

## The United States Post Office Aviation Hall of Fame

By Henry M. Holden

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Inaugurated in the early 20th Century, airmail was a premium service which required paying special postal rates. U.S. airmail stamps document the early history of commercial aviation - from biplanes to Zeppelins, flying boats, and jets.



*Germany operated a transatlantic Zeppelin passenger service and depending on the route, a one-ounce letter cost \$0.65. to \$2.60. The Hindenburg disaster in Lakehurst N.J. in 1937 ended that type air travel.*

In the Early years of commercial aviation, the revenue from airmail was used to subsidize the airlines who were losing money on the inefficient passenger aircraft.

It took a few years for the post office to realize that certain kinds of stamps were not only to pay postage with but many of the stamps were done so well artistically that people would collect them and build stamp albums where uncanceled stamps would grow in value.

Between 1917 and 1918, there were four airmail stamps issued. One of them was a printing error, where the airplane, a JN-4 Jenny was printed upside down. Today these uncanceled stamps would garner thousands of dollars.

Between 1920 and 1929, eight airmail stamps were issued. As the popularity of airmail began to grow, and the successful solo transatlantic flight of Charles Lindbergh more commemorative stamps were issued. The decade between 1930 and 1939 which some called the "Golden Age of Aviation" saw 15 airmail stamps issued.

In the decade that followed the world went to war. Twenty-one stamps were issued with one stamp being issued in seven different colors.

Things began to slow down in the decade of the 1950s with 12 airmail stamps issued.

Things picked up in the 1960s with 20 stamps issued. The end of that decade saw an airmail stamp acknowledging the first man on the Moon. Many more space-related stamps would follow.

In the 1970s 14 airmail stamps were issued but instead of featuring airplanes or famous aviation people, Mount Rushmore, the Statue of Liberty and other non-aviation related people and places became part of the philatelic landscape. Only seven stamps featuring airplanes made the hall of fame that year.

In October 1903, Samuel P. Langley made two failed attempts at powered flight in his Aerodrome, from a houseboat on the Potomac River. Langley received \$50,000 from Congress to develop his aeroplane, and his years of experiments provided inspiration for later innovators, including the Wright brothers, Glenn L. Martin and Glenn Curtiss.



*In May 1988, eighty-five years after Langley's failed attempts at controlled powered flight, Langley was honored on a postage stamp.*

On Sept. 25, 1911, Postmaster General Frank Hitchcock presided over the first airmail flight, 1.7 miles from Garden City, N.Y., to Mineola, on Long Island, N.Y. A year later, the first aviation stamp, a 20-cent parcel post stamp, was released. It coincided with the first unofficial airmail flight in the nation from one post office to another, South Amboy, to Perth Amboy, in New Jersey, a leap of 3.8 miles.



*The stamp showed a Curtiss Model D pusher flying over a mountainous area—hardly realistic for the fragile, near-skeleton of a plane.*

In 1917, Congress appropriated \$100,000 for an airmail service. The first airmail stamp - a 24-cent stamp that covered postage from New York to Washington, - was issued in May 1918. The new stamp was supposed to promote airmail. The rate was 24 cents per ounce, and the stamp received a great amount of publicity—more publicity than many stamps that followed. The stamp pictured a Curtiss Jenny JN-4 that carried the mail. It is widely recognized today because a pane of 100 was accidentally printed and sold with the plane inverted.



*The Post Office reissued the JN-4 Jenny stamp in 1997; at that time, the plane was flying straight and level.*

New airmail stamps appeared irregularly at first, usually to commemorate a historical event. An 8-cent stamp, appearing in 1923, featured an airplane radiator and a wooden propeller, acknowledging the famous, although unreliable Liberty engine.



Also, in 1923, a de Havilland biplane was pictured on a 24-cent stamp, one of the few times foreign-built aircraft appeared on a U.S. stamp. The Jenny and de Havilland were mainstays of airmail until William Boeing and Donald Douglas introduced their mailplanes.



*De Havilland DH-4*

On July 1, 1924, regular airmail service across the country was established. Airmail was divided into three zones: New York to Chicago, Il. Chicago to Cheyenne, Wy. and Cheyenne to San Francisco, CA. Mailing a letter cost eight cents per zone, so stamps were issued in denominations of 8, 16, and 24.

In February of 1926, the Post Office contracted private companies to distribute airmail. Three stamps were issued for use on these contract airmail routes (CAMs), each depicting the U.S. map.

Charles Lindbergh's historical flight in May 1927 inspired one of the most popular airmail stamps issued, which featured his plane, the Spirit of St. Louis.



*In 1927, more than 20.3 million copies of the Spirit of St. Louis stamp were issued.*



*Fifty years later the flight was honored again.*



*The cost of airmail was reduced in 1928, and two new stamps were issued: Beacon on Sherman Hill and the Winged Globe.*



By the time of the International Aeronautical Conference in Washington, D.C., in December 1928, high and low-wing monoplanes were in use, but the Post Office chose to mark the conference event with a stamp picturing the Wright brothers' Flyer. Over the years, the Flyer has appeared on six stamps. The Wright brothers themselves were first honored on a stamp in 1949, and again on a matched set of stamps in 1976.



This stamp was issued on December 17, 1949, forty-six years to the day after the first flight and shortly after Orville's death.

Airmail service across the Pacific was taken over by the Post Office Department in November 1935, and Pan Am was chosen as the carrier. A stamp was issued for the three trans-Pacific zones: San Francisco to Hawaii, Hawaii to Guam, and Guam to the Philippine Islands. It originally cost 25 cents per zone.



*In 1937, a 20-cent stamp was issued and the cost of mailing a letter from the mainland U.S. to the Philippine Islands was reduced. A 50-cent stamp was issued to cover the cost when airmail was extended to Hong Kong.*



*The Boeing 314 Clipper ships were the mainstay of transpacific airmail and passenger service until the outbreak of World War II. The Martin 314 first flew in November 1935, inaugurating transpacific airmail. A stamp commemorated the event in 1935, and the Clipper appeared again in 1997, as part of the Classic American Aircraft commemorative sheet. On that sheet were also the Ford Tri-Motor, the Lockheed Constellation, the Douglas DC-3 and the Jenny.*

Cross-Atlantic airmail began on May 20, 1939, as Pan Am delivered mail from New York to Marseilles, France, traveling through Portugal on the way. Although this service didn't last long because of World War II, a 30-cent stamp was issued specifically for this route.

Between June 25, 1941, and October 29, 1941, a tri-tailed "Twin Motored Transport Plane" was featured on U.S. airmail stamps in 6-, 8-, 10-, 15-, 20- 30 and 50-cent denominations. Each denomination appeared in a different color. The actual plane was only an artist's conception and is an amalgam of several different designs, but apparently largely based on the Douglas DC-3 aircraft, the Lockheed Electra, and the Beech 18.



*Two of the seven variations of this airplane that never was.*

After World War II, many commemorative stamps were released, such as a stamp to honor the 75th anniversary of the Universal Postal Union in 1949 and another to honor the 50th anniversary of airmail service in 1968.



*The stamp on the left was issued in October 1949 celebrating the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Universal Postal Union. The stamp on the right came out a month later featuring Boeing's Stratocruiser.*

As new airplanes were built, some found their way onto stamps, but many did not. The same was true for famous aviators. Women and African Americans have been part of aviation from its earliest days, yet only a few of either have made this hall of fame.

Although domestic air mail became obsolete in 1975, and international air mail in 1995, when the USPS began transporting First Class mail by air on a routine basis the commemorative commercial aviation stamps continued. .

Amelia Earhart, probably the world's most famous female pilot, showed up twice; her Lockheed Electra was in the background on her first stamp. Blanche Stuart Scott was the first American woman to solo in 1910; Scott's 1910 Curtiss pusher was in the background on her stamp, which appeared in 1980. Glenn Curtiss was honored with a stamp that same year.



*Amelia Earhart*



*Blanch Stuart Scott*



*Glenn Curtiss*

Harriet Quimby, the first American woman licensed as a pilot in August 1911, appeared on a 50-cent airmail stamp in April 1991. Quimby had been scheduled to fly

the first airmail from Boston to New York in 1912 but was killed in an airplane accident the day before she was to fly the mail.



*Harriet Quimby*

Bessie Coleman was the first African American in the United States to earn a pilot's license. Because of racial discrimination at home, Coleman took her flight lessons and earned her license in France in 1921.



*Bessie Coleman was honored in February 1995..*

Conspicuously absent until 1996 was Jackie Cochran, a controversial woman who held more speed, distance and altitude records than anyone else, male or female. Cochran believed that women were equal to men in piloting skills and promoted women in aviation throughout her career.



*Jackie Cochran*



More than a dozen men are honored, but William Boeing, designer of the Model 247, "the world's first modern commercial airliner," had a long wait (2005) before the 247 made it to the hall of fame. Boeing's Stratocruiser appears on two stamps in 1947, and again in 1949 at the height of its popularity.



Boeing Stratocruiser over the San Francisco Oakland Bay Bridge was issued July 30, 1947.



*The Lockheed Constellation over New York City, issued August 20, 1947.*



*The Boeing 247 finally made the hall of fame in 2005 as part of a 20-stamp commemorative sheet of Classic American Aircraft.*



*The Boeing 707 appeared in October 1960 and the Boeing 747 appeared on a 10-cent stamp marking the 200-year anniversary of the Postal Service. This stamp was not called an airmail stamp.*

Donald W. Douglas was responsible for successful commercial airplanes ranging from the DC-1 to the DC-10, and dozens of military planes, but he is also missing from this hall of fame. His Douglas' DC-4 made it to a stamp at the height of its popularity, in 1945. His DC-3, "The plane that changed the world," made it to a 36-cent postcard in 1988, 53 years after its birth. The economy of the DC-3 allowed commercial airlines to turn a profit from just passenger fares alone and not have to rely on mail subsidies. However, the subsidies did not stop, and the commemorative stamps continue today albeit fewer in commercial aviation. The DC-3 earned its own stamp in 1997, as part of a 20-stamp commemorative sheet of Classic American Aircraft.



The Douglas DC-4 aka the Skymaster



DC-3 postcard

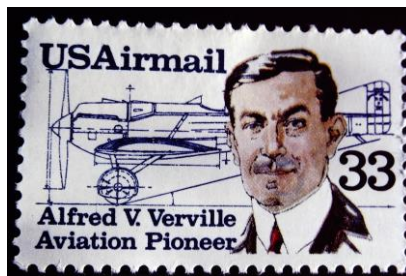
Leonardo da Vinci left drawings of a helicopter, dating back to 1410, yet he never made a stamp. Igor Sikorsky, the Russian emigrant who pioneered the first practical helicopter design, earned a stamp in June 1988. His VS-300, which first flew in 1939, was in the background on his stamp.



Lawrence and Elmer Sperry were responsible for development of the autopilot and the directional gyroscope in the late 1920s. They were honored in 1985. Alfred V. Verville's contribution to aviation was a plane called the Packard-Verville with a 638-hp engine, billed as the "wonder plane of the Army." This low-wing monoplane was, in its day, a leap in technology. In the first Pulitzer Trophy Race in 1920, it averaged 156.5 mph over the 116-mile closed course. Verville was honored with a stamp on Feb. 13, 1985.



*Lawrence and Elmer Sperry*



*Alfred V. Verville*

In 1933, Wiley Post set a round-the-world speed record of eight days, 15 hours, 51 minutes, beating the Graf Zeppelin's longstanding record by more than 12 days. Post flew his way onto a pair of stamps in 1979. One stamp showed his Lockheed Vega, Winnie Mae. Because Post was also a pioneer of high-altitude flying, the second stamp showed him in a pressure suit.



Wiley Post flew his way onto a pair of stamps in 1979.

A stamp in 1927 marked airmail pilot Charles Lindbergh's first transatlantic flight. But Lindbergh and his aviator wife and flying partner, Anne Morrow Lindbergh, are absent from this hall of fame, although not from stamps in Gambia, Ghana and a few other countries. The Ryan monoplane Lindbergh flew across the Atlantic showed up twice, but the plane's designer, T. Claude Ryan, is absent from the hall of fame.

1977 USPS First Day Cover issued to commemorate the 50th Anniversary of Charles A. Lindbergh flying solo across the Atlantic from New York to Paris. Postmarked May 20, 1977. Glenn L. Martin is also absent but his Martin 202 shows up..

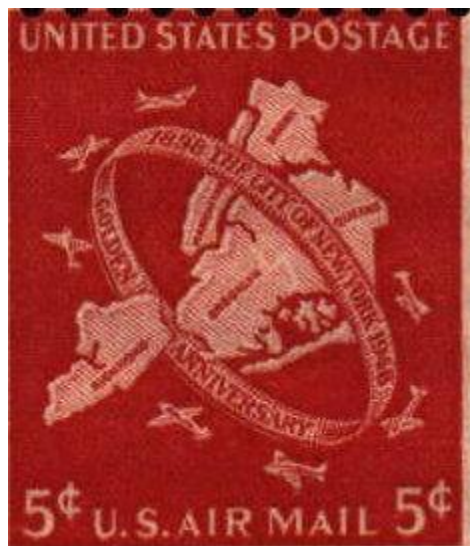


*Martin 202 is on a 10-cent airmail stamp flying over the Pan Am Union Building in 1947.*





*Seemingly, unrelated stamps and events were sometimes tied together. The first flight of commercial helicopter service occurred on Jan. 6, 1947, but instead of a helicopter, the First Day Cover marking the event shows a Douglas DC-4 airmail stamp.*



*New York City celebrated 100 years in 1948. By that time it had its own airport LaGuardia Airport and New York International Airport, commonly called Idlewild Airport after the Idlewild Beach Golf Course that it displaced. It was renamed John F. Kennedy Airport (JFK) in 1963 to memorialize the assassinated president.*



*American Airlines commemorated its first commercial land plane flight overseas in 1945 with a First Day cover. The problem is instead of using a DC-4 stamp, an aircraft which American Airlines used they used an artist amalgam of several different designs, largely based on the Douglas DC-3, the Lockheed Electra, and the Beech 18. In other words, an airplane that never was.*



*The Alaska Statehood airmail stamp did not have an airplane in it so Pan American World Airways created a First Day Issue that celebrated the event.*

This hall of fame is far from complete, but it does provide a small overview of aviation history. In the years to come, more aviation stamps will be produced, but some events and persons who justifiably should earn a spot will never be thus honored. Such is life, and aviation history, as told by the U.S. Postal Service.

### Rocket Mail – a Postscript

One of the first successful delivery of mail by a rocket in the United States was made on February 23, 1936, when two rocket airplanes were launched from the New York side of the frozen Greenwood Lake and landed on the New Jersey side, less than

100 yards away. This event was preceded by several other successful short range rocket mail experiments in the early 1930s.



*Robert Goddard is considered the 'father of modern rocketry.'*

During the mid-1950s, "amateur" rocketeers flew several solid propellant mail-carrying rockets interstate, from California, across the Colorado River, and into Arizona. The postal covers were printed for each occasion and franked at the nearest destination post office.

In 1959 the U.S. Navy submarine USS *Barbero* assisted the Post Office Department, in its search for faster mail transportation, with the only delivery of "Missile Mail". On June 8, 1959, *Barbero* fired a Regulus cruise missile — its nuclear warhead having been replaced by two Post Office mail containers — targeted at the Naval Auxiliary Air Station at Naval Station Mayport in Florida. The Regulus cruise missile was launched with solid-propellant boosters. A turbojet engine sustained the long-range cruise flight after the boosters were dropped. Twenty-two minutes after launch, the missile struck its target.



The USPS had officially established a branch post office on *Barbero* and delivered some 3,000 pieces of mail to it before *Barbero* left Norfolk, Virginia. The mail consisted entirely of commemorative postal covers addressed to the President and government officials.

Upon witnessing the missile's landing, Postmaster General Arthur E. Summerfield stated, "This peacetime employment of a guided missile for the important and practical purpose of carrying mail, is the first known official use of missiles by any Post Office Department of any nation." Summerfield predicted that "before man reaches the moon, mail will be delivered within hours from New York to California, to Britain, to India or Australia by guided missiles. We stand on the threshold of rocket mail", he said.

Despite the Postmaster General's enthusiasm, the Department of Defense saw the measure more as a demonstration of U.S. missile capabilities. Experts believe that the cost of using missile mail could never be justified especially since airmail crossed the Atlantic Ocean in as little as a day