

Yesterday in U.S. Stamp News: **“Bad Luck” Boyle**

by A. Don Jones

(From *U.S. Stamps & Postal History*, Spring 1992, with images added)

(*U.S. Stamps & Postal History* was the forerunner to *U.S. Stamp News*, and was merged into *USSN* when I started *USSN* and acquired *USS&PH* in 1995. JFD.)

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Would America’s first scheduled air mail flight make it through to Philadelphia? Not if George Leroy Boyle had anything to do with it.

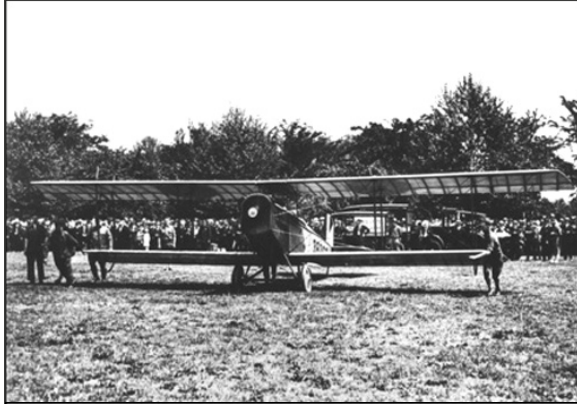
It may seem strange to the outsider to hear highly skilled pilots speak of “luck,” whether it be good or bad. But if you think of what aviators do and the intensive training that they have undergone in order to perform their “three-dimensional driving,” then you begin to realize that their skills are a given and that which remains is common sense; and yes, “luck.”

Many pilots, whether carrying mail or not, have experienced good and bad luck.

One of the most famous of those “good luck” pilots was Charles Augustus Lindbergh. Lindbergh was the beneficiary of an inordinate amount of good luck when he made the first solo flight across the Atlantic Ocean in 1927. He initially used all of his learned skills in planning the flight, especially in understanding the weather patterns and determining his course and time of flight to coincide with barometric high and low pressure areas, so he could take advantage of the associated wind currents. This planning took skill. If the weather patterns did or didn’t change after he was airborne, that was luck.

Another early American aviator, George LeRoy Boyle, was truly at the opposite end of the aeronautical “luck” spectrum.

Boyle was the pilot who was to make the first scheduled air mail flight from Washington, D.C. to Philadelphia on May 15, 1918. Much of the mail he was carrying was



Left, the ground crew positioning Boyle's plane for his historic First Flight;

Below, the plane just before lift-off—and just minutes before it crash-landed in Maryland.



Major Reuben Fleet on the left briefs airmail pilot Lt. George Boyle before Boyle begins his flight on May 15, 1918. It didn't help. Boyle still got lost.



Left to right: Otto Praeger, Second Assistant Postmaster General, Merritt O. Chance, Postmaster, Washington, D.C., Albert S. Burlison, Postmaster General, President Woodrow Wilson before the First Air Mail Flight from Washington, D.C.



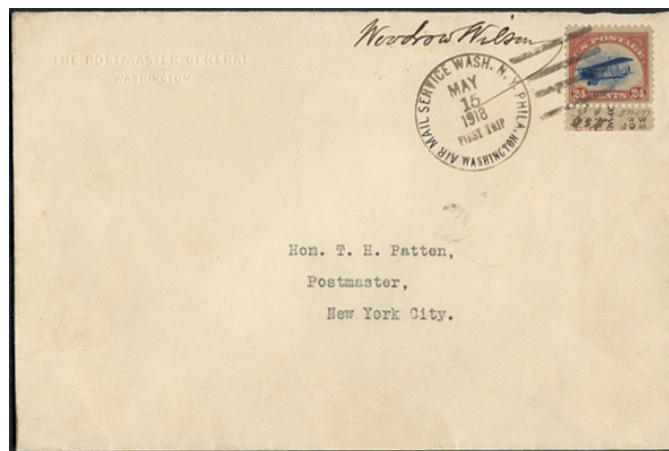
franked with some of America's first air mail stamps. His "luck" started running bad before he ever left the ground: the ground crew forgot to refuel his aircraft after it was flown from Philadelphia to Washington, landing only 35 minutes before Boyle's takeoff with the air mail.

After the error was discovered and corrected (about 15 minutes later), Boyle took off, but instead of arriving in

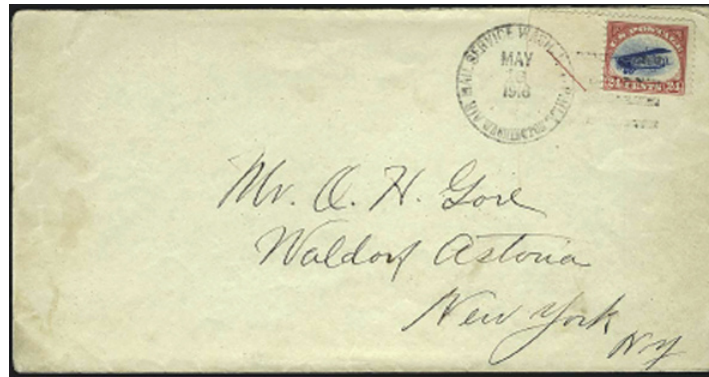
Philadelphia as planned, he became disoriented and crashed his aircraft near Waldorf, Maryland. The mail from the aborted flight was returned to Washington that night and flown to Philadelphia on the following day, May 16, 1918.



Two covers carried on the First Flight from D.C.: top, a Roessler cacheted cover with Washington-Franklin heads instead of a C3; bottom, a cover with the 24¢ carmine rose & blue, Sc. C3. Both covers bear strikes of the "Air Mail Service Wash. N.Y. Phila./Washington" May 15, 1918 duplex cancel.



A cover autographed by President Wilson and carried on the First D.C. Flight. At <http://www.airspacemag.com/video/The-First-Day-of-Airmail-1918.html> you can enjoy a silent film showing pre-flight events, preparation and the take-off, including footage of President Wilson depositing this cover in the flight mail bag.



A cover carried on the May 16, 1918 Second Day flight, also piloted by George Boyle.

On May 16, 1918, Boyle had what may be construed as good luck by being given a second chance to fly the mail from Washington to Philadelphia. Boyle was instructed to “...keep the Chesapeake Bay on your right...” This he did, and with a great deal of concentration. After he was escorted by another aircraft from Washington to a point about ten miles south of Washington, Boyle signaled that he was okay and on course for Philadelphia. After that, he followed his instructions to the letter—keeping Chesapeake Bay on his right wing as he passed Baltimore, Havre de Grace, Chestertown, Easton, and Salisbury, Maryland, landing with his fuel supply exhausted at Cape Charles, Virginia! He had forgotten that the Chesapeake was a rather gigantic bay, not a river.



This map shows how Boyle could have taken off heading north from Washington and landed in Cape Charles, Va.—simply by keeping Chesapeake Bay (arrow) on his right!

After enlisting the aid of the local residents, Boyle refueled his aircraft, was given instructions on how to get to Philadelphia (again?) and took off.

And again, he experienced bad luck by running out of gas and crashing at the Philadelphia Country Club, only a few miles from his intended destination.

Lindbergh attained fame with his good luck while Boyle was never able to set aside his bad luck.

You are reading the first issue of *U.S. Stamps & Postal History*. The staff has all the learned skills

and common sense to produce a quality publication. It is only logical to wish them the best of—yes—luck.

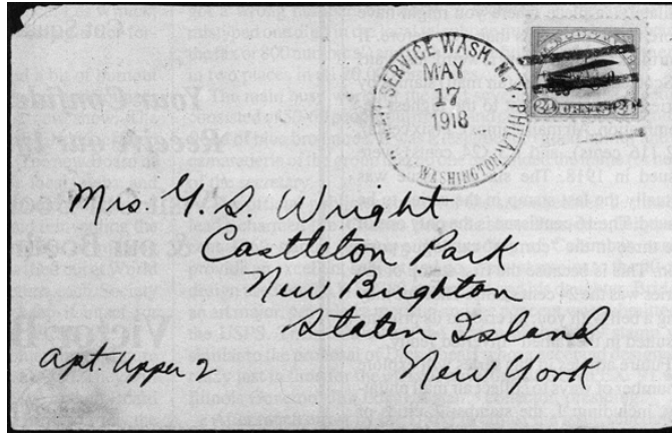
Why George Boyle?

As part of my research on this tale, here is what we learn about George Boyle, from

<http://www.airmailpioneers.org/history/Sagahistory.htm>

“Careful preliminary study and consideration had been given this new undertaking and on May 15, 1918, the first air mail route in the United States was established between New York, N.Y., and Washington, D.C., with a stop at Philadelphia, Pa., for the exchange of mails or plane. The distance of the route was approximately 218 miles and the frequency of service was one round trip daily, except Sunday. This service was inaugurated with the cooperation of the War Department, which furnished the planes and pilots and conducted the flying and maintenance operations, the Post Office Department handling the mail and matters relating thereto....

“The young lieutenant [George Boyle] was engaged to marry Margaret McChord, whose father was chairman of the Interstate Commerce Commission, and postal officials wanted this powerful family on their side. [Major Reuben Fleet, in charge of Army pilots] argued against [rookie pilot] Boyle but lost.”



From the USS&PH article, a cover carried on the May 17, 1918 flight that almost made it to its intended Philadelphia destination.