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BEGINNINGS OF AIR MAIL IN THE CARIBBEAN AND PUERTO RICO

By Luis González

Aviation has its origins in the seventeenth century using balloons. Some designed devices with wings to be able to fly. By 1910 the Wright brothers were the first to fly an airplane in North Carolina. For many years, mail was transported by land and sea. In search of shortening the delivery time, some countries begin experiments to transport correspondence. In 1911 Earle Ovington was the first pilot to experimentally transport airmail in the United States. That same year, pilots Ted Schrive and George Smith made the first flight of an airplane in Puerto Rico (Fig.1). After Ovington's test flight it was not until 1918 that George Boyle transported mail on the first established United States Mail route.

[Fig.1a](#) , [1b](#)- Postcard canceled on December 1, 1911 with a view of the first plane that Schrive and Smith flew in Miramar, Puerto Rico

We are going to define certain terms related to this topic. The United States government assigned a number to the airmail contract routes that were established. "FAM - Foreign Air Mail" routes go outside the United States. The internal routes of the EU are the "CAM - Contract Air Mail". These routes are listed in a catalog issued by the American Airmail Society". Collectors of the time prepared envelopes with the postage required to be transported on these first flights of each route. The mail prepared some designs or cachets which were applied with a stamp rubber on the front of the envelopes. In the same way the envelopes were canceled on the front with the city of origin and on the back at the destination. We call these envelopes "first flight covers".

The following is a chronological account of the air routes that had an impact on the development of aviation in the Caribbean and Puerto Rico.

In November 1920, the United States Post Office hired Aeromarine Airways, Inc. to transport correspondence from Key West to Havana (FAM-4). This is the first attempt at airmail to the Caribbean (Fig.2). This service lasted until 1923 as the airline faced financial problems.

[Fig.2](#) - Cover of the first Aeromarine Airways flight from Key West to Havana on November 1, 1920.

The first time that a plane transported passengers on the island charging for it, was in 1923 in a seaplane called "Morro Castle". Brothers Paul and Cyrus Zimmeraman brought said plane to San Juan as an experiment for the transportation of passengers and thus began taking passengers for pay, a kind of "air taxi" in January 1923. Cyrus was a pilot and his brother an engineer, due to the success of "Morro Castle", the firm where the Zimmerman brothers worked in New Jersey , and builder of the "Morro Castle", began to build another seaplane, the "Morro Castle II". It was this plane that made the first famous passenger flight from New York to Puerto Rico in March 1924. This was an experimental flight (Fig.3)

[Fig.3](#)- Photo of Morro Castle I (photo from the Daniel Kusrow collection)

In 1925 the United States Navy airship Los Angeles flies from Lakehurst, New Jersey to Puerto Rico. This is considered the first airmail to Puerto Rico. The airship arrived in Mayagüez on May 3, where the mother ship "Patoka" was waiting for it. The envelopes for this flight have cancellers from Mayagüez (in red or purple), Marina Station, or San Juan. This flight was experimental in nature. (Fig.4).

[Fig.4](#) - Cover of the flight from Lakehurst to Mayaguez canceled on the USS Patoka and at the Marina Staion. Special boat cachet.

By May 1927, Lindbergh crosses the Atlantic from New York to Paris. This flight gives a very big boost to air transportation. In that same year, US Navy planes were transporting mail between various cities in Haiti and the Dominican Republic.

In October 1927, the United States Post Office awarded the correspondence contract between Key West and Havana to Pan American. This contract should have been awarded to the West Indies Aerial Express (WIAE) who was already flying in the Caribbean by that date. That first Pan American flight was made by Cy Caldwell, who was a WIAE pilot on a plane from the same airline since Pan American had not received its planes from the factory (Fig.5).

[Fig.5](#)- Cover of the first flight from Key West to Havana of the Pan American autographed by the pilot Cy Caldwell

The WIAE was founded by Basil Rowe, who was born in New York and dedicated himself from an early age to flying in aerobatic presentations and airplane races . Looking for a place where aviation was not so regulated and with more opportunities to grow, his airline moved to Puerto Rico and then to Santo Domingo. It was in Santo Domingo that he found more help from the sugar industry and support from the government. There he founded the WIAE in June 1927. The first WIAE aircraft were a Fairfield F-7 seaplane called La Niña and a Pathfinder called Santa María (Fig.6).

[Fig 6a.](#), [6b](#) - WIAE Aircraft: La Niña and El Santa Maria

By December 1927, the West Indies Aerial Express began the correspondence service between Haiti, Santo Domingo and San Juan. Correspondence was not dispatched from San Juan since there was no contract with the United States government (Fig.7).

[Fig.7](#) - Envelope of the first WIAE airmail from Santo Domingo to San Juan

In January 1928 Lindbergh began his "Good Will" flight through South America, Central America and the Caribbean. The flight departs from Washington, DC on December 13, 1927 and arrives in St Louis on February 13, 1928. The visit to Puerto Rico was on February 2 and commemorative envelopes are prepared with a special cachet (Fig.8). On this flight Lindbergh, at the request of Basil Rowe, transported correspondence from Haiti to Havana. This is the only official mail transported in the Spirit of San Luis (Fig.9).

[Fig.8](#) - Commemorative envelope with "Lindbergh Day" canceller

[Fig.9](#) - Envelope carried by Lindbergh in the Spirit of San Luis

In February 1928, the WIAE extended its air mail service to Santiago de Cuba. At the end of 1928, Pan American changed from the Key West airport to Miami on its flights to Havana by acquiring planes with more powerful engines.

When Pan American obtained the mail contract from Miami to San Juan in 1929, it absorbed the WIAE. Basil Rowe flew on September 20, 1928 from Santo Domingo to Puerto Rico with the purpose of meeting with Pan American officials in what was the last flight of the "Santa María" plane before handing it over to its new owners the "Pan American". At that time, neither Pan American nor WIAE had a contract to transport mail from Puerto Rico. Although that was so, Rowe transported correspondence from San Juan on October 15 on the flight back to Santo Domingo with the Pan American officers. According to the "American Airmail Catalog" the envelopes carried on this flight are extremely scarce.

[Fig.10](#) - First airmail from Puerto Rico by Rowe

From January 7 to 9, 1929, an aviation exhibition was held at the new Miami airport. On the 9th, the airport and the new international airmail service are inaugurated, covering the FAM-6 route from Miami to Havana, Port au

Prince, Santo Domingo and San Juan. That same year, the Isla Grande airport was inaugurated, built by Pan American (Fig.11). Rowe was one of the pilots on this route. The envelopes for this first flight have a red or purple cachet in which the plane goes to the right or left depending on whether the route is east or west (Fig.12).

[Fig.11a](#) , [11b](#) - Miami and Isla Grande airports in 1929

By February 1929, Lindbergh flies the FAM-5 route from Miami to the Panama Canal Zone.

[Fig.12](#) - Cover of the flight from Miami to San Juan autographed by the pilots: Edwin Musick, C. Swinson and Basil Rowe.

In September 1929, the FAM-6 route was extended from San Juan to Paramaribo, Dutch Guiana in South America with stops in the Virgin Islands, Antigua, Saint Lucia, Trinidad and Georgetown. This flight is made by Lindbergh. In the cachet of the envelope appears a Sikorsky S-38 hydroplane. This plane was widely used by Pan American for its convenience of landing on water (Fig.13).

[Fig.13](#) - Envelope carried by Lindbergh on the flight en route to Paramaribo

By the summer of 1929 Pan American and the New York, Rio and Buenos Aires Airline, the "NYRBA" were in a fight for the contract of mail service to the Caribbean and the east coast of South America. Pan American receives the mail contract and the NYRBA receives a temporary contract for Argentina, Brazil and other South American countries. The NYRBA was the first to transport mail from South America to the north. In March 1930, the NYRBA flew from Haiti to San Juan and shortly thereafter, in August 1930, the NYRBA ceased to exist, selling operations to Pan American (Fig.14).

[Fig.14](#) - Cover of the first NYRBA flight from Haiti to San Juan

In May 1930, the Graf Zeppelin passed through Puerto Rico on its trip around the world. Although I do not have any record that correspondence was transported to Puerto Rico, I have in my collection an envelope sent from Rio de Janeiro to San Juan with a writing that reads "Via Parachute" so it can be understood that the envelope was sent from the airship passing through Puerto Rico (Fig.15).

[Fig.15](#) - Envelope of the Graf Zeppelin flight from Rio de Janeiro to San Juan

In November 1930 the FAM-6 route expands further in South America reaching Santos, Brazil and in October 1931 to Buenos Aires, Argentina.

By February 1931, what is called the Lindbergh Circle is completed. It is with this flight that the FAM-6 and FAM-5 routes meet in Maturín, Venezuela (Fig.16).

[Map](#) of Pan American routes in 1929

[Fig.16](#) - Lindbergh circle flight envelope autographed by Roosevelt

In August 1931, the Dornier X hydroplane visits Puerto Rico. correspondence (Fig.17). This plane begins its flight around the world leaving Lake Constance in Germany in November 1930 and arriving in Berlin in May 1932.

[Photo](#) of the DOX in the bay of San Juan

[Fig.17a](#) , [17b](#) - [Cover](#) of the DOX from Paramaribo to San Juan and cancellers on the back

In 1931 the points of sending correspondence of the FAM-6 are changed to San Pedro de Macorís and Nuevitas, Cuba. For 1932 destinations such as Kingston, Jamaica are added. In 1937 Martinique, Guadalupe and Asunción.

In 1936 the brothers Narciso and Horacio Basso founded the "Aerovías Nacionales de Puerto Rico, Inc" with the hydroplane "Kofresi" with the purpose of establishing an air service between San Juan, Vieques, Culebra, Saint Thomas, Saint Croix and other neighboring islands. (Fig.18). In 1937 they begin to develop the idea of using adhesive stamps to pay for the mail transported on their planes. After several problems to obtain this authorization from the United States Post Office, they finally received the authorization on April 27 to inaugurate the service the following day (Fig.19).

[Fig.18](#) - ANPRI Kofresi seaplane

[Fig.19](#) - Cover of the first day of issue of the 1938 series

The correspondence transported by the ANPRI had to be franked with regular stamps of the United States Postal Service (3c local and 10c outside the island), to which the ANPRI stamps had to be added for the payment of air transport at a rate of 5c per local half ounce and 10c for the Virgin Islands. The [second series](#) consists of 8 triangular stamps printed on sheets of 6 stamps each and were put up for sale on March 22, 1941.

In 1937 Dennis Powelson, a private pilot of the Don Q company who was carrying company officials and other passengers between San Juan and Ponce, organizes the Powelson line. The line also carried mail from the Virgin Islands to Puerto Rico for free.

As part of Air Mail Week held from May 15 to 21, 1938, the United States Postal Service organized a nationwide plan to transport air mail for one day to cities that were not on established routes, visiting remote cities using Independent pilot services. In Puerto Rico, it coordinated with two private entities, the Basso brothers' National Airlines and the Serralles Succession. Two routes were established to fly on May 19. For some reason, the National Airlines could not do the route, so the Serralles had to fly both routes. The route flown by Felix Juan Serralles was: departure from Central Mercedita in Ponce at 1:00 pm to Christiansted, St. Croix, from there to Saint Thomas. At 2:00 pm it leaves for Mercedita arriving at 3:00 pm. At 3:30pm leaves for Arecibo, then to Mayagüez, Guánica, Aguirre and from there to Merceditas. From Merceditas she travels to San Juan arriving at 6:00 pm with the mail. The envelopes that were on this flight bear a mark that reads: "INTER-ISLAND PICK-UP FLIGHT". These are considered the first flights transporting correspondence within Puerto Rico (Fig.20).

[Fig.20](#) - Envelope from the first internal airmail of Puerto Rico

According to a document that was part of the Gustavo Schwarz collection, there are 24 towns that issued special cancellers for airmail week. In my collection after much searching I only have ten so I understand that some are extremely rare (Fig.21).

[Fig.21](#) - Commemorative cover with cachet of Ponce from NAMW

On May 20, 1939, the FAM-18 route was inaugurated with the flight from New York to Marseille, France. This is the first route to cross the Atlantic. It was not until February 5, 1941, shortly after the war began, that alternative routes were sought to return to America, including Puerto Rico, to avoid places in the conflict. This route flew from Miami to San Juan and from there to Portugal and Africa. This is considered the first route crossing the Atlantic with correspondence (Fig.22).

[Fig.22](#) - Cover of the flight from Portugal to Puerto Rico of the FAM-18

In 1939 Powelson was incorporated as Caribbean-Atlantic Airlines, Inc. and in December 1942 the correspondence service between San Juan, San Tomas and Santa Cruz was inaugurated. Due to wartime secrets the new route was not announced so envelopes from this initial flight are very rare (Fig.23). The pilot was José Jiménez.

[Fig.23](#) - Cover of the first Caribair flight

Several years later the route was extended to cover Mayagüez and Ponce. On June 6, 1945, the flight departs from San Juan over the mountains to Ponce and continues along the coast to Mayagüez. The cachet was applied by the airline. The pilot was E.Brue (Fig.24).

[Fig.24](#) - Envelope of the flight from San Juan to Mayagüez

In July 1946 Pan American inaugurated its flights from New York to San Juan. The flight decks have a cachet prepared by Pan American (Fig.25).

[Fig.25a](#) , [25b](#) - Envelopes from the flights from New York to San Juan and from San Juan to New York

Although Air France established itself in Puerto Rico in 1953, by September 1948 it transported mail to San Juan from Martinique.

In December 1948 Caribair extends its service to Ciudad Trujillo, Dominican Republic.

In March 1951, Eastern inaugurated its correspondence service between New York and San Juan.

In January 1951, Delta Airlines places a franchise at the Isla Grande Airport and opens its correspondence service to New Orleans and Houston.

On May 20, 1955, the new Isla Verde International Airport was inaugurated. The Philatelic Society of Puerto Rico prepares a special cachet for the occasion (Fig.26). The first flight at the airport comes from New York on May 23 and a flight to Miami departs on May 24. For both flights, Pan American prepares allusive envelopes (Fig.27).

By 1959 Pan American flies its jets to San Juan and after that other airlines begin to fly to Puerto Rico such as TWA, Iberia, Avianca, American, Mexicana, National, Lufthansa, etc.

[Fig.26](#) - Commemorative cover issued by the Philatelic Society of Puerto Rico

[Fig.27](#) - Cover of the inaugural flight from New York to the new San Juan airport

[Photo](#) postcard of the Isla Verde International Airport under construction

By 1967 Caribair expands its services to several Caribbean islands reaching Trinidad and Tobago. In 1970 Eastern bought Caribair.

In June 1976 the British Concorde visited us with correspondence from London (Fig.28). In 1987 the Air France Concorde visited us on its flight around the world.

[Fig.28](#) - Envelope of the flight of the British Concorde to Puerto Rico

Due to the limited space of this article, examples of each of these flights cannot be presented. Many of these flights have been covered in previous Puripex publications and the monthly newsletters issued by the Society. At the end of the article there is a table of all the flights that I have been able to identify related to Puerto Rico with catalog number, route, date and value.

This article is presented on the page of the Puerto Rico Philatelic Society on the Internet. There you will be able to see the color images and in more detail of these and other envelopes related to this topic. The address of the page is: www.yunque.net/lgonzalez and to see this article, www.yunque.net/lgonzalez/aereo.htm. To contact the author you can send an email to lgonzalez@yunque.net.

