924, the transcontinental service was established on regular schedule, in celebration of which I made my pioneer coast-to-coast flight with Lieutenant McDuffie. Special stamps reappeared, this time to stay. You paid only eight cents within any one of the three postal zones, twenty-four cents for the full treatment. The service was still far from dependable, and once the novelty had worn off, air-mail bags were light for several years. Diffidence on the part of prospective patrons was made more acute by the fulsome press handling of the rather frequent crack-ups of mail planes. The customers didn't want their letters burned up.

In 1926 the Post Office Department, through the channels of competitive bidding, turned over sections of the transcontinental system and new and projected feeder routes to civilian contractors. At first cargo was scarce, and since the contractors were paid by weight of mail, some of them shipped and reshipped mail-order catalogues back and forth to boost their take. But the spark of free enterprise, however it may have been temporarily tarnished by such shenanigans, had been struck. A few of the mail contractors began carrying passengers; the de luxe carrier of the day was the old Ford "tin goose," whose luxury passengers didn't mind being deafened by the clangor inside the metal fuselage.

Then, in 1927, a young Army-trained air-mail pilot (who incidentally held the service record of three forced bail-outs) soloed from New York to Paris, and air-mail volume soared. More important for commercial aviation was the fact that Lindbergh's great feat opened the purses of American investors. If the sketchy air-mail routes then in operation had not existed, and been capable of serving as the pattern on which broadened operations could be effected, a distressing and embarrassing situation would have arisen: both the contractors and the industry would have had more money at their disposal than they would have been prepared to use.

Sound-proofed Boeing and Douglas transports, bulwarked by advanced navigation aids, were carrying passengers as well as mails over an ever-panding network when, in February 1934, President Roosevelt canceled all domestic air-mail contracts and turned the job of flying the mails over to the Army Air Corps. The weather was far worse than average, and the planes available were ill-suited to the task, but the basic reason for the poor performance was best expressed by one airlines president: "The Air Corps is just about as mobile as the coast artillery." But the disastrous experiment paid long-term dividends.

Up to 1934 the Army General Staff had dictated top-level air policy. The small air establishment enjoyed a minimum of autonomy under the commanding generals of the Army Corps Areas where air bases happened to be located. Fuel restrictions handicapped cross-country training. Air leaders who watched with keen and doleful interest the progress made by civilian airline operators in radio and other communication aids had been denied funds to keep abreast of these developments.

The over-all poor performance in flying the mails, however, convinced the Army General Staff that the air chiefs had been right. It also loosened the purse-strings. From the air-mail "bungle" of 1934 sprang the Army General Staff authorization for the first step in Air Corps autonomy, the GHQ Air Force, support for the Flying Fortress program, the end of the pants-seat era of flying—in fact, the start of all the advances which, despite frequent setbacks, eventually made possible the accomplishment of the Army Air Forces in World War II and the existence of the Air Force itself as an independent arm.—END