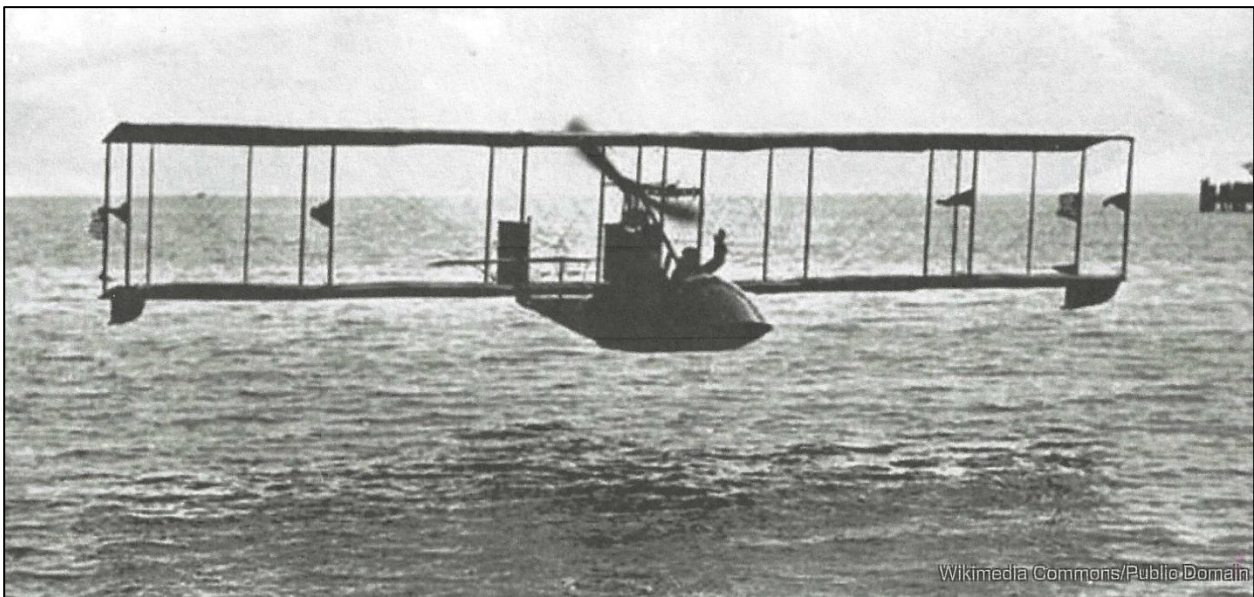


# First Commercial Airline 110 Years Ago (January 1, 1914) Commemorated on 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary

By Tom Reyman

Situated on Tampa Bay in Florida, the cities of St. Petersburg and Tampa are across the bay from each other. Today, there is a bridge that links them allowing vehicles to quickly drive from one city to another. In the early 1900's, there was no bridge and car travel around the bay would have required a long trip on rough, unpaved roads lasting as much as 20 hours. A steamship ride lasted 2 hours and travelling by rail would require at least 4 hours.

In 1913, a local entrepreneur proposed establishing a commercial airline between the cities. His idea was to use a Benoist XIV flying boat, an aircraft produced in St. Louis, to connect the two cities and suggested that the flight would only take about 25 minutes. The Tampa city officials were not interested but the St. Petersburg officials were more receptive and encouraged local investors to fund the project. An aircraft was purchased, arriving in St. Petersburg in December 1913 aboard a train and needed final assembly. This wood and linen flying boat could only seat the pilot and one passenger, had a top speed of 64 miles per hour, and flew just above the water to take advantage of the ground effect to keep the plane aloft. **(Figure 1)** After being assembled and after some test flights, the first flight across the bay was attempted.



**Figure 1 – Benoist XIV**

On January 1, 1914, the pilot, Tony Jannus, and the former Mayor of St. Petersburg, Abraham Pheil, left St. Petersburg at 10 A.M. to the cheers of an assembled crowd of about 3,000 people. Mr. Pheil purchased the honor of being the first passenger by winning a bidding auction. During the flight, Jannus had to land the plane on the bay to make some adjustments to the engine but was then able to continue the flight to Tampa. The return flight at 11 A.M. went smoothly without a mid-flight stop.

This flight began a commercial enterprise where flight service was offered on a scheduled basis with daily newspaper deliveries to Tampa and regular passenger service. In the first three months of service, the airline carried 1,205 passengers and logged over 7,000 miles of flight. The passenger fee for a flight was \$5 per person (equivalent to over \$130 in current dollars).

To commemorate this important event St. Petersburg issued the subject cover in 1939 on the occasion of the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the first flight (**Figure 2**). While other periodic flights in the United States and throughout the world had preceded the 1914 flight, they were not commercial flights. This flight was done under contract with the city of St. Petersburg and flights were accomplished under a regular periodic schedule. Thus, the St. Petersburg Tampa Airboat Line earned the honor worldwide as being the first scheduled, commercial airline using heavier-than-air winged aircraft.



**Figure 2 – Commemorative Cover**

References:

- <https://www.grunge.com/420404/this-was-the-first-commercial-airline-in-history/>
- <https://www.iata.org/en/about/history/flying-100-years/firstairline-story/>

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