

Airmail History in Pictures, 1918–1928



Mail is loaded onto a Curtiss JN-4H "Jenny" biplane on May 15, 1918, at Bustleton Field near Philadelphia, while U.S. Army personnel look on. Bustleton Field was the midpoint stop on the New York–Washington, D.C., airmail route. During the first three months of airmail service, Army pilots flew the mail. *Courtesy National Archives and Records Administration*

On May 15, 1918, the Post Office Department began airmail service between New York and Washington, D.C., via Philadelphia — the nation's first regularly scheduled airmail route. Initially, Army pilots flew the mail. On August 12, 1918, the Department took over all phases of airmail service, using newly hired civilian pilots. In 1919, airmail routes linked New York and Chicago; in 1920, a transcontinental airmail route was completed, linking New York with San Francisco.

In the early years, pilots flew in open cockpits in unpredictable weather. According to one veteran airmail pilot, there was a fifty-fifty chance of engine failure on any given flight.¹ Airmail service was a working laboratory — wind, rain, ice, snow, and extreme temperatures revealed weaknesses and flaws in airplane design and maintenance. Through trial and error, designs were improved and failures corrected.

The Department's purpose in developing airmail service was in part "to demonstrate to men of means" that commercial aviation was "a possibility."² The demonstration succeeded. Private companies began flying mail under contract in February 1926, and by September 1927 all airmail was carried under contract. In the days before passenger service, contracts for mail transportation sustained fledgling U.S. airlines.

¹ Dean C. Smith, "Flying By Guess and By God," *Atlantic Monthly*, September 1961, 40. Smith flew the mail from 1920 to 1927 with the U.S. Air Mail Service.

² Statement of Postmaster General Harry S. New, September 23, 1925, in *Aircraft: Hearings before the President's Aircraft Board*, vol.1 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1925), 265, in HathiTrust at <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/umn.31951d035053734> (accessed December 5, 2017).



Top: Army Major Reuben H. Fleet stands in front of a Curtiss JN-4H "Jenny" airplane at the Potomac Park polo ground in Washington, D.C., on May 15, 1918. Fleet brought the plane to Washington in preparation for the first airmail flight from that city.
Courtesy Library of Congress

Bottom left: Dignitaries at the inauguration of airmail service in Washington, D.C., included, from left to right: Merritt Chance, Postmaster of Washington, D.C.; Postmaster General Albert Burleson; and President and Mrs. Woodrow Wilson.

Bottom right: Lieutenant James C. Edgerton with his sister at Potomac Park on May 15, 1918. Edgerton flew the second leg of the first New York to Washington, D.C., flight, from Philadelphia.



Curtiss JN-4H "Jenny" airplane at Potomac Park, Washington, D.C., May 15, 1918. *Courtesy Library of Congress*



U.S. Army ground crew at Potomac Park, Washington, D.C., May 15, 1918. *Courtesy Library of Congress*



First airmail flight from New York, May 15, 1918. Army Lieutenant Torrey Webb takes off from the infield of Belmont Park's racetrack. Belmont Park hosted both airmail flights and horse races until December 1919, when New York's airmail field moved to Newark, New Jersey. *Courtesy National Archives and Records Administration*



Airmail plane taking off from Bustleton Field on May 15, 1918. Bustleton Field was the midpoint stop on the New York–Washington, D.C., airmail route until the route was discontinued on May 31, 1921. *Courtesy National Archives and Records Administration*



Lieutenant Torrey Webb and his mechanic were thrown from the plane but not injured when their plane tipped over when landing near Boston on June 6, 1918. They had been scouting a possible New York to Boston airmail route. *Courtesy National Archives and Records Administration*



Specially-built airmail planes at Standard Aircraft Corporation in Elizabeth, New Jersey, August 1918. The Standard JR-1B mail planes had 150 HP motors and a top speed of 75 to 80 miles per hour. Strong headwinds could slow the planes down to 30 miles per hour; severe wind gusts could actually propel the planes backwards. *Courtesy National Archives and Records Administration*



First civilian airmail flight, August 12, 1918. Pilot Max Miller takes off for Philadelphia from the College Park, Maryland, airfield, which replaced Washington's tree-ringed polo ground as the city's airfield. Miller, one of the first civilian pilots hired by the Post Office Department, flew one of the newly purchased Standard JR-1B mail planes. *Courtesy Library of Congress*



Civilian airmail personnel at College Park, Maryland, August 12, 1918. The group includes airmail superintendent Captain Benjamin Lipsner (far left) and pilot Max Miller (far right). *Courtesy Library of Congress*



New York Postmaster Thomas Patten hands a mailbag to pilot Max Miller before Miller's pathfinding flight to Chicago on September 5, 1918. Heavy winds during the trip blew Miller more than 100 miles off course in Ohio; when he descended through the clouds to get his bearings he skimmed a treetop. Despite a few other mishaps — including several unplanned stops to add water to his leaky radiator — Miller completed the trip to Chicago the next day. *Courtesy National Archives and Records Administration*



Far left: After arriving in Chicago on September 6, 1918, Max Miller delivers a mailbag to Captain Benjamin Lipsner, superintendent of the Air Mail Service. *Courtesy National Archives and Records Administration*

Near left: A large crowd of dignitaries greeted Miller upon his arrival in Chicago, including Benjamin Lipsner (on plane, to the right of Miller), Postmaster William Carlile (holding his hat near front center), and pioneering aviator Augustus Post, secretary of the Aero Club of America (bearded, at far right). *Courtesy National Archives and Records Administration*



Pilot Max Miller arrives back in New York with mail from Chicago on September 10, 1918. The mail is placed on a mail truck for transfer to a train heading to the New York Post Office. Miller's Chicago–New York flight demonstrated that mail could be transported between the two cities in a day. Regular service between the cities was established on July 1, 1919. *Courtesy National Archives and Records Administration*



Airmail pilot Walter Smith's plane stalled and nose-dived after taking off from the Indiana State Fair on September 7, 1922. Smith died in a local hospital the next day. Thirty-four of the approximately 200 pilots who flew the mail from August 1918 to September 1927 lost their lives due to plane crashes.



Airplane engineer, airmail official, and airmail pilot, circa 1922. From left to right: Paul G. Zimmermann, aeronautical engineer who helped developed "high lift wings" for heavier mail loads; John E. Whitbeck, superintendent of the Eastern Division of the U.S. Airmail Service, who supervised the construction and rebuilding of planes from 1920 to 1926; and Charles B. D. Collyer, airmail and test pilot of several airplanes developed in the early 1920s. In 1928 Collyer set two speed records, for a trip around the world in 23 days and 15 hours; and a flight from New York to Los Angeles in 24 hours, 51 minutes. He died in November 1928 when his plane crashed during another record attempt.



Top: Airmail pilot Lawrence H. Garrison, circa 1922. Garrison joined the U.S. Air Mail Service on July 31, 1920; he resigned in June 1925. He was hired by National Air Transport to fly the mail on Contract Air Mail Route 3 beginning in May 1926. He died when his plane crashed in a snow storm in Ohio in November 1928.



Left: Airmail pilot James D. Hill, circa 1924. Hill was an army flight instructor and test pilot before joining the U.S. Air Mail Service in 1924 at the age of 42. He flew the first flight on the overnight New York–Chicago airmail route on July 1, 1925. Hill left the Air Mail Service in August 1927. He died the next month while attempting a transatlantic crossing with Lloyd Bertaud, another former airmail pilot.



Airmail hangar at Ak-Sar-Ben Field, Omaha, Nebraska, in 1923 or 1924. Ak-Sar-Ben ("Nebraska," spelled backwards) served as Omaha's airmail field from 1920 to 1924. When the hangar was destroyed by a tornado on June 22, 1924, the Air Mail Service moved to nearby Offutt Field at Fort Crook (now Offutt Air Force Base).



DeHavilland Mail Plane No. 193 on the field at Bellefonte, Pennsylvania, in December 1923. Bellefonte was an important refueling stop on the New York to Cleveland route from 1919 to 1926. At its peak in 1925, fifteen employees worked at the airfield full-time. Bellefonte and other intermediary stops on the transcontinental airmail route lost regular airmail service in 1926, when new Douglas mail planes were introduced which had greater speed and range.



Top: DH-4 mail plane sits in front of the airmail hangar at Offutt Field near Omaha, Nebraska, on January 3, 1925. The tower in the background holds a 500 million candlepower revolving beacon light, which helped guide pilots at night. *Courtesy National Air and Space Museum*

Bottom left: Airmail mechanics Carlton Force (standing) and James King pose with a mobile flood light near Omaha around July 1923. Flood lights were used to illuminate regular landing fields at night. *Courtesy National Air and Space Museum*

Bottom right: William E. Kline poses next to an airmail route beacon equipped with a cut off sun valve on October 17, 1924. Flashing beacon lights —visible for up to 9 miles — were installed every 3 miles between landing fields from Chicago to Cheyenne. Most of these lights had sun valves which automatically turned on the lights at night and extinguished them at daylight. *Courtesy National Air and Space Museum*



DH-4 mail plane equipped with lights on nose and wingtips, for night flying, around 1924. *Courtesy National Air and Space Museum*



Airmail personnel at Offutt Field near Omaha unload the first eastbound mail plane on July 1, 1924, the first day of regular through-service (night and day flying). *Courtesy National Air and Space Museum*



Airmail planes, pilots, and onlookers at unidentified airfield, circa 1924. In the background stands a beacon light tower, which helped guide pilots at night.



Laird "Swallow" mail planes at Boise, Idaho, airfield, circa 1926. Varney Air Lines used the planes to provide service on the first airmail route to the northwest — Contract Air Mail Route 5, Elko, Nevada, to Pasco, Washington, via Boise — beginning April 6, 1926. Courtesy Smithsonian Institution



Top left: Pilot Wesley Smith watches as ground crew transfers mailbags at Bellefonte, Pennsylvania, in the 1920s.

Top right: Boeing 40A mail and passenger plane, 1928. The Model 40A was the first Boeing airplane to carry passengers. The planes could carry two passengers in a tiny cabin, as well as 1,200 pounds of mail. They were used by Boeing Air Transport on Contract Air Mail Route 18, San Francisco–Chicago, beginning in July 1927.

Bottom: Fokker Universal cabin monoplane, 1928. The Fokker Universal was used on Contract Air Mail Route 1, Boston to New York via Hartford, Connecticut, in 1928. The pilot, with head exposed, sat in front of the wings; four passengers could fit in an interior cabin. Service on the route, operated by Colonial Air Transport, began in July 1926. *Courtesy American Airlines*