

Airplane mail: An historic flight in far-off India

By KEN WOOD

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We have now reached that part of our story of man's adventure into the air when flight and postal affairs begin to come together.

Although mail had already been carried by an aircraft, notably by balloon out of besieged Paris during the 1870-71 Franco-Prussian War, and occasionally, letters had reportedly been carried by an airplane, we now enter the era of Post Office-authorized airplane mail.

By 1911, the airplane had reached a stage of development where it was a reasonably reliable means of transport. Speeds were approaching 100 mph, altitude reached 12,000 feet, and the distance record stood at 460 miles.

The airplane was also sputtering in the skies of areas far removed from the world's aviation center. The first airplane flights had already been made in Africa, South America, Asia, Australia, and New Zealand, and flying meets were being held at various cities around the world.

The stage was thus set for postal authorities to begin looking with some interest at the possibilities of carrying mail by air on an official basis.

Demonstration flight

Strangely, the first official instance where the public could send letters by airplane was not in North America or Europe, where aviation was in its most developed form, but in far-off India.

The site was the United Provinces Exhibition in Allahabad and the date Feb. 18, 1911. A British officer, Walter G. Windham had been invited by the governor of the United Provinces to bring airplanes and pilots from Britain to the exhibition in order to demonstrate heavier-than-air flight, according to Holmes.

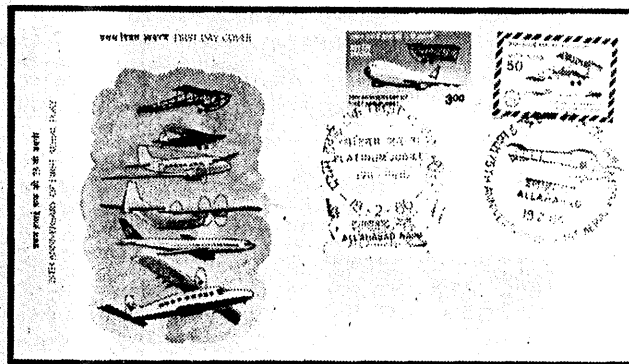
He arrived with two pilots, the Frenchman Henri Pequet and an Englishman named Keith Davis, plus eight air-



These stamps bear the spectacular cancel of the Allahabad flight.



India's 1961 set honoring the flight's 50th anniversary.



A first-day cover of the two stamps issued by India on Feb. 18 to mark the 75th anniversary of the Allahabad flight.

craft comprising two Humber-Sommer biplanes of the Farman type and six Bleriot monoplanes.

Several demonstration flights were made beginning in December 1910, when Pequet is said to have made the first airplane flight in India.

Just who originated the idea of a mail-carrying flight is not clear. Holmes states that the chaplain of Holy Trinity Church in Allahabad appealed for help in raising money for a new hostel, and Windham came up with the idea of carrying mail with a surcharge to benefit the hostel fund.

Kronstein notes that the surcharge on mail to be carried on the proposed flight

was imposed in order to restrict the amount of mail to what the aircraft was able to carry, although he does indicate that it was donated to the "Oxford and Cambridge Hostel."

In any event, Windham and the postmaster general of the United Provinces, Sir Geoffrey Clarke, arranged an official mail-carrying flight from the exhibition grounds to Nairni, a distance of about five miles across the Jamuna River.

A special cancelation was designed by Windham and made by the Post Office. It was a spectacular double ring circular affair with "FIRST AERIAL POST — U. P. EXHIBITION ALLAHABAD" between the rings and a side view of the Humber-Sommer aircraft flying over mountains in the center. It was applied in a bright magenta ink. The canceler is reported to have been destroyed immediately after the flight took place.

The flight was advertised to be made on Feb. 20, but for some reason it was moved forward to Feb. 18.

Attentive audience

Interest was intense among Indians, because of a legend claiming that the earth would come to an end 1,000 years after a man came flying, and a crowd of several thousand, including the UP governor, Sir John Hewett, and his wife watched the takeoff.

Pequet lifted his airplane off the exhibition ground at 5:30 p.m. on Feb 18, and within 13 minutes he had made history by landing at Nairni, where the mail was handed over to postal of-

ficials for onward transmission.

Within another 30 minutes he had made the return flight to the exhibition.

The mail is reported to have included both letters and a special postcard depicting the aircraft and Pequet's signature.

The postcards cost one rupee, which is reported to have gone to the hostel fund, while there was a six-annas surcharge on letters, which also went to the hostel. A total of 6,500 pieces of mail, including some registered letters, was carried.

Kronstein quotes the Field airpost catalog as reporting a total of 40 postcards, of which about 12 were known to survive. However, he also cites Feb. 19 reports from Allahabad that note that Pequet signed at least 400 cards. *The American Air Mail Catalogue* notes that about 40 postcards in a larger size were signed, which may explain the apparent inconsistency.

This landmark flight in the history of aviation and air

mail has been twice commemorated by India with special stamp issues.

On Feb. 18, 1961, the 50th anniversary of the flight was marked with a set of three stamps picturing the aircraft, reproducing the special cancel, and showing a Boeing 707 jet airliner.

The second issue came on Feb. 18, 1986, and commemorated the flight's 75th anniversary with two stamps, which also show Pequet's aircraft and modern jet airliners. □

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