

Uncle Sam's Air Mail Service Marks Its 20th Anniversary

Spirit of Pioneering Flavored Early Development of America's Fastest Postal Transportation; New York-Washington Route Was First

By JOSEPH W. LABINE

The scene was Mineola, N. Y. The date, sometime between September 23 and 30, 1911. An excited postmaster lifted his eyes to the heavens and saw mail pouches plummet toward him from the cockpit of an early model army airplane.

That was the start of air mail, a national institution which currently observes its twentieth birthday anniversary. Officially, air mail dates back to May 15, 1918, when the first scheduled flight was made between New York and Washington under post-office department supervision. But in 1911 the intrepid Earle Ovington made history by carrying about 37,000 pieces of mail from Nassau boulevard airport, Long Island, to Mineola, where he dropped the pouches and flew back home.

In 1911—and even in 1918—it was considered an impractical stunt. Today, in 1938, giant silver airliners glide to every corner of the nation day and night, carrying the written word of man to distant destinations in incredibly fast time. Last year 760,000,000 letters were flown by a service which has become an all-important factor in American business and industry.

Such an institution would bring joy to the heart of a man named John Wise. Mr. Wise rose from his seat in congress back in 1843 to propose legislation regarding the carriage of mail by aircraft. But Mr. Wise might also have aged prematurely had he realized the setbacks confronting aviation and air mail before it reached its 1938 stage of development.

For air mail has not been a smooth and successful venture. It has weathered storms far more severe than those of a wintry Rocky mountain night at 10,000 feet. It has seen the flush of premature success, as in 1926 when a pound of mail brought the carrier \$3.00 for 1,000 miles transportation. And it has seen the depths of February, 1933, when the postoffice department cancelled all contracts because a few major companies had swallowed the little fellows.

War Sped Air Mail.

The World war sped adoption of air mail because aircraft had been used so successfully in France. In the beginning the postoffice department had complete supervision over the work and army fliers in army planes handled the transportation. But late in 1918 the post-office department dropped its army affiliation and bought its own planes. As in 1938, the economic rule governing air mail expansion in 1918 is that such service becomes a necessary utility when it operates between points farther apart than a night's journey by train. With that in mind the postoffice department began planning a transcontinental route from Atlantic to Pacific. This job was flavored with the pioneering spirit of America's first transcontinental railroad or her coast-to-coast telephone and telegraph systems. It was a challenge to the ingenuity of clear-visioned modern pioneers.

The route was composed of four distinct sections. The first, from May 15, 1919, was between Cleveland and Chicago. The second was established July 1, 1919, between Cleveland and New York. On the anniversary of the first section, May 15, 1920, the third division was opened between Chicago and Omaha. And the following September 8 the fourth section between Omaha and San Francisco was inaugurated.

It sounds simple and matter-of-fact, but many a grim faced pioneer pilot acquired the lines of age during that short span of years. Such famous pioneers as Jack Knight and E. Hamilton Lee became identified with the game—Knight fly-

weather. Even the next pilot had left the airport.

Knight, realizing the flight's importance, volunteered to take off for Chicago, a route he had never before flown, and under difficult weather conditions. He took off for Des Moines, passed over that city without incident and headed for Iowa City where he was due to take gas. Storms and low visibility hampered him until he reached Iowa City, where he circled 20 minutes seeking the airport. The field crew there had been told the flight was cancelled at Omaha and had left for home. Only a blessed watchman was on duty and he finally heard Knight's motor, igniting a flare to help the beleaguered pilot land. His gas supply replenished, he headed for Chicago to complete the most dramatic flight in air mail's history.

The system began rapid expansion. To supply the transcontinental line with proper loads, feeder routes were established between Chicago and St. Louis and Chicago and the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul. In 1925 the Kelly air mail bill was passed authorizing the postmaster general to turn the work over to private operators. By the end of 1926, 14 domestic routes were being operated by private companies. The postoffice department relinquished all control except the power to grant contracts, which it guarded jealously.

Private operators prospered in 1926 when the rate of pay for air mail was changed to a poundage basis on a fixed rate not exceeding

ing between Cleveland and Chicago in DH-4s and Lee herding Jenny biplanes over the Washington-New York route.

Night Flying Experiments.

But this was daylight flying, necessitating the sending of mail by train at night and materially lessening the usefulness of air transport-



Jack Knight, one of air mail's pioneer pilots, as he appeared in the aviator's costume of 15 years ago, shortly after his epochal night flight from Omaha to Chicago. Knight, now retired from active flying, is with United Airlines in Chicago.

tion. For several years the post-office department conducted experiments in night flying with radio, radio beams and airway lights. On July 1, 1924, the first scheduled night flight was successfully completed, but as early as 1921 a day-night flight was made across the continent to demonstrate its practicability to congress.

Behind this venture was Otto Praeger, former assistant postmaster general who pioneered the expansion of aviation. Praeger felt a day-night flight would win congress over to the value of a progressive view on air mail. At 4:30 a. m., February 22, 1921, an eastbound plane left San Francisco loaded with mail that landed in New York city at 4:50 p. m. the following day.

Trouble Over Iowa City.

It was on the central portion of this flight that Jack Knight ran into such trouble as had seldom plagued an air mail pilot, but he came through with flying colors to give day-night flying a good name. Knight's portion of the flight was from North Platte to Omaha. The ship reached Omaha at midnight and Knight was told the hop to Chicago was canceled because of bad

\$3.00 a pound for the first 1,000 miles. Immediately began an aggressive advertising campaign to popularize the system.

Profits Excessive.

Changes were soon made to provide for the granting of air mail "certificates" which permitted carriers to apply for contracts. By 1930 profits became excessive, according to the government, and charges were changed from a pound basis to the space-mile basis. Carriers were further ordered to fill all available space with passengers, amounting to government subsidy of passenger traffic.

In 1933 came the dark hour for commercial aviation, when four major companies emerged through a merger of operators. It had been expected that the act of 1930 would produce some bidding for contracts but the mergers resulted and the major operators in turn entered into gentlemen's agreements about which routes each should seek. That state of affairs led to cancellation of all air mail contracts by the post office department in February, 1933. The army air corps was ordered to fly the mail. But army pilots were ill trained for cross-country and instrument flying. Twelve deaths and great loss of property resulted during the tragic experiment.

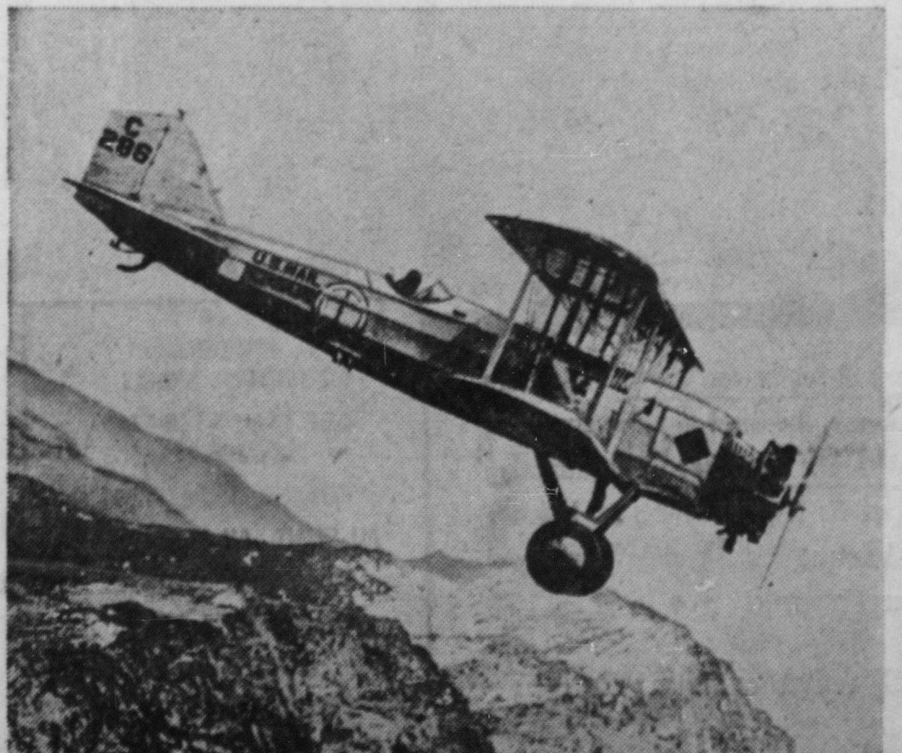
Aviation's story since the 1933 affair is a complex one, filled with legislative investigation and new congressional acts. It will suffice that public denunciation of the government's unsuccessful operation resulted in a return of contracts to private operators under conditions more satisfactory from a mutual standpoint.

Rates Have Dropped.

Today the United States probably has an air mail service superior to that of any other nation in speed, dependability and economy. Its history is one of constantly decreasing costs. Oldtimers who dispatched mail in that first historic pouch from New York to Washington may remember they paid 24 cents an ounce, compared to the present rate of 6 cents.

Such is the brief story of Uncle Sam's latest venture in speeding the mails. Who can say that the pony express, colorful symbol of an earlier era, held more adventure than the night flights of pioneer birdmen who flew above the same trails several decades later?

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It's only eleven years since this Boeing "40" was the latest in air mail planes. The ensuing period has brought huge liners that carry both mail and passengers in speed and comfort.

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HELLO EVERYBODY:

There's an old saying that a man who is born to be hanged will never be drowned, and Pete Lovett of Brooklyn, N. Y., has a hunch that something of the sort is true in his own case. Pete doesn't know what sort of an end the Fates have in store for him, but he's darned certain that no bullet will ever put an end to his career.

Pete went through two years of the World war without getting killed, but that only helped make him all the more sure that he was bullet proof. The thing that convinced him of it in the first place happened before the war even started—back in the summer of 1912, when Pete was a kid, thirteen years old.

Pete was brought up over in Brooklyn, and as a kid he spent most of his time playing around the waterfront.

A regular dock rat, Pete was in those days—a youngster who loved to be in, or on, or anywhere near the water.

He and a couple of other lads used to go down to the docks together, and one of those boys had a brother-in-law who was captain of a lighter-barge tied up at the foot of Columbia street in the Red Hook section.

The Captain Was Drinking Whisky.

It was a day in August, and the three kids went down to the barge, at the captain's invitation, to spend the day aboard it. The captain and his wife had quarters aboard the boat, but the three youngsters no sooner arrived than the captain's wife left to pay a visit to a friend.

That left the three kids alone with the captain. He was a heavy drinker, Pete says, and this day was no exception. But he started in to show the kids a good time by taking them out in his rowboat to hunt crabs in the harbor.

They did pretty well hunting crabs. One after another they scooped in with a net, until they had a peach basket full of them. They went back to the barge, cooked the crabs, and sat down to a meal of crabs, boiled potatoes and tea.

Only the captain didn't drink any tea. He had a bottle of whisky alongside of him and he took frequent sips out of that.

The captain's wife hadn't returned, and the bottle was almost empty. He asked the boys if they would go out and get him some beer, and two of them went, but Pete stayed behind. Pete says the captain was



The Captain Began Blazing Away at Pete.

acting normally and he didn't notice anything strange about him. If he had, he might have expected what came later. But the captain, as a matter of fact, didn't look as if he had taken so much as a single drop of liquor, though he had been pouring it down all afternoon.

He Began Shooting at Pete.

After the other two boys had gone he told Pete his wife would be back shortly and he thought he'd start getting supper ready. He asked Pete if he'd go down the aft hatch where he stored his potatoes, and bring some back to him. Pete walked aft and started down the hatch.

"In the meantime," says Pete, "he must have gone stark mad. Most barge captains keep pistols aboard for protection against harbor thieves, and he had two loaded ones somewhere about the boat. I was down below, standing just to one side of the hatchway, when all of a sudden he appeared overhead and began blazing away at me!"

It was dark down there in the hold of the barge, and Pete was thankful for that. The captain couldn't see him and he was standing to one side, out of range of the fire. "At the sound of the first shot," says Pete, "I went stiff with fright. I never prayed so long or so hard in my life. I have faced machine gun fire and hand grenades in France, but nothing ever scared me as much as I was scared that day.

"The captain emptied one revolver down the hatch before he stopped firing. Then he slammed the hatch cover down on me and locked it so I couldn't get out while he went back, apparently to get his other gun. I could hear him screeching and yelling up above—yelling that I was a river pirate and he was going to kill me if he had to come down the hatch to do it.

"Now I heard him open the hatch cover and descend two or three steps down the ladder. I began creeping slowly away from the hatch. I moved along on a string piece barely wide enough to walk on. The barge had four feet of water in its hold for ballast, and if I slipped and fell into that, the captain would surely kill me."

Trapped Down the Dark Hatch.

Pete was right alongside of the hatch stairway now. The captain's legs were within a few inches of his hands. In a sudden desperation he made a grab for those legs. He thought if he threw the captain into the water he'd be able to escape. But in the gloom of the hold, he missed his grab. He caught the cuff of the captain's trousers, and pulled with all his might, but he miscalculated his strength. He couldn't budge the captain. Instead, the captain brought his gun down across Pete's wrist, paralyzing his arm.

Pete let go his hold. In the darkness, he began creeping along the stringpiece toward the back of the dark hole he was trapped in. Then, again, came the sound of shots. Bullets splashed in the water alongside of him and thudded into the wooden side of the barge. Again the captain emptied his gun, and then he went back on deck, closing and locking the hatch after him.

He was up in the cabin, reloading his pistols when Pete's two young friends came back with the beer they had been sent for. They got the guns away from him and ran out on the dock. Another bargeman came running to the rescue. The police were called. They came and took the now thoroughly crazed captain away in a straitjacket.

"All the time," says Pete, "I was pounding on the hatch cover and calling for help. Altogether I was down there about an hour before they came and let me out, but in that hour I passed through a century of horror. Now, all fear of bullets has been erased from my mind. After that experience, I don't think I'll ever be killed by one."

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Needed Good Swimmers

Usually, in the Ohio pioneer days, the first question asked by a prospective buyer of a saddle horse was, "Is he a good swimmer?" For with no bridges over the streams, swimming was the only way over.

Naming Downing Street

Downing street, residence of the British prime ministers, was named for Sir George Downing, a Seventeenth century secretary of the treasury.

First Trains Horse Drawn

The first two railroads in the country, the Quincy railroad of Massachusetts and the Mauch Chunk railroad of Pennsylvania, both dating from the year 1827, used horse power and not locomotives.

Signed Constitution, Declaration

George Washington and James Madison were signers of the Constitution, and Thomas Jefferson and John Adams signed the Declaration of Independence.

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Ask Me Another

A General Quiz

The Questions

1. Who was the Greek god of time?
2. Was George Washington really the first President of the United States?
3. How much would a cube of gold 14 inches in each dimension weigh?
4. How many interments are there in Arlington National cemetery?
5. What in round numbers is the latest estimate of the population of the United States?

The Answers

1. Chronos.
2. Yes, under our first Constitution. Other presidents before him were little more than presiding officers over the Continental congress.
3. A 14-inch cube of gold would weigh approximately one ton.
4. Up to and including March 25, 1938, 46,661 burials have been made in Arlington National cemetery.
5. The population of the United States is 127,000,000.

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