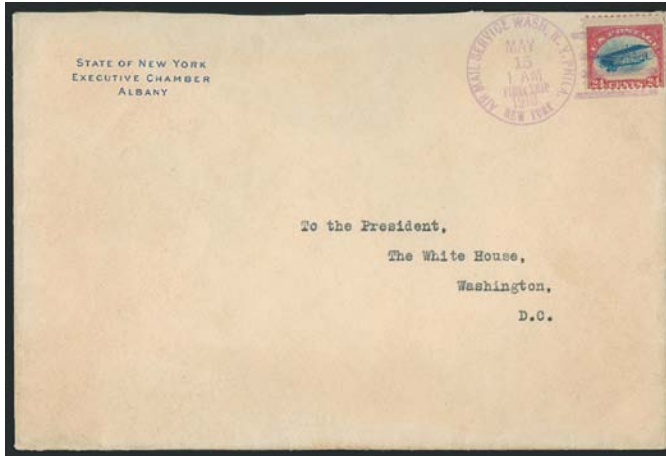


## *Historic Events:*

# First US Airmail, May 15, 1918

by J.P.V. Heinmuller (From *STAMPS Magazine*, May 15, 1943)

The United States air mail was inaugurated in most modest surroundings on May 15, 1918, during the dark days of World War I. It was fathered by the Post Office Department and nursed by the U.S. Army Signal Corps. Since that time our air mail has been



*1918 24¢, Sc. C3, tied by "Air Mail Service Wash. N.Y. Phila. New York May 15 1 AM 1918 First Trip New York" duplex cancel, on cover from "State of New York Executive Chamber Albany" addressed "To the President, The White House, Washington D.C."*

extended to all parts of the world; it spans oceans, mountains, and deserts, and operates with the precision of train service.

Now again in the midst of world war we come to the twenty-fifth anniversary of the air mail. Perhaps if it had not been for the present war we might have had a new air mail stamp to mark the anniversary. But as it is, we have to be contented with the ceremonies which will be held in Washington and New York, and reported elsewhere in this issue.

On May 15, 1918, a series of first flights took place between New York, Philadelphia, and Washington. A special cachet was used, Washington using black, blue, and magenta cachets; Philadelphia, blue-back; and New York, magenta and carmine. Ceremonies attended the flights both at Washington and New York, which I will try to tell as I recall them.

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At the New York end the first U.S. air mail took off from Belmont Park race track after a round of ceremonies attended by many celebrities. The ceremonies were opened by New York's Postmaster Patten. Alan R. Hawley, President of the Aero Club; Byron R. Newton, Collector of the Port of New York; Murray Hulbert, Dock Commissioner; Henry Woodhouse, of the Board of Governors of the Aero Club; Rear Admiral Bradley R. Fiske, inventor of the aerial torpedo; the postmasters of Long Island City, Far Rockaway, Flushing and Jamaica; and three French aviators were interested spectators and participants.

Postmaster Patten in his speech declared that the moment was historical in that the first flight of the aerial mail service marked a new epoch in the transmission of intelligence. A *New York Times* editorial of the day described it as "a most historical event" and predicted rural air delivery. A *Times* advertisement offered aerial delivery of the 4 A.M. City Edition delivered in Washington every day at 2:30 P.M. for \$1.70 per copy.

Lieut. Torrey H. Webb, of Gazelle, California, who was to pilot the plane, listened to the ceremonies with his young wife whom he had married only the year before. Webb's Hispano Suiza single motored J.N.4 was poised for flight as Mr. Hawley made his speech of dedication and prediction, which foresaw world-wide air mail service. The flight was scheduled to start at 11:30 A.M., and although Mr. Hawley was in the midst of his speech when that moment arrived, Lieut. Webb, with military promptitude, leaped into his seat in the plane, and started her off, leaving Mr. Hawley, a famous aeronaut in his own right, talking to an audience that had its eyes turned skyward.

The plane rose at the rate of a thousand feet a minute, favored by a light eighteen-mile tail wind. Within ten minutes Webb was out of sight and making his way southward by compass and



contact. He carried two pouches containing 2,457 pieces of air mail, including the first letter postmarked for aerial delivery from New York's Governor Whitman assuring President Wilson of New York State's support in the coming Red Cross drive. There were also letters from Postmaster Patten to President Wilson and Postmaster General Burleson, congratulating them upon the beginning of the air mail service; and a letter to Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels (today editor of his Raleigh, N. C., newspaper) in which the officers and men of the Pelham Bay Training Camp extended a "hearty invitation" from the enlisted men of the camp to attend the opening performance of an entertainment "Biff Bang" at the Century Theatre.

The rather small number of letters carried on this flight was probably due to the fact that the new 24-cent air mail stamp, which was issued on May 13th and which saw its first use on these flights, was for sale in New York only at the General Post Office, and was not put on sale at the various branch post offices until several days later. A special truck had brought the mail from the nearest Long Island Railroad station to the improvised air field at Belmont Park Race Track.

The 144 pounds of mail which Lieut. Webb carried included three parcels containing a copy of the *New York Times*, two copies of a war book by Secretary of War Newton D. Baker, and a music roll addressed to President Wilson.

The Westchester Racing Association had granted free use of the race track grounds. The Post Office Department was in complete charge of the postal arrangements, but the U.S. Army Signal Corps furnished the planes and pilots with Major R. H. Fleet in charge. (Major Fleet today is running the Consolidated Aircraft Company, which is building the giant Catalina flying boats and Liberator transports and bombers.)



Lieut. Webb safely reached Philadelphia at 12:30 P.M., landing at the suburban Bustleton air field. After a delay of only six minutes, Lieut. James C. Edgerton, who was to pilot the plane from there to Washington, took off, and he arrived at the Polo Grounds in Potomac Park at 2:50 P.M., two hundred minutes after the plane had left New York.

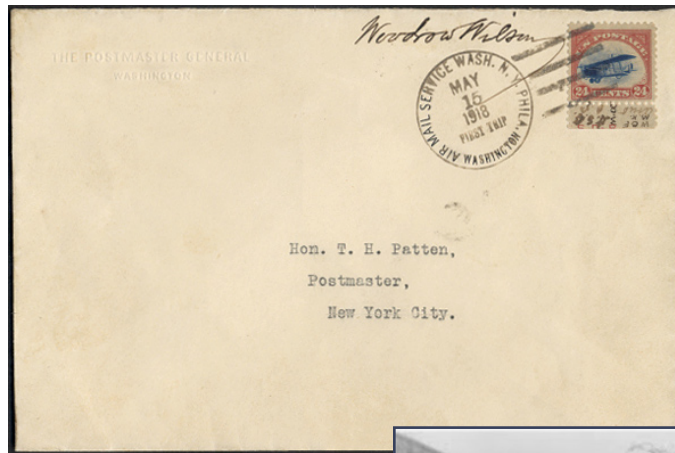
Lieut. Edgerton, incidentally, is still active in Washington today, and it was he who piloted Postmaster General James A. Farley and other celebrities over the same route during National Airmail Week in 1938.

Edgerton covered the Philadelphia-Washington lap of 144 miles in one hour, thirty-six minutes, carrying five thousand covers. When the air mail reached the district post office 190 Boy Scouts on bicycles distributed it through the city in thirty-three minutes. At Philadelphia, a committee headed by Joseph A. Steinmetz, President of the Aero Club of Philadelphia, headed the ceremonies as Lieut. Edgerton took over the controls.

In the meantime the main event, the Washington-Philadelphia-New York flight, had gotten under way in Washington, with President and Mrs. Wilson, Postmaster General Burleson, Assistant Secretary of the Navy Franklin D. Roosevelt, Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels, and Chairman of the War Industries Board Bernard M. Baruch in attendance at the take-off ceremonies. Also present were Second Assistant Postmaster General Otto Praeger, Major R. H. Fleet, John D. Ryan, Chairman of the Aircraft Board, and District Postmaster Merritt Chance.

There were no formal ceremonies, but President Wilson placed a letter in one of the bags, franked with the new 24-cent air mail stamp, over which the President had written his autograph. This cover was auctioned off June 11th for the benefit of the American Red Cross, and was bought for \$1,000 by Moah H. Tausig, President of the American Molasses Company. (See page 5.)

Lieut. G. L. Boyle was the pilot for this flight, and four bags of air mail were loaded onto his "Jenny," three for New York containing 2,500 covers for New York City, 3,000 for delivery to every section of the country, and 250 for Philadelphia.



*The cover autographed by President Wilson and carried on the First D.C. Flight; and a photograph of Wilson depositing the cover in a mail bag.*



The take-off from the Polo Grounds in Washington's Potomac Park got off to a good start, but Lieut. Boyle encountered a mishap shortly after. After a flight of only twenty-five miles, Boyle began to have compass trouble, which was later attributed to magnetism from the steel of the plane and motor. He lost his way and was forced to land at Waldorf, Maryland, which coincidentally was right near the farm of Second Assistant Postmaster General Otto Praeger. In the forced landing the propeller of the plane was broken.

The hub of this propeller, by the way, is today one of my prized possessions, having been fashioned into a clock by Harry L. Hartung, in charge of the air mail service in New York. The hub-clock bears a silver plaque from Harry L. Hartung to Mrs. Wm. A. Bartlett, Chairman of the Women's Auxiliary of the Aero Club and of the Aerial League of America. I acquired this priceless relic from Henry Woodhouse last summer.

To go on with the story of the flight, the plane was quickly repaired and flown back to Washington in the evening, while the mail load was sent back to the starting point by truck.

The mishap to Boyle's plane caused a delay of only one day in the aerial dispatch of the Washington covers, as Lieut. Edgerton, who had delivered the New York-Philadelphia first flight covers, took off from Washington at 11 :30 A.M. May 16th with an additional 703 letters cancelled May 16th and addressed to New York. A post office truck rushed the mail to a waiting Long Island Railroad special train, which rushed it to the New York Post Office at 33rd Street and Eighth Avenue; from there it was distributed at once, the last piece of mail leaving the post office around 4 P.M.

Among the items carried on this latter flight was a parcel containing a gold thimble which Mrs. Woodrow Wilson contributed to the Treasure and Trinket Fund of Mrs. Bartlett, and which was to be sold for the benefit of air service dependents affected by disaster.

Meantime, when word of Boyle's mishap had reached Philadelphia, on



1918 24¢, Sc. C3, tied by bold strike of "Air Mail Service Wash. N.Y. Phila. May 15, 1918 First Trip Washington" duplex cancel on First Day of Air Mail Service cover. The last leg of the trip, to Boston, would be by rail.



Not mentioned in the article, after the first mishap, Boyle—who was engaged to be married to the Chairman of the Interstate Commerce Commission—Was given a second chance from D.C., but went off course, ran out of gas, and eventually crashed on the grounds of the Philadelphia Country Club. The flight was then assigned to Edgerton.

the 15th, it had been decided to forward the Philadelphia-New York mail as scheduled. Lieut. Howard P. Culver arrived in New York at 3:30 P.M. The mail was sped by truck and train to New York, arriving in New York at 4:12 P.M., and distributed beginning at 4:18 P.M., beating train mail by about 75 minutes.



1918 24¢, Sc. C3, tied by "Air Mail Service New York Jun. 3, 1918 First Trip" c.d.s. on Roessler cover to Beverly Mass. This cover was a remainder, prepared for the inaugural Washington-Philadelphia-New York flight, converted for use on the New York to Boston First Flight.

Only three weeks later air mail service from New York to Boston was inaugurated, when on June 6th Lieutenant Webb again took off, landing at the Saugus estate of Godfrey Cabot, which was later to become the Franklin Park air field. Lieut. Webb also piloted the first air mail from Boston on June 9th, 1918.

In explanation of the discrepancy between the June 3rd postmark on the N.Y.-Boston first flight covers and the June 6th take-off, French Lieut. Gustav Vanel was scheduled to take off June 3rd from an army air field near Mineola, Long Island, but crashed without leaving the ground.

Air mail service was extended to Chicago experimentally on

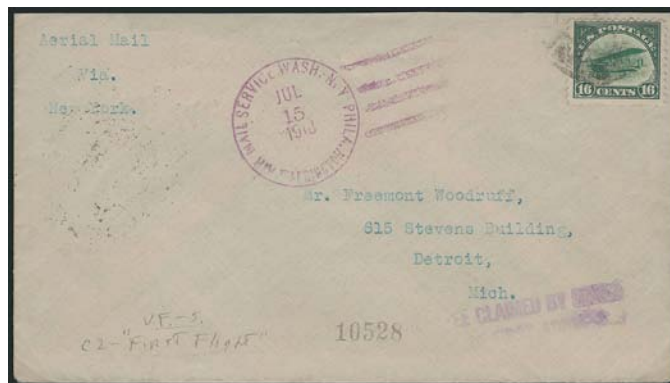


September 5, 1918 First Flight cover, New York to Chicago

Airmail pilot Max Miller (in leather gear) and Superintendent of the Airmail Service Benjamin Lipsner (holding mailbag) pose for a photograph before Miller begins his flight from New York to Chicago on September 5, 1918.



September 5th, 1918, by pilots Ed Gardner and Max Miller. Regular service between Chicago and New York was inaugurated December 18th, when the air mail rate, which had been reduced on July 15th, 1918, from 24 cents per ounce to 16 cents, was again reduced to six cents, and a new bright orange stamp was issued. The reduction to 16 cents had also been marked with a new 16¢ green stamp.



1918 16¢, Sc. C2, tied by oval cancel on first day of 16¢ rate cover, from New York to Detroit Mich., with purple "Air Mail Service Wash. N.Y. Phila. Jul. 15, 1918 Washington" cancel.