

This Day in History... August 12, 1918

U.S. Post Offices Takes Over Airmail Flights

On August 12, 1918, the US Post Office Department took over control of airmail service from the US Army Air Service. Under the Post Office Department, the service flourished, leading to transcontinental airmail service, which was eventually taken over by private companies.

In the early 1900s, aviation advanced quickly. For nearly a decade, it was debated if planes could be used to deliver the mail. Then in 1918, when the world was at war, the US postmaster general announced that airmail service would begin between New York City, Philadelphia, and Washington, DC. Critics argued that every available resource was needed to win the war – including planes and pilots.

But the postmaster brokered a deal with the War Department on March 1, 1918, that

satisfied a very important military issue. Experienced pilots were scarce. America's most seasoned pilots were serving overseas, leaving few opportunities for training new recruits. Under the new arrangement, the Postal Department would handle their traditional tasks and the military would provide the planes and pilots. Americans would have a rapid system of mail transportation, and military pilots would receive badly needed flight training.

This stamp was issued on July 11, 1918, for the new 16¢ airmail rate.



It was these pilots that flew America's first airmail on May 15, 1918. They continued to fly it for the next three months. The US Army Air Service (USAAS) made their last airmail flight on August 10, 1918. On August 12, the Post Office Department officially assumed control of airmail flight operations. They appointed Benjamin B. Lipsner to lead the civilian-operated Airmail service. Lipsner had retired from the USAAS for this job.

Lipsner hired the first four civilian airmail pilots. They were required to have at least 1,000 hours of flying experience. The Post Office also moved the service from Washington, DC's Polo Grounds to Maryland's College Park. The pilots flew de Havilland DH-4s and Stand Aircraft Company JR-1Bs. During its first year, the Post Office hired 40 pilots who flew 1,208 airmail flights with 90 forced landings. By 1920, they delivered 49 million letters.

Issued for the 8¢ single-zone rate.



Airmail service cost the Post Office about \$64.80 for each hour a plane was in the air. The pilots received \$3,600 per year plus another five to seven cents for each mile they flew, for about five to six hours each day. The post office revenues from that first year were \$162,000, while the cost had been \$143,000 – that would be the only year the service showed a profit.

Early on, banks were the service's best customers, sending checks and financial papers. The Post Office reduced rates twice in 1918 to encourage more people to use the service, and dropped the extra charge for airmail in July 1919. Cross-country airmail began in September 1920. However, the planes only flew during the day, with trains transporting the mail between airfields at night. This method took over four days to move letters across the country.

Pictures a de Havilland biplane and paid the 24¢ cross-country airmail rate.



New innovations followed to help light pilots' paths at night, so that regularly scheduled transcontinental airmail service could begin on July 1, 1924. Airmail stamps were reinstated, with the service costing eight cents for each "zone" it traveled to, with letters across the country costing 24¢. By this time, airmail could travel from New York to San Francisco within 34 hours. In 1925, the Post Office began contracting airmail flights to private companies, bringing an end to this brief era of Post Office-flown airmail.



The first airmail stamp, issued on May 13, 1918.



Issued on December 10, 1918, for the new reduced 6¢ rate.



Paid the postage for an airmail letter of one ounce or less covering two zones.



Paid for the 10¢ rate for contract airmail service beginning in 1926.

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