

U.S. Army Carries the Air Mail 1934

By Tom Reyman

In the mid-1920's, the United States Post Office Department decided to improve and expand the delivery of mail by airplane. Under the leadership of Postmaster General Walter Brown, a call for bids was made to commercial airline companies for them to carry domestic mail by air along defined routes. The first five contracts for what became known as Contract Air Mail (CAM) routes were awarded on October 7, 1925 and the first flight occurred on February 15, 1926. Postmaster Brown continued to complete further contracts until by 1930 there were 34 CAM routes across the United States.

The airlines flying these routes were subsidized by the Post Office at a rather high cost. Even though the service provided by the airlines met expectations, it was rightly pointed out that three corporations (General Motors, the Aviation Corporation of America-AVCO, and Boeing-Pratt & Whitney) dominated the rights to these routes to the exclusion of any new companies and this situation was the result of decisions made by Postmaster Brown. After objections were raised in the U.S. Congress about the high costs and the lack of competition, the U.S. Attorney General rendered an opinion against the existing arrangements.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt stepped in and on February 9, 1934, cancelled the existing contracts and asked the U.S. Army Air Corps to provide the air mail service. Even though the Army did not have adequate aircraft or pilots trained in that type of flying service, the Army agreed to take on the task. The air routes were modified to streamline the service, resulting in 15 routes being flown by the Army. Salt Lake City, Chicago, New York, and Atlanta were designated as "hubs" to distribute mail in each region of the country.

Under the newly appointed Postmaster General, James Farley, the first Army flights began at midnight on February 20, 1934. While the service by the Army was generally good, the lack of proper equipment, inadequate training, and bad weather in the Spring of 1934 resulted in more than expected airplane crashes and pilot injuries and deaths. These results led to negative public opinion and in May 1934, contract airmail service through commercial airlines was reestablished with a new set of contract carriers.

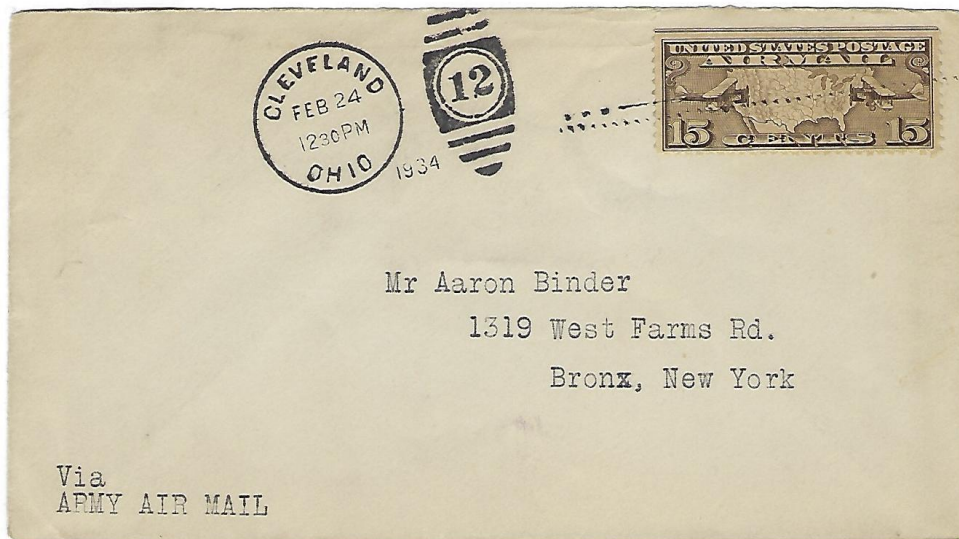
The three covers shown are from the era of flights by the Army Air Corp.



The Eastbound First Flight cover from Los Angeles to New York was postmarked on February 19 at 9:30 in preparation for the initial flight at 12:01 AM on February 20.



The Westbound cover from Newark, New Jersey to Los Angeles, California (near Venice, California) was postmarked at 9:30 AM on February 20.



The third cover from Cleveland, Ohio to the Bronx, New York (arriving at Newark) carries a 15¢ air mail stamp (Scott C8) first issued in 1926,

References:

- American Air Mail Catalogue, Volume 1, Seventh Edition, 2014; Pages 2-3
- R.E.G. Davies, Fallacies and Fantasies of Air Transport History, 1994 - "Legalized Murder (1934)", Pages 41-50

Tom Reyman is a Nevada Stamp Study Society member whose collecting interests are U.S. FAM covers, general Air Mail covers, Canadian Semi-Official Air Mail stamps and covers, and Cape Breton (Nova Scotia) covers.