The Bathurst Connection:  
The Centrality of Gambia to the Development of Transatlantic Air Mail  

Gary Wayne Loew

Introduction

People fly aircraft to distant places for many reasons. Early efforts were simply to prove that it could be done. Military applications emerged soon thereafter. At some point, national pride drove the formation and funding of airlines. But it was commercial purposes that rapidly came to dominate the use of aircraft. Eventually goods would be shipped, but initially it was moving people and information – mail – that drove the race for better, faster and cheaper air transportation.

The case for moving the mails ever faster is as old as the mails themselves. But air mail offered completely new opportunities to accelerate the delivery of vital information. To be sure, wealthier individuals were able and willing to pay air mail premiums. But the time value of critical business information easily justified nearly any premium that air mail demanded. Getting market information to a business partner a day or two ahead of the competition could yield great commercial advantage. Of what matter was an additional few shillings or francs or deutschmarks in such a situation? In Revolutionary times the framers of the US Constitution recognised this and mandated that the new nation’s post office would provide the delivery services to nurture the nation’s embryonic commercial fabric (Ref. 1). Thus the story of Deutsche Lufthansa’s pursuit of a European air route to South America through Bathurst was a natural extension of the pursuit of postal expedience.

In this paper we will have the opportunity to review numerous examples of communications and correspondences between Deutsche Lufthansa (DLH) and British and Gambian authorities regarding, first the development, and then the subsequent maintenance of service incorporating Bathurst into the Europe / South America route. The details of these machinations between DLH and its counterparties will dramatically highlight the difficulties entailed in DLH’s accomplishments. Through the lens of contract negotiations, we will demonstrate the difficulties faced by DLH in its mission to save two or three days of transit time. Bathurst must have been really important to DLH. If anything established the value of air mail to international commerce, it was DLH’s herculean efforts to ‘close the deal’ at Bathurst.

The Back Story – How Von Bismarck Saved Gambia and DLH!

But, let’s start at the very beginning. The fact that Deutsche Lufthansa had the opportunity to enter into discussions regarding Bathurst can be traced back to German machinations that began in 1869! During the late 1860s, much of Gambia’s administration was being directed by British authorities in Sierra Leone. In 1868, Governor Kennedy acknowledged an inquiry from the French regarding the possible cession of Gambia to France in exchange for other French West African territories. In late April of 1869, Kennedy opined that such an arrangement could have obvious commercial, administrative and military benefits. He warned, however, that the native populations had a ‘chivalrous attachment to the Queen and Her Government’ and further observed that ‘….the natives of the country…. would regard any negotiations…. [as a] sale of their country….’ (Ref. 2).

Nevertheless, Kennedy was willing to further pursue the matter should the Secretary of State (at the time, Earl Granville) deem it desirable. Thus ensued a series of correspondences, all debated in and recorded by the House of Lords, starting with Kennedy’s 29 April letter and continuing in 1870 with Granville’s successor, Earl Kimberley. Figure 1 illustrates an extract of the table of contents from the cession correspondence, which consisted of 92 separate documents. There are several appeals by local Gambian kings and headmen praying that the British maintain them under the Crown’s protection (Ref. 3). Kimberley, for his part, assured his ‘subjects’ that their wishes would be ‘taken into account’ in the event
of such negotiations with the French. The British merchants in Gambia were divided on the prospect. Largely they opposed the cession, led in no small part by the Thos. Chown firm, the largest and one of the oldest of the Bathurst merchants, having been started in the 1840s (Ref. 4).

Nevertheless, the decision was taken to pursue the Gambian cession with France. But further discussions were not to be. Concurrent with these events, Otto Von Bismarck was busy engineering the unification of the German states. In the process of creating the German Empire, he successfully provoked the French to join in the Franco-Prussian War. Upon the conclusion of the War, the French never revisited the subject of Gambian cession and the British apparently thought better of pursuing the matter.

What does all of this have to do with Gambia in the 1930s? Well, if Von Bismarck hadn’t ‘diverted’ the French, Gambia might long ago have been merged into an integrated Senegal, and Bathurst would have been French territory.

Considering the French aspirations for establishing, indeed dominating, air mail routes from Europe to South America, it is impossible to see how DLH would have succeeded in obtaining landing rights in Bathurst or Dakar. Given the state of aircraft technology in the early 1930s, there really weren’t other comparably suitable West African sites for the southern transatlantic leg of the route. But with Bathurst remaining safely in British hands, DLH had a non-competitive nation with which to negotiate. And those negotiations are at the heart of our story.

**The British Efforts – Few South American Business Interests & no Air Route Interest**

As early as April of 1931 the London Chamber of Commerce was seeking to have an air mail service established between London and British West Africa. By this time DLH had already reached out to the British Air Council, inquiring about the possibility of establishing a seaplane service from Europe to BWA. Thus, the Chamber opposed the DLH initiative until such time as British firms had been given the opportunity to establish their own routes.
The British, in the form of Imperial Airways (IA), were very active in developing African air routes. But those routes were down the east-central corridor of the continent, essentially from Cairo to Cape Town. IA were running test flights to South Africa in the early 1930s and had established their first scheduled weekly London to Cape Town (see Figure 2) on 20 January 1932 (Ref. 6). That first trip took 11 days. Over the ensuing five years, IA added to the frequency of its service and cut the travel time from eleven to eight days (Ref. 7). Clearly, the British were accomplished air route developers in Africa throughout this period.

![Figure 2](1932 Imperial Airways route London to Cape Town, reproduced from French African Airmails 1932 to 1940, courtesy of Gérard Collot)

As it turns out, though, the levels of British commerce with West Africa did not offer sufficient opportunity for long north/south air mail routes – even assuming that some European mail traffic might be carried to improve the overall economics. Shipment of goods was adequately provided by Britain's substantial fleet of Elder Dempster ships and a comparable number of competitive, international vessels (Ref. 8). Passenger traffic was modest and the mails alone apparently could not justify diverting capital to establish a
substantial air service. Moreover, British commercial interests in South America were minimal when compared with those of Germany, and indeed France as well. Thus there was little justification for serious consideration of a British air mail service. Viewed from a capital allocation standpoint, the British correctly focused their investments towards southern, rather than western, African routes. While British politicians and civil servants sought to preserve rights and opportunities for their entrepreneurs (Ref. 9), investors were simply not interested. Bathurst may have represented a strategic opportunity for a South Atlantic route, but the British elected to let others capitalise upon it.

The French Efforts – They had Dakar & didn’t need Bathurst

The French, for their part, were very interested in strategic opportunities for a South Atlantic route. And they possessed the better of the strategic alternatives in the form of Dakar – some 112 air miles north of Bathurst. (Interestingly, Bathurst is closer than Dakar to Natal, but the total Las Palmas/Dakar/Natal distance is shorter by 56 miles than the Las Palmas/Bathurst/Natal route.) Thus, the French had no need for Bathurst. Indeed, they were inclined to avoid Dakar-Bathurst connections with a view towards minimising the latter’s strategic transportation value.

French air presence in West Africa dates to the very turn of the 20th century, with military flights having been identified as early as 1912 in Bambey, Senegal. Indeed, photo-illustrated post cards celebrating one such flight have been documented (Ref. 10). The French were executing experimental air mail flights within French West Africa (FWA) as early as 1919 (Ref. 11). And, by 1925 had a full-fledged service between France and Senegal (Dakar). According to Picirilli, “[a] letter from the French Director of Posts, dated 8 June 1925, [states] ‘The Toulouse-Dakar service has been operating since 1 June, with weekly flights via Casablanca departing Toulouse Monday mornings (arriving Wednesday afternoons)…’” (Ref. 12).

While there is an important story to tell regarding the French development of South American routes, it is only tangentially related to Bathurst’s role. Thus let us move on to DLH, who were very interested in Bathurst’s strategic location.

The German Efforts – A lot of DLH work to save 2 days’ transit

Nothing illustrates better the time value of information communication than the efforts that DLH initiated in 1931 to move mail through Bathurst to South America. By 1929, the Graf Zeppelin (owned by Luftschiffbau Zeppelin GmbH) had transnavigated the globe and in 1930 made a more focused series of flights between Friedrichshafen and South America (G62-G68) (Ref. 13). These latter demonstration flights established the reliability of airships for the transoceanic transportation of passengers and mails: both considered high value ‘cargo’. By 1932 commercial Zeppelin service had been established. But mail’s time value was greater still, especially considering the size of Germany’s economic interests in South America. And even though the Zeppelins continued developing direct Europe-to-SA routes, DLH was pursuing a mail-only alternative involving its faster-flying airplanes.

It appears that a significant breakthrough in the development plans and negotiations occurred in mid-1933. In May, Friedrich von Buddenbrok arrived in Bathurst to serve as DLH’s head of operations. He immediately established relationships with the local British authorities. Acting governor Parish issued a permit on 19 May allowing two Dornier-Wal seaplanes to land at Bathurst for experimental flights (Ref. 14). On 11 August 1933, Parish wrote the Secretary of State Philip Cunliffe-Lister discussing DLH’s decision to select Bathurst as the location for a seaplane base (Ref. 15). To this point, DLH had been operating (or trying to operate) a combined service consisting of:

- Berlin – Stuttgart by train
- Stuttgart – Marseilles – Barcelona – Cadiz by land planes
- Cadiz – Las Palmas by sea plane
- Las Palmas – Fernando Mortuna Island (Ref. 16) (Fernando de Noronha) by steamer
- Fernando Mortuna – Natal – Rio de Janeiro by land plane
But since delivery speed continued to be the motivating factor, the Bathurst alternative was reconfigured by DLH to include:

- Berlin – Stuttgart – Marseilles – Barcelona – Cadiz by land planes
- Cadiz – Las Palmas – Villa Cisneros (Rio de Oro) – Bathurst – Fernando Mortuna – Natal by seaplane
The transatlantic link was planned to be in two stages, utilising a catapult ship and second seaplane to compensate for the limited seaplane range. But even in 1933 DLH were anticipating that the rate of technological innovation would eliminate the need for mid-ocean refueling in the near future (Ref. 17). DLH had conducted test flights in 1931 and again in 1933. There were three trials in the June of 1933. Philatelists, never far from a first flight opportunity, were able to get some mail aboard these catapult test flights, the first on 2 June, as illustrated in Figure 3. The second test flight was conducted on 4-6 June, as illustrated in Figure 4. This cover was cancelled Bathurst on the 3rd, and travelled to Natal via the catapult ship Westfalen. The last of the June test flights (Figure 5) originated in Natal and went via Westfalen and Bathurst onward to Germany.

Concluding the viability of the Bathurst route, von Buddenbrok’s Bathurst operations envisioned the following facilities:

- Housing accommodations for six persons
- Seaplane facilities at Half Die (hanger for two planes, slipway, crane and service cutter)
- Wireless station for communication with seaplanes (located aboard the cutter)

Significantly, Parish observes that DLH’s desired facility will not compete with any British service. But to ensure that any future British service will not be impeded, he recommends that neither mails nor passengers should be carried from Bathurst north to Las Palmas. Moreover, he urges that any agreements and/or leases be confined to not more than a twelve-month period. This appears to be the first suggestion of a ‘short leash’ strategy, one that was in fact implemented and remained in effect throughout the DLH occupancy at Bathurst. Parish’s office (sender not specified) also sent a cable response to DLH in Berlin on that same date (Ref. 18) offering to assist with the facilities that DLH were seeking. The cable stated that several private properties under consideration for lease proved not to be available, but that any government property that DHL might consider would be looked upon favorably by Parish.

Things began to move forward rapidly. The German embassy in London sent a note on 6 October specifying the specific equipment that was to be sent to Bathurst that month for additional experimental flights (Ref. 19). This consisted of an additional Dornier-Wal seaplane and a Junkers Ju 52. At that time,
Prince Bismarck had been appointed DLH’s representative in Bathurst. He identified a crew and compliment of twenty-one personnel to accompany the two aircraft. Clearly, DLH was dedicating a substantial number of personnel to these near-final experimental flights. This cable contains a significant commitment from DLH with regard to the specifics of the transatlantic service. Beginning in January of 1934, DLH would establish a regular fortnightly service from Germany to South America utilising the catapult ship *Westfalen*. For the entire year, the southbound schedule would be:

- Day 1 – Stuttgart to Cadiz via Junkers Ju 52 Land or Heinkel He 70
- Day 2 – Cadiz – Las Palmas – Bathurst via Junkers Ju 42 Sea and Dornier-Wal
- Day 3 – Bathurst to *Westfalen* via Dornier-Wal
- Day 4 – *Westfalen* to Natal via Dornier-Wal
- Day 5 – Natal to Rio de Janeiro & Buenos Aires by transfer to the Condor Syndicate service

DLH’s expectation was that beginning in either February or March, the frequency would increase from fortnightly to eight days. This would be accomplished by combining the airplane-based service with the airship *Graf Zeppelin* and, possibly, the addition of a second catapult ship. Thus, by September of 1933 DLH had a clear vision of what the first year of service would look like.

The importance of experimental flights is, perhaps, sometimes oversimplified. More than mapping routes and determining the effectiveness of particular aircraft for a route leg, the totality of route logistics needs to be determined. In this instance, the experimental flights established that the originally configured wireless communications approach (aboard a ship near the DLH facility and supplemented by the regular Bathurst wireless station) was insufficient. Specifically the Bathurst wireless was both too sporadic in its operation and had too weak a transmitter for the requirements of the DLH flights. Prince Bismarck thus issued an application for a dedicated wireless station to be constructed at the site of the DLH aerodrome (Ref. 20).

With an expected January 1934 startup, the British did not let DLH wait long. In early December (date unclear), Parish issued a Special and Temporary Authority to DLH to extend from January to 31 March (Ref. 21). In quick sequence thereafter, DLH appointed The United Africa Company Limited (UAC) as its full agents (Ref. 22). UAC were informed in Bathurst by acting Colonial Secretary H.R. Oke that approvals for the aerodrome and the wireless station had been temporarily approved, but that final details needed to
be negotiated locally with the Colonial Office (Ref. 23). But, as subsequent correspondence indicated, the DLH flights were, quite literally, undertaken ‘on the fly’ with changes taken frequently, as required. In early February a meeting was held in the Governor’s office, with a Commander Bertram now representing DLH. The topics were wide-ranging in light of the fact that the DLH service had been operating for a month. Topics included implementing the dedicated DLH wireless station (and costs thereon), normal telephone service, slipway construction for the flying boats, spare parts and ship stores importation and the duties thereon, and gasoline and oil importation and those duties as well (Ref. 24). Clearly, much still needed to be resolved and the ongoing operations brought additional matters to the surface.

A particularly interesting sidelight relates to the handling of mail from within Gambia to European destinations. DLH’s Commander Bertram offered to transport a bag of Gambian mail (along with DLH’s regular trans-shipment of South American mails) to Germany for forwarding to a post office in London. As of May 1934, no agreement between the German and British postal administrations had been reached for Gambian mails. Thus the Governor’s office was specifically enjoined from accepting Bertram’s offer (Ref. 25). What makes this Gambia-centric prohibition all the more interesting is that the British and German post offices had concluded an agreement for the through transit of mail between the UK and South America, but failed to include mail to or from Gambia itself. Figure 6 illustrates a First Acceptance cover mailed from London on 13 April arriving Berlin the same day and Montevideo, Uruguay, on 25 April.

But the post office in Gambia was anxious to take advantage of DLH’s presence and sought to formalise carriage between Bathurst and Berlin for onward transmission to London (Ref. 26) and elsewhere. The reply from DLH in Berlin was to offer logistics for sealed postal bags through ‘Postamt Stuttgart 9’ for transmission ‘by the quickest possible means’ and further stated that ‘...the air mail charges will not be increased’ (Ref. 27). The reply did stipulate, however, that the Gambian post office needed to negotiate directly with DLH for the costs of carrying the sealed mailbags. This stipulation, absent an agreement between the two post offices, would have mandated that Bathurst be responsible for sorting all mail – regardless of destination – into individual sealed bags at Gambia, an impractical solution. Thus, it would await the agreement between the two postal authorities in August before a practical solution for mail to/ from Gambia could be achieved. Subsequently, very lengthy and difficult negotiations directly with DLH were conducted, fees agreed upon and a contract was drawn between DLH and the Gambian Post Office (dated 24 August, but effective several weeks previous - Ref. 28). A correspondence from the Receiver General (Ref. 29) notes that the first mail to Gambia from London carried via DLH arrived on 30 July. A total of 75 letters were carried, 69 of which were from philatelists. Figure 7 illustrates one of those philatelic covers.
Curiously, symmetry of service was not in the offing. It was not until 9 November that a northbound Gambia to England flight took off with mail from Gambia. As shown in Figure 8, the Gambian postal authorities were rather proud of this route and created a special violet cachet featuring a Dornier Wal seaplane and reading ‘First Air Mail / Gambia – England’. Indeed, authorities were sufficiently enamored of that cachet that it remained in use into 1936, but with the word ‘First’ excised, as shown in Figure 9.
But opening the service to Bathurst origins also opened this route to other West African locations, and Bathurst/DLH supplanted much previous ship mail from the WA British Colonies to the UK. For example, Figure 10 shows a cover from Freetown, Sierra Leone (possibly a Paquebot, but the ‘POSTED ON STEAMER’ indicium was frequently too liberally applied in Freetown) utilising the Bathurst to Stuttgart link to London.

Figure 10
29 December 1935 West Africa opens to UK via DLH
Freetown - Bathurst - Stuttgart - London
Author’s collection

In the same, February 1934, meeting it becomes evident that a flying boat base would represent only a part of the DLH Bathurst facility. Now, an aerodrome for land planes was required as well. This makes an important point about the continuous and rapid development of aircraft during this period and DLH’s *kaizen*-like approach to evolving its air routes. Bertram proposed that DLH be allowed to utilise the aerodrome in Cape St. Mary operated by the Royal West African Frontier Force. This led to a reopening of the question as to exactly what type of service DLH was truly envisioning. Bertram clarified for the Governor the next day, stating:

> With regard to the question as to whether it is intended to use land or seaplanes, it is proposed to run the service between Las Palmas and Bathurst with landplanes, as it is more economic, faster and safer to use this type of plane, in preference to seaplanes. We therefore, beg for permission to use the landing ground at Cape St. Mary for this purpose (Ref. 30).

Bertram’s proposal was rejected for military security reasons, but he was encouraged to submit detailed requirements and the Colonial Office would work with DLH to secure land for their own commercial aerodrome. DLH pushed the issue of using Cape St. Mary’s through several venues in the ensuing few months, but to no avail (Ref. 31). From May until September DLH continued its plans for its commercial aerodrome. Key to this project was locating a suitable piece of land. At one point the Home Office suggested that the Government obtain the necessary land for lease to DLH, the objective being to keep a potentially strategic property out of the hands of a foreign airline, but this approach was not considered
further. Several alternatives were pursued until a lease on a property in Jeshwang belonging to Sir Samuel John Forster was drafted on 22 June by UAC (Ref. 32). The actual lease was not executed until 9 November and called for DHL securing approximately 59 acres of land (Ref. 33).

Matters can hardly be judged to have moved ahead expeditiously. While DLH pursued the new aerodrome, their licensure for the originally envisioned operations was insecure. The original temporary licenses issued at the end of 1933 only extended through the end of March 1934. Finally, on 15 September Oke notified UAC that the Governor would soon be issuing three documents in favor of DLH:

- Authorisations to land
- Indenture to construct and operate a seaplane base at Half Die
- License to operate a Wireless Telegraph Station at Cape St. Mary (Ref. 34)

The operating authorities were for a period of twelve months, thus codifying the ‘short leash’ strategy first proposed by Parish. Almost immediately thereafter, on 1 December, Governor Richards issued DHL a twelve month license to operate the Jeshwang aerodrome (Ref. 35). (Upon the expiration date in 1935, Richards renewed the license, but only for a period of three months.)

To further underscore the operational uncertainties surrounding the Bathurst facilities, in May of 1935 DLH applied to Gambian authorities for an extension and enhancement to the Jeshwang aerodrome (Ref. 36). As well considered as the original design may have been, modifications were already called for. By this time, Captain Klaube was the German Resident Agent of DLH in Bathurst. He informed local authorities that both the rainy season and normal wind conditions suggested that the runway be reoriented in the direction of prevailing winds and paved with asphalt (Ref. 37). Such improvements would facilitate night-time landings as well as year round operations. The latter was a significant issue, as unpaved landing sites were completely unusable during the Gambian rainy season.

Concurrently, and as a clear inducement to obtain the desired approvals, Klaube inquired of the Secretary whether he would be interested in having the improved aerodrome at the disposal of the Government for military and government aeroplanes ‘free of costs and free of charge’. DLH became involved in such
minutia as negotiating compensation with individual sharecroppers whose land would be taken and with local headmen for cutting down palm trees! Ultimately, approvals were forthcoming on 25 October from the Secretary of State. At about this time, it should be noted, there was a growing concern throughout Europe regarding yellow fever outbreaks. Such concerns were important in light of the November 1934 outbreak of yellow fever in Bathurst. Klaube inquired about Gambian preparedness. Clifford Palmour, the Land Officer, responded that Gambia expected to become a party to the International Sanitary Convention for Aerial Navigation and further that DLH’s facility might thus need to make modifications to become compliant (Ref. 38).

One of the consequences of the growing and evolving facilities in Gambia was DLH’s attempts to control the ballooning costs of both construction and operation. One of the largest of those costs were the import duties associated with both construction materials (asphalt, steel rebars and the like) and consumables (primarily petrol and lubricating oil). This is evidenced by DLH’s regular repeated applications for relief. Such applications, between 1933 and 1937, were directed at authorities in Bathurst and London. Without belaboring the point, there were approximately forty pages of correspondence between DLH and the British during this period (Ref. 39). The British evidenced great willingness to accommodate these requests, subject to the limitations imposed by British tariff law and with frequent reference to the need for reciprocity to be received from German authorities regarding British airlines serving Germany.

The dynamics of DLH’s Bathurst bases notwithstanding, the resulting air mail service was clearly successful. During 1934, DLH completed a total of 47 flights (south- and northbound) and an additional 79 flights in 1935 (Ref. 40 - these excluding flights of the Graf Zeppelin, some of which transferred mails in Bathurst). After the initial two months, the volume of air mail ranged from between 100kg and 250kg per trip on the southbound and perhaps two-thirds of that volume on the northbound trips. (To put this in perspective, if the average letter weighed 5 grams – the single-rate weight – then 100kg contained 20,000 individual letters!) While postal historians attribute much mail to contemporaneous philatelists, the significant commercial use of the DLH service was apparent. Philatelists, for their part, were not content with simply recording individual flight origins and destinations with covers, labels and cancellations. The creative registered cover in Figure 11 was sent to a person not in Bathurst in order to acquire the rare Gambian boxed straight-line instructional markings ‘Not applied for’ and ‘Return to senders’. The cover left Vienna on 18 October, left Stuttgart on the 20th, arrived in Bathurst on the 22nd and then returned to Stuttgart. The sender, not surprisingly, was the Austrian Aero Philatelic Association.

**Figure 12**
26 April 1934
Crash of Floatplane *Tapajoz*
Burgstadt to Rio
Author’s collection
Figure 13
9 March 1937
Crash of Rostock
Upper Edmonton To Buenos Aires
Author’s collection

Figure 14
3 March 1937
Crash of Rostock
Antwerp to Chiclayo, Peru
Author’s collection
The early successes notwithstanding, operations were not problem free by any means. Indeed, on 20 April the Condor floatplane Tapajoz, carrying the DLH air mails, crashed in the harbour at Rio de Janeiro. Both the pilot and co-pilot were killed.

Mail was recovered (Figure 12, page 141) the next day, heavily damaged. Other aviation disasters occurred, including the crash of the Heinkel 111 Rostock on 12 March 1937 while on its approach at Jeshwang (Ref. 41). All 4 aboard were lost, but about twenty mailbags were salvaged and sent onward, including the covers illustrated in Figure 13 and Figure 14 (page 142).

Such was the nature of aviation during these formative years and nothing was allowed to interfere with the development of the DLH service. By 1935 the DLH route structure (Figure 15) included numerous cities in both Europe and South America. DLH was heavily promoting the service with well designed brochures (Figure 16) intended to attract the public attention internationally.
Bathurst was not the only venue where national pride entered into the negotiations. For its part, Brazilian authorities were demanding that at least some of the flights from Natal carry the flag of Brazil. On 30 October 1934, Klaube inquired of the Colonial Secretary on the subject: ‘…within the next months one of our seaplanes… shall be handed over to the Condor Syndicate in South-America and for that reason shall have to bear the Brazilian colors. The plane in question remains in our service, carrying mail from Bathurst to Natal and to Las Palmas… and will have a German crew aboard’ (Ref. 42). Klaube wanted to know if there would be any objection. Indeed there was.

Throughout the entire period that DLH operated in Bathurst, British authorities very tightly controlled the landing authorities granted to DLH. Every flight needed to be scheduled; every substitution or addition of equipment required approval of the tail number (Ref. 43). Thus, the Air Ministry in London stated that it would have ‘no objection in principle’ to such a flag change ‘provided that the Brazilian Government would agree to grant reciprocal facilities for a British service to or in Brazil…’(Ref. 44), effectively quashing the request, which was officially communicated to Klaube (Ref. 45) on 29 November.

For the period between the end of 1935 and well into 1939, there was substantial communication between Bathurst and DLH. But, other than the discussions about import tariffs, such correspondence was confined to periodic renewals of the various operating and occupancy licenses and the ongoing series of equipment substitutions and additions. The addition of Zeppelins to the equipment mixture, while representing a quite different mode of transportation, fell neatly into the category of ‘equipment substitutions’. Operationally, the DLH service through Bathurst proceeded with few interruptions. From a postal history standpoint the volume of commercial and philatelic mail was substantial and has been thoroughly documented elsewhere. Of some interest is the cover in Figure 17 illustrating the 500th flight of the Graf Zeppelin, where the mail was parachuted at Bathurst for onward transmission via DLH to Stuttgart and thence to Nurnberg.

It should also be remembered that the utilisation of the DLH service went beyond the cities shown on their route maps. The service opened up new opportunities for correspondence between effectively all of South America and all of Europe. For example, the registered 1935 cover in Figure 18 originated in Asuncion, Paraguay and was addressed to Frankfort am Main in Germany, travelled by train to Buenos Aires where it met the DLH service.
12 November 1935
Asuncion, Paraguay
connection via train to
Buenos Aires
and onward to
Frankfort am Main
Author’s collection

30 October 1934 Montevideo to Genoa via DLH to Stuttgart
Author’s collection
In another example, the 1935 cover in Figure 19 originated in Montevideo, Uruguay and was destined for Genoa, Italy. The envelope is preprinted ‘Via Air France’ but the circular Condor/Zeppelin/Lufthansa/Uruguay-Europa clearly indicates a DLH routing. Since the cover was cancelled 30 October in Montevideo, it could not have made the Buenos Aires departure of the Graf Zeppelin on that same date, so it most likely was on the 6 November DLH flight passing through Bathurst on the 10th on the way to its 13 November arrival in Stuttgart and thence to Genoa. Coincidently, the Bathurst stop represents the first acceptance of mail from Bathurst northbound (Ref. 46) referred to earlier.

**The End of the Dream – War: the supremacy of political interests over economic interests**

Right on schedule, on 1 June 1939, Colonial Secretary Oke notified DLH that their license to operate the aerodrome at Jeshwang had been renewed (Ref. 47). He made a point of noting that the terms of the lease were identical to those of the lease that had expired the prior day. The war stirrings in Europe notwithstanding, the mails carried by DLH (and the French service too, for that matter) continued throughout the spring and early summer of 1939. But Germany’s mobilisation was apparent and – even before the First of September invasion of Poland – it was clear that the end was near.

The final DLH flight from South America is shown in Figure 20. Originating in Santiago, Chile on 20 August and destined for Antwerp, Belgium, the cover took a significantly non-typical routing, ominously bypassing Bathurst. According to Graue (Ref. 48), DLH South Atlantic was advised on August 25, 1939, to ‘suspend’ service and return all aircraft and ships to Germany immediately. L480 (Ha-139 Nordwind) had already departed when this advisory was received, so it was called back to Natal, arriving 3 hours 45 minutes after its departure. Meanwhile, at Bathurst, Ostmark left and went to Bolama. Dornier Do-26 Seefalke took the last air mail from Natal on August 27 at 1915, flew to Ostmark (at Bolama) and onward to Las Palmas where mail was transferred to He-111 Breslau for flight to Lisbon - Barcelona - Milan - Frankfurt. There exists some uncertainty as to whether the flight details of the Nordwind’s journey were related to instructions from the home office or some other reason (Ref. 49).

A brief chronology of aircraft movement for DLH (Ref. 50) from late July through August of 1939 (see Table 1) serves to clarify the quickening of the service’s demise. The von Roeth had a consistent pattern of departing Bathurst for the return to Las Palmas the day after its arrival. However, on 25 August, the day of its arrival, it abruptly refueled and departed. The Gambia Government Gazette records neither a destination nor the cargo that von Roeth carried. As described above, Nordwind was scheduled to arrive on 25 August at Bathurst and took off as scheduled, but was called back to Natal. The Seefalke departed 25 August right on schedule, never to return.
The finality of that last trip is reinforced by a communication from DLH. The Gambian postal authorities had been notified by DLH (Ref. 51) on 28 August 1939 of the ‘temporary’ but indefinite suspension of the air service from Bathurst ‘...we are sorry to communicate that the air mail service by the German Lufthansa up North and to South America is to be considered temporarily interrupted.’

Relations between DLH and Bathurst devolved rapidly thereafter. Acting under Section 9(1) of the Trading with the Enemy Ordinance of 1939 (Ref. 52), the Governor instructed the Custodian of Enemy Property to seize DLH’s facilities (Ref. 53) and dispose of them as he so chose. A subsequent correspondence, addressed to the Custodian of Enemy Property for the Gambia, is dated 3 October and is from Samuel Forster, the lessor of the Jeshwang property. ‘I have the honour to inform you that the quarter’s rent for the Landing ground at Jeshwang under the tenancy of [DLH] is due on the 9th instant and I shall be thankful if payment is made as early as your convenience’ (Ref. 54). Acting Colonial Secretary Gretton reached out to Forster on 14 October and discussed reversion of property rights to him (Ref. 55) but there is no record of payments having been made to Forster. Apparently, other matters were found more pressing by both the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Aircraft</th>
<th>Arrival/Departure</th>
<th>From/To</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>21-Jul-39</td>
<td>Land-plane <em>Fritz von Roeth</em></td>
<td>Arrival</td>
<td>From Las Palmas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22-Jul-39</td>
<td></td>
<td>Departure</td>
<td>To Las Palmas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28-Jul-39</td>
<td></td>
<td>Arrival</td>
<td>From Las Palmas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29-Jul-39</td>
<td></td>
<td>Departure</td>
<td>To Las Palmas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-Aug-39</td>
<td></td>
<td>Arrival</td>
<td>From Las Palmas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-Aug-39</td>
<td></td>
<td>Departure</td>
<td>To Las Palmas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11-Aug-39</td>
<td></td>
<td>Arrival</td>
<td>From Las Palmas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12-Aug-39</td>
<td></td>
<td>Departure</td>
<td>To Las Palmas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18-Aug-39</td>
<td></td>
<td>Arrival</td>
<td>From Las Palmas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19-Aug-39</td>
<td></td>
<td>Departure</td>
<td>To Las Palmas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-Aug-39</td>
<td></td>
<td>Arrival</td>
<td>From Las Palmas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-Aug-39</td>
<td></td>
<td>Departure</td>
<td>Not Stated!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14-Jul-39</td>
<td>Sea-plane <em>Nordwind</em></td>
<td>Arrival</td>
<td>From Natal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21-Jul-39</td>
<td></td>
<td>Departure</td>
<td>To Natal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28-Jul-39</td>
<td></td>
<td>Arrival</td>
<td>From Natal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7-Aug-39</td>
<td></td>
<td>Departure</td>
<td>To Natal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11-Aug-39</td>
<td></td>
<td>Arrival</td>
<td>From Natal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18-Aug-39</td>
<td></td>
<td>Departure</td>
<td>To Natal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21-Jul-39</td>
<td>Sea-plane <em>Seefalke</em></td>
<td>Arrival</td>
<td>From Natal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28-Jul-39</td>
<td></td>
<td>Departure</td>
<td>To Natal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-Aug-39</td>
<td></td>
<td>Arrival</td>
<td>From Natal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11-Aug-39</td>
<td></td>
<td>Departure</td>
<td>To Natal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18-Aug-39</td>
<td></td>
<td>Arrival</td>
<td>From Natal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-Aug-39</td>
<td></td>
<td>Departure</td>
<td>To Natal</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1
DLH Aircraft Movements July-August 1939

The finality of that last trip is reinforced by a communication from DLH. The Gambian postal authorities had been notified by DLH (Ref. 51) on 28 August 1939 of the ‘temporary’ but indefinite suspension of the air service from Bathurst ‘...we are sorry to communicate that the air mail service by the German Lufthansa up North and to South America is to be considered temporarily interrupted.’

Relations between DLH and Bathurst devolved rapidly thereafter. Acting under Section 9(1) of the Trading with the Enemy Ordinance of 1939 (Ref. 52), the Governor instructed the Custodian of Enemy Property to seize DLH’s facilities (Ref. 53) and dispose of them as he so chose. A subsequent correspondence, addressed to the Custodian of Enemy Property for the Gambia, is dated 3 October and is from Samuel Forster, the lessor of the Jeshwang property. ‘I have the honour to inform you that the quarter’s rent for the Landing ground at Jeshwang under the tenancy of [DLH] is due on the 9th instant and I shall be thankful if payment is made as early as your convenience’ (Ref. 54). Acting Colonial Secretary Gretton reached out to Forster on 14 October and discussed reversion of property rights to him (Ref. 55) but there is no record of payments having been made to Forster. Apparently, other matters were found more pressing by both the
custodian and the Colonial Secretary’s office. The director of public works on 29 November informed the custodian (Ref. 56) ‘…the Aerodrome at Jeshwang has become thickly overgrown in the course of the past three months and is not now in a fit state for Aeroplanes to land.’ On 12 January 1940 the custodian further inquired of the Colonial Secretary whether they had any use for the property, otherwise ‘…I propose disposing of as much of the property as I can’ (Ref. 57).

The end of the story, it would appear, comes in a letter to the custodian and DLH dated 21 September 1940 (Ref. 58). Samuel Forster had passed away on 5 July 1940 (Ref. 59) and his executors informed both parties that, due to the lease payments being over one year in arrears, they were seizing the property on behalf of the estate. The action was not opposed by Gambian authorities. DLH did not reply. And Forster’s executors foreclosed on their leasehold.

An interesting footnote to this saga is a telegram from the Acting Governor of Gambia dated 14 July 1940 and addressed to the Commander-in-Chief, South Atlantic with copies to the Secretary of State and the Governors of Nigeria and Gold Coast. The dispatch stated: ‘Persistent rumours for last several days that a delegation consisting of two or more Germans and Italians would arrive or may have already arrived by Air at Dakar object to reopen Air Mail Service with South America by Luft Hanse Line.’ No such representatives appeared and nothing further was heard on the matter (Ref. 60). Deutsche Lufthansa’s glorious venture through Bathurst for its European / South American service was permanently ended.

References - Books


Collot 2013: Collot, Gerard & Cornu, Alain; French African Airmails 1932 to 1940; London: John Parmenter 2013

Dalwick: Dalwick R.E.R.; The Gambia; London: Robson Lowe Ltd. 1953


Duggan 1995: Duggan, John & Graue, Jim; Commercial Zeppelin Flights to South America; Valleyford, WA: JL Diversified 1995


Lords 1870: House of Lords; Correspondence Respecting the Proposed Cession of The Gambia to France; London: Harrison & Sons 9 August 1870


Picirilli 2011: Picirilli, Robert E.; Postal and Airmail Rates in France & Colonies 1920-1945; Bristol: France & Colonies Philatelic Society (GB) 2011


References - Archives

CMP: Gambia Colonial Secretary’s Office - Confidential Minute Paper, Deutche Lufthansa Archives
Most references, including Graue 2000 Pg. 11, have the ship delivering to Brazil directly. This is apparently the first reference to an intermediate stop at Fernando de Noronha, some 240 miles off the Brazilian coast of Natal. Again, speed being of the essence, flying the final 240 miles was worthwhile to DLH.

CMP 11 August 1933. (Parish to Cunliff-Lister)

CMP 11 August 1933. Translation Pgs. 2-3 (Governor’s Office to DLH)

CMP 6 August 1933. Translation Pgs. 1-2 (German Chargé d’Affaires to Cunliff-Lister)

CMP 29 September 1933 (von Bismarck to Simon)

CMP ?? December 1933 (Parish to von Bismarck)

CMP 11 December 1933 (DLH to Parish)

CMP 28 December 1933 (Oke to UAC)

CMP 5 February 1934

CMP 3 May 1934

CMP 7 May 1934 (Gambian Receiver General (Posts) to Postmaster General Asser, Berlin)

CMP 26 May 1934 (Asser to Receiver General)

CMP 28 August 1934 (between DLH and Post Office at Bathurst/British Gambia)

CMP 2 August 1934 (Receiver General to Parish)

CMP 4 May 1934 (Bertram to A.F. Richards)

CMP 16 May 1934 (UAC to Oke), 7 June 1934 (Richards to Cunliff-Lister) and 15 Jue 1934 (Parish to UAC)

CMP 22 June 1934 (UAC to Parish) and 3 July 1934 (UAC to Parish)

CMP 9 November 1934 (between Forster and DLH)

CMP 15 September 1934 (Oke to UAC)

CMP 1 December 1934 (Richards to DLH)

CMP 31 May 1935 (Gretton [Commissioner of the South Bank Province] to the Land Officer and Surveyor)

CMP 3 July 1935 (Klaube to Land Officer)

CMP 2 November 1935 (Palmour to Klaube)

CMP representing 27 distinct correspondences between various DLH and British personnel

Graue 2000. Flight Lists 5.1 and 5.2

Nierinck 1995. Pgs. 15-17. Other accounts reported various numbers of mailbags salvaged

See, for example, CMP 16 November 1934 (Klaube to Parish)

CMP 26 October 1934 (Brigstocke to Under Secretary of State’s office)

CMP 29 November 1939 (Parish to Klaube)

Graue 2000 Pg. 189. This was the L34 flight

CMP 1 June 1939 (Parish to DLH)

Email from Jim Graue to the author dated 7 September 2014

Email from Dieter Leder to the author dated 1 November 2014

Gambia Government Gazette 15 August 1939 and 19 September 1939. Arrivals and Departures records

CMP 28 August 1939. (DLH to Parish)

CMP 30 December 1939. Order No. 37 of 1939 entitled ‘Trading with the Enemy (Custodian) Order 1939’ was formally issued and published by Governor Southorn on 31 December, but was stated to have come into effect on 3 September 1939

CMP 6 September 1939 (Southorn to Custodian)

CMP 3 October 1939 (Forster to Custodian)
Author’s Note

The robust scope of this paper could not have been realised were it not for the generosity of James Graue in sharing his copies of DLH archive materials. The author is indebted to numerous members of the West Africa Study Circle who provided valuable documents and insights, including John Wilson, Barbara Priddy, Peter Wingent, Stewart Duncan and Klaus Hahn. Thanks are also due to Ken Lawrence, David Crotty, Dieter Leder and Ed Grabowski for their assistance. I am grateful, as well, to Dr. Doris Benardete, John W. Bristow and James Fenner.