

The Post Office announcement said it was a complete success. The real story is different—and much more interesting.

The Day the Airmail Started

BY C. V. GLINES

MAY 15, 1918, was a day some wanted to forget. The story begins with Maj. Reuben H. Fleet, then Col. Henry H. "Hap" Arnold's officer in charge of training pilots at thirty-four Army Air Service fields in the United States. His primary responsibility was to make combat pilots out of carpenters and college students and get them to France. There were not enough barracks, classrooms, instructors, or airplanes. There were too many training accidents. The British-designed de Havilland DH-4 trainers were flimsy and underpowered.

Major Fleet (who one day would own his own aircraft company) had no reason to be concerned when he saw a War Department order dated May 3, 1918, that directed the young Air Service "to inaugurate an Aerial Mail Service between Washington, D. C., and New York beginning May 15th."

Major Fleet was at work in his Washington office on May 6 when he was summoned by Secretary of War Newton D. Baker. Major Fleet, the Secretary revealed, had been chosen to get the airmail started. He was to pull together airplanes and pilots and begin daily operations on a Washington-Philadelphia-New York circuit. The first flight would leave Washington at 11 a.m. on May 15. President and Mrs. Wilson would be there for the takeoff.

"I was dumbfounded," Major Fleet confessed many years later. "I didn't know how to tell this man who knew nothing about airplanes that he was giving me an almost impossible task. I said, 'Mr. Secretary, with all due respect, we don't have any airplanes that can fly from Washington to Philadelphia to New York. The best plane



The first "regular airmail" is loaded for delivery to Philadelphia. Despite technical problems, Maj. Reuben H. Fleet, flying a modified Curtiss JN-6H from Bustleton Field near Philadelphia to Washington, D. C., arrived as scheduled.

we have is the Curtiss JN-6H, and it will fly only an hour and twenty minutes. Its maximum range is eighty-eight miles at sixty-six mph.' "

Major Fleet explained that the "Jenny" was only a trainer, had dual controls for student and instructor, and had no baggage compartment for mail. There was a shortage of experienced pilots, few had any cross-country experience, no maps except road maps were available, and good mechanics were extremely rare.

Secretary Baker listened to this unwelcome recitation and sent Major Fleet to repeat it to Postmaster General Albert S. Burluson. The Postmaster was not sympathet-

ic. He had already announced that Army Aerial Mail Service would begin May 15, he said, "and it's going to start, even if your pilots have to land in cow pastures every few miles."

"Leave the Front Seat Out"

Major Fleet departed and hurriedly called Col. Edwin A. Deeds, Chief of Air Service Production. He asked him to order six JN6Hs from the Curtiss Aeroplane and Motor Co. at Garden City, Long Island. "Tell them to

Lt. George L. Boyle, carrying the first official load of airmail, takes off from Potomac Park in Washington, D. C., in the modified Jenny delivered by Major Fleet. Lieutenant Boyle got as far as Waldorf, Md., twenty miles southeast of Washington; another pilot flew the mail to Philadelphia the next day.



leave the front seat out, and the front set of controls," he said. "In the front seat space, have them make a hopper or compartment up there to carry mailbags." To the fast-moving, energetic Colonel Deeds, this didn't sound impossible.

"But there's more," Major Fleet said. "I've got to have double the fuel and oil tank capacity, and we need those ships in eight days!"

When Colonel Deeds contacted the Curtiss factory, its engineers proposed doubling the fuel and oil capacity merely by hooking two nineteen-gallon gas tanks and two twelve-gallon oil tanks in tandem. Test flights proved that the modifications worked.

Major Fleet next contacted Maj. August Belmont, President of the Belmont Park Race Track on Long Island, and asked permission to use the park as the New York terminus of the mail operation. This was done to prevent interference with training of Army pilots at nearby Mineola Field.

The problem that most troubled Major Fleet was finding capable pilots. He needed six and was told to choose four from whatever source he pleased. The Post Office Department would choose the other two.

Major Fleet chose Lts. Howard P. Culver, Torrey H. Webb, Walter Miller, and Stephen Bonsal. The Post Office Department made arrangements with the War Department to have Lts. James C. Edgerton and George L. Boyle detailed to the duty.

Major Fleet soon understood why these men were chosen. Lieutenant Edgerton's father was purchasing agent for the Post Office Department. Lieutenant Boyle's prospective father-in-law was an Interstate

Commerce Commissioner who "had saved the parcel post for the Post Office Department" from private express companies fighting the government in court. Both young men had just graduated from flying school at Ellington Field, Tex., and had little experience flying out of sight of their training field.

Major Fleet knew that, even if the aircraft functioned perfectly, the operation would depend on good piloting. He was furious when he learned that Lieutenant Boyle was to have the honor of flying the first mail from Wash-

ington to Philadelphia and Lieutenant Edgerton was to fly it from Philadelphia to the nation's capital.

Major Fleet was told he had no choice in the matter. On May 13, he took the train to New York with five of the six pilots, having left Lieutenant Boyle in Washington. At the Curtiss factory, mechanics, engineers, and pilots worked around the clock to get the six planes into shape. By the afternoon of May 14, only two were ready. Leaving Lieutenant Webb in charge of preparing the other four planes, Major Fleet commandeered an unmodified Jenny, knowing it didn't have enough range to make the trip to Bustleton Field outside Philadelphia.

In the late afternoon of May 14, Major Fleet left Belmont Park with Lieutenants Culver and Edgerton following closely. Major Fleet describes the flight:

"The weather was frightful; it was so foggy we pilots couldn't see each other after we left the ground. Even the masts of the boats in the New York harbor were sticking up into the clouds.

"I climbed through the fog and came out at 11,000 feet, almost the absolute ceiling of the plane. I flew south guided only by a magnetic compass and the sun until I ran out of gas and the engine quit. Since I had the Jenny without the extra gas tank, it wasn't any surprise. There was nothing I could do but ride the Jenny down and hope that I landed near a source of gas."

Flying on Tractor Gas

"I broke out of the clouds at 3,000 feet over lush farmland, so I just picked out a nice pasture and landed. A farmer sold me a five-gallon milk can of tractor gas, but I had trouble getting it in the tank without a funnel.

Perhaps three gallons got in the tank and the rest all over me, but darkness was coming, and I couldn't wait while he got more from town. I asked him to point out where Philadelphia was and took off.

"Two miles from Bustleton Field I ran out of gas again and landed in a meadow. I persuaded a farmer to drive me to Bustleton. Culver and Edgerton had just arrived, so I sent Culver with some gas to get my plane and fly it in.

"There were so many things wrong with the modified planes and their engines that we worked all night to get them in safe flying condition. One gas tank had a large hole in it, and we plugged it up with an ordinary lead pencil.

"Next morning, at 8:40 a.m., I took off for Washington, where I landed at 10:35 at the polo field in Potomac Park. The mail was due to start twenty-five minutes later."

While Major Fleet had been worrying about operational details, Army Capt. Benjamin B. Lipsner was concerned about administrative details at the Washington end. Not a pilot, he had volunteered to be the superintendent of operations when he heard the Army was going to be responsible for getting the project started.

On the morning of May 15, he was waiting nervously at Potomac Park for Major Fleet. Although he felt sure he had solved all the nonflying problems, he was worried because President and Mrs. Wilson and other VIPs had been invited to witness the historic takeoff of "the first plane in history to carry mail at an announced time to and from designated places on a regular schedule irrespective of weather," according to the Post Office press release.

The plan for the inaugural flights was uncomplicated. After Major Fleet arrived, the mail was to be loaded aboard his plane, and Lieutenant Boyle was to depart in it for Philadelphia, 133 miles away, at precisely 11 a.m. He was to pass his mail to Lieutenant Culver, who would fly it the remaining 100-plus miles to Belmont Park. At 11:30 a.m., Lieutenant Webb was to leave Belmont for Philadelphia and turn over his pouches to Lieutenant Edgerton. The other two pilots would be kept in reserve, and all pilots would share flying duties on succeeding days in order to maintain a six-day-a-week schedule until the experiment was completed.

Nothing to Worry About

The minutes ticked by, and no plane arrived. Captain Lipsner chatted nervously with Sgt. E. F. Waters, one of the mechanics assigned to service the planes at the polo field.

At 10:30, Major Fleet's plane came into sight. It circled once, then landed. "Where's Lieutenant Boyle?" he asked, as he climbed out of the cockpit. Lieutenant Boyle approached the plane with Margaret McChord, his fiancée, and introduced her.

"We haven't got much time," Major Fleet said. "The President will be here any minute." He handed a road map to Lieutenant Boyle. "Here, Boyle, I'll show you how to get to Philly," he said.

While the two pilots talked, mechanics checked the plane's fabric and wire braces. Second Assistant Postmaster General Otto Praeger pushed through the crowd and asked if everything was all right. Captain

Lipsner assured him there was nothing to worry about. Just then, a line of cars chugged across the polo field. Secret Service agents were standing on the running boards. The lead car parked beside the plane. President and Mrs. Wilson stepped out to applause from the crowd. The President shook hands with the two pilots.

The mail trucks arrived. Washington Postmaster Merritt Chance held one of the mailbags open as President Wilson dropped in a letter addressed to New York Postmaster Thomas G. Patten. The President had written his name across the stamp. This historic letter was to be auctioned off in New York for the benefit of the Red Cross as part of a drive for wartime funds.

Major Fleet, who stood on the sidelines, assumed that Captain Lipsner was refueling the Jenny. He was concerned about the polo field used as the Washington terminus for the experiment. The area available was about 900 feet long and 400 feet wide. Trees at each end towered sixty feet high.

When the formalities were complete and the bags placed in the plane, Lieutenant Boyle strapped himself in and yelled, "Switch off!" Sergeant Waters twisted the propeller three times, then yelled "Contact!"

Lieutenant Boyle turned the switch on and Sergeant Waters gave the prop a mighty swing. The 150-h.p. Hispano-Suiza engine coughed once and died. Sergeant Waters tried again. And again. And again.

Major Fleet, standing nearby, quickly thought over the reasons why an engine that had worked so well would refuse to start after less than a half hour on the ground. He ordered Sergeant Waters to check the plugs. Nothing wrong there. He overheard President Wilson whisper to Mrs. Wilson, "We're losing a lot of time here."

Major Fleet then realized what the trouble was. "Sergeant, check the gas tank!"

Sergeant Waters, red-faced, dipped a stick in the tank, probably knowing what he would find. Major Fleet rushed to a nearby truck, grabbed two cans of gas, and handed them to Sergeant Waters. Sergeant Waters drained the cans into the tank, added more, and checked the level. Satisfied, he spun the prop, and the engine roared into life. Everyone, including the President, smiled in relief.

Major Fleet patted Lieutenant Boyle on the back and signaled for the chocks to be removed. Lieutenant Boyle taxied away from the crowd, turned into the wind, and lifted off smoothly. Leveling off slightly, he gained flying speed but not altitude. He was heading for the tall trees at the end of the field!

The crowd gasped. Lieutenant Boyle eased back on the stick, missed the treetops by inches, and disappeared from sight. The airmail was on its way.

The President and his party climbed back into their cars and the crowd dispersed, except a few who waited for Lieutenant Edgerton to arrive with the first inbound mail. Everything had proceeded as the Post Office press release said it would. Almost everything, that is.

Midair Confusion

Lieutenant Boyle had taken off heading north toward Philadelphia but, apparently confused by the railroad tracks leading out of Washington, had turned in the opposite direction soon after.

Captain Lipsner, who had returned to his office, had received a call telling him that Lieutenant Webb had landed at Philadelphia and turned over his pouch to Lieutenant Edgerton. Next should be a call from Lieutenant Boyle announcing his arrival in Philadelphia.

Lieutenant Boyle's call came all right—but not from Philadelphia. He was on the ground at Waldorf, Md., having landed in a field because his compass was off. The airplane had nosed over, and it would take some time to fix the propeller. The mail was on its way back by truck.

Captain Lipsner was livid, but there was nothing he could do. After nearly running out of gas, Lieutenant Boyle had landed twenty miles southeast of Washington. Ironically, he had landed next door to the rural home of Otto Praeger, the Postal Service official. He had become the nation's first official scheduled airmail pilot—but also the first to get lost and the first to have an accident.

Lieutenant Boyle's mailbags were sent north the next day by air. The press was too busy with war news to follow up on Lieutenant Boyle's flight, and the Post Office Department declared the airmail's first day a complete success.

Although no one else seemed to worry about Lieutenant Boyle's flying skill, Major Fleet was very concerned. He tried to get a replacement pilot, but the Post Office hierarchy asked that Lieutenant Boyle be given a second chance. Two days later, Lieutenant Boyle took off again, this time with Major Fleet flying ahead in a training Jenny to make sure Lieutenant Boyle was on course. About forty miles north of Washington, Major Fleet waved to Lieutenant Boyle and peeled off to return to Washington.

An hour later, Lieutenant Boyle, lost again, landed near the mouth of the Chesapeake Bay. He quickly obtained some tractor gas from a farmer and took off. He became disoriented again and crashed near the Philadelphia Country Club, only a few miles from his destination.

The Post Office Department requested that Lieuten-



Major Fleet (shown here upon arrival from Philadelphia, with his map still strapped to his leg) was given twelve days to get the airmail system running. Good maps, pilots, and mechanics were rare, and no plane available had the necessary range.



At Potomac Park for the historic first flight of regular scheduled airmail were (from left) Otto Praeger, Assistant Postmaster General; M. O. Chance, Postmaster of Washington, D. C.; A. S. Burleson, Postmaster General; and President Woodrow Wilson.

ant Boyle be given a third chance, but Major Fleet refused, and Secretary Baker backed him up. Lieutenant Boyle never flew the mail again.

Lieutenant Edgerton never experienced these difficulties. He served during the entire three-month experiment without mishap.

Fifty years later, Major Fleet maintained that Lieutenant Boyle should not be criticized too severely. He said:

"There were no maps of much value to airmen in those days. Maj. E. Lester Jones, Chief of the Geodetic Survey Office, made up maps for the airmail pilots. The official state maps of New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware, and Maryland were all of different scales and showed only political divisions with nothing of a physical nature except cities, towns, rivers, harbors, etc. We had to fold large maps of the United States in a 'strip' in order to have everything on a uniform scale. Naturally, these contained little detail.

"In addition to poor maps, the magnetic compass in any airplane was highly inaccurate and was affected by everything metal on the airplane. Pilots had to have a sixth sense about navigating, and many didn't acquire this until they had flown a long time. Lieutenant Boyle simply didn't have enough training to do the job."

On Saturday, August 10, 1918, the airmail pilots made their final trips, and the experiment ended. The Post Office Department acquired its own planes, hired its own pilots, and continued airmail service until 1927, when private contractors took over.

Despite the snafus at the beginning, the Air Service pilots turned in a commendable record: Ninety-six percent of the flights were completed. A total of 40,500 pounds of mail was transported on 270 flights. The pilots had flown 421.5 hours and had "only" sixteen forced landings due to mechanical malfunctions. ■

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