

Airmail Comes of Age

By: Lyndon Baltazar

NOTE: Lyndon Baltazar is a junior at the University of Maryland, College Park, majoring in aerospace engineering. He is currently working as an intern in the FAA History Office.

The first airmail flight operated by the U.S. Post Office Department with a civilian flight crew took off from College Park, MD, on August 12, 1918, with pilots Max Miller, Edward Gardner, Robert Shank, and Maurice Newton taking turns at the controls of a new, purpose-built Curtiss R-4 airplane. The four pilots shared the 218 mile flight from

College Park to New York via Philadelphia. The first regularly scheduled United States Mail service flight had actually taken place on May 15, 1918, but the Army Air Corps still flew the mail. On that day, Army pilot Lieutenant George Boyle climbed in aircraft #38262, a U.S Army surplus Curtiss JN-4HM "Jenny" and prepared for the northbound flight from the Washington Polo Grounds in Washington, DC, to Belmont Park in New York. President Woodrow Wilson,



First Post Office pilots (left to right): Eddie Gardner, Superintendent of the airmail service Benjamin Lispner, Maurice Newton, Max Miller, and Robert Shank.

Postmaster General Albert Burleson, and then Secretary of the Navy Franklin D. Roosevelt came to send off the pioneer pilot on his historical flight. Unfortunately, due to a navigational error, Boyle landed 18 minutes into his flight to regain his bearings and damaged his plane upon touching down. As a result, the 140 pounds of mail he carried needed to be transported back to Washington, eventually being flown and delivered the next day.

As unsuccessful as it was, Boyle's flight marked the first time the U.S government used aircraft in the delivery of mail. Before this, airmail was limited to pilots taking small amounts of personal mail in their individually owned planes. With Boyle's flight, the federal government began to take an increasingly larger role in creating, organizing and maintaining the nation's airmail system. However, development of a viable federal air mail system did not come quickly and led to the Air Mail Scandal. That scandal served as a catalyst that led to the improvement of the airline industry and transformation of the United States Army Air Corps. The events that led up to the scandal included the passage of the Air Mail Act of 1930, the infamous "Spoils Conference," Executive Order 6591 and the subsequent Air Mail Act of 1934 legislation.

The development and success of military aircraft in World I had led U.S. postal officials to believe that the airplane could be developed into a means of fast mail transportation. Agreeing with the Post Office's assessment, Congress appropriated \$100,000 for the fiscal year ending June 30, 1918, to be used in the establishment of an experimental air mail route. In May 1918, the U.S. Post Office Department established the first air mail route in the United States between New York, NY, and Washington, DC, with a stop at Philadelphia, PA. The War Department initially provided the planes and pilots and conducted the flying and maintenance operations, while the Post Office handled the mail and developed the airways.

Lieutenant Boyle's flight marked the first of many flights until the Army turned operations of the airmail service over to the Post Office in August. The successful operation of this first airmail route led to the expansion of the airmail system along a transcontinental route from New York to San Francisco. To facilitate night flying, on August 20, 1920, the Post Office Department issued orders to establish the first air mail radio stations along the transcontinental air mail route. The 2,612-mile route from New York to San Francisco had 17 primary landing fields, and each would have its own air mail radio station. In 1923,

work began on lighting the airway. With the transcontinental route fully operational, by the mid-1920s, the Post Office Department was ready to turn its “experiment” over to commercial operators.

The Contract Air Mail Act of 1925 (commonly known as the Kelly Act) allowed the Post Office to contract with private airlines to establish feeder routes into the national system. By 1927, the Post



Charles Lindbergh as an Airmail pilot

Office had completely transferred the responsibility for flying the mail over to commercial airlines, with over 45 airlines involved in mail delivery by 1929. The early air mail pilots included Charles Lindbergh, who would later gain fame during his transatlantic flight to Paris. As more routes were established, the safety and capability of the planes and pilots grew as well. More flights began occurring at night and in non-ideal weather conditions, with the help of radio, ground beacons, and lighted landing fields. As government subsidies

exceeded the cost of transporting the mail, many airlines began abusing the system, allowing bulk packages to be flown as mail or flying large amounts of junk mail.

Contracts with the post office became the primary source of revenue for commercial airlines. However, the process of delivering mail proved costly, inefficient and time-consuming due to the large number of airlines having to coordinate and work together. Many of the airlines involved in the delivery of the mail were small and underfunded, which only allowed them to fly older aircraft and short routes. The postmaster general under President Hoover, Walter Folger Brown, requested from Congress the power to change postal policy in order to improve the national system. With the support of Senator Charles McNary and Representative Laurence Watres, Congress passed the Airmail Act of 1930, giving Brown power to create long-term mail contracts with airlines.

The Airmail Act of 1930 was divided into three main provisions. The first provision changed the way payments to airlines were calculated, rating it based on volume of mail, rather than weight. It also set a fee on planes of a certain size, whether it was flying mail or not, to discourage the flying of large amounts of junk mail and to encourage the carrying of passengers to increase revenue. The second provision simply allowed an airline that had an existing contract to haul mail for two years to apply for a “route certificate” which allowed them to carry mail for up to 10 more years. The third provision controversially allowed Brown to extend or change mail routes according to his own judgment.

Shortly following the passing of the Airmail Act of 1930, Brown hosted what came to be known as the Spoils Conference. Under the third provision of the Act, Brown called together a meeting of a few airlines, deliberately excluding many smaller airlines, and eventually awarded the majority of the airmail contracts to three major airlines at the time: Boeing Air Transport, which became United Airlines, Transcontinental Air Transport, which later merged with Western Air and ultimately became TWA, and Robertson Aircraft Corporation, which later became American Airlines.



Assistant Secretary for Aeronautics
William P. MacCracken Jr.

Although this increased the efficiency of the postal system and led to decreased costs for sending mail, many smaller operators complained the contracts had been unjustly auctioned off to the larger airlines, since they could not match the bids made by the bigger, more established airlines. There were also accusations of foul play, as the contracts were only made to those allied with the Hoover Administration. In 1933, Senator Hugo Black led a Senate investigations committee

that called into question the legality of Brown's decisions. William MacCracken Jr., the first Assistant Secretary of Commerce in Aeronautics refused to testify before Congress regarding the charges of favoritism in his and Brown's actions, as they had both presided over the Spoils conference, ensuring the mail contracts went to the largest, most well-established airlines. Congress called MacCracken a lobbyist and held him in contempt of Congress.

In February of 1934, President Roosevelt and his postmaster general, James Farley, announced that all domestic air contracts would be terminated, and with Executive Order 6591, turned over the responsibilities of air mail over to the Army Air Corps. Many top advisors to the President believed the Air Corps would be able to take over the mail contracts in as little as a week. However, the truth was the Air Corps were severely ill prepared for the task. During the Great Depression, due to pay cuts and lack of funding, many pilots lacked the flight hours and experience to take on the nations mail. Their military pilots typically conducted air operations for only up to four hours a day, during the daytime and in good weather and flew obsolete aircraft, a far cry from the night flying, modern aircraft that private airlines used.

As a result, during the first familiarization flights, three pilots were killed in crashes, all attributed to bad weather. However, the trouble would not stop there. In the first week of operations, a



Crashed JN-4H "Jenny" during the period the Army Air Corps flew mail.

blizzard disrupted all flights east of the Rocky Mountains and weather-related accidents killed two more pilots.

Another pilot was forced to land in the Atlantic Ocean and drowned. Although the Air

Corps transitioned to newer, more advanced aircraft, which could carry larger quantities of mail flown per flight, they flew only 60 percent of the original routes flown by the airlines and the number of accidents did not decrease due to pilots' unfamiliarity with the planes. In an attempt to curb accidents, Roosevelt met with Chief of the Air Corps Benjamin Foulois to discuss the reduction of routes and flights. Unfortunately, this did not stop the problems, and four more pilots died in crashes.

Finally, after 66 crashes that resulted in 12 deaths, the responsibility of the nation's mail was returned to private airlines, with the passage of the Airmail Act of 1934. The Act closely regulated the airmail industry, and separated the airlines from the manufacturers for reasons of safety, as during this time in history, many aircraft manufacturers also offered passenger services. The Act also gave various federal organizations power over airmail, such as the Post Office to award postal contracts, the Interstate Commerce Commission to establish rates, and the Bureau of Air Commerce to develop and manage the airways and regulate safety. The Act also banned companies that previously held airmail contracts from obtaining new ones. However, a loophole allowed those same companies to buy contracts by changing their names. Therefore, companies such as Northwest Airways, Boeing Air Transport, and American Airways became the Northwest Airlines, United Airlines, and American Airlines we know today. With many major changes to air mail policy, airlines were no longer able to generate enough revenue on mail delivery alone and as a result, began focusing more on the business of carrying passengers.

The Airmail Act of 1934 also created the Federal Aviation Commission, whose purpose was to study aviation policy. The commission recommended an increase of 4,000 planes for the Army Air Corps and Navy. After passage of the Act, the Air Corps went through a major overhaul. The corps increased training requirements and began to include new courses and requirements in radio and other instruments, as well as night-flying. The fiasco also served as a catalyst for the Air Corps to upgrade their

aircraft and equipment and as a result, the planes and technology entering World War II were a far cry from those used just 7 years earlier to carry the mail.