On September 23, 2011 the United States Postal Service celebrated the 100th anniversary of the first official air mail flight. On September 23, 1911 Earle L. Ovington was officially sworn in as the first U.S. air mail pilot. He took off in his Bleirot monoplane from the Nassau Boulevard Aerodrome in Garden City, New York, with a pouch of letters and postcards balanced on his knees. He flew several miles to Mineola and dropped his mailbag to the waiting postmaster on the ground. The flight took only about six minutes and would immortalize Ovington as the first of the pioneer aviators to carry the U.S. mail.

Earle L. Ovington was born December 20, 1879 in Chicago, Illinois, the oldest of the four sons of Edward and Mary Ovington. Growing up, Earle had an inquisitive mind. He was always experimenting and was fascinated with electricity. When he was sixteen years old, Earle went to work for the Edison Electric Illuminating Company in New York City. Realizing that his future depended on a formal education, Earle enrolled in the Electrical Engineering program at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Boston, graduating in 1904. All through this period he continued his experiments with electricity, eventually earning the nickname “Volts.” For the next several years he explored several business ventures, including the formation of the Oving-
ton Motor Company to promote and distribute European motorcycles in the United States.

Airplane flight was in its infancy, and Earle's life would take another dramatic change after he witnessed the planes in action at an aviation tournament at Belmont Park, New York, in October 1910. The physics of flight ignited his curiosity and would consume his thoughts and actions for the rest of his life. It didn't hurt that aviators were winning thousands of dollars in prizes for just a few minutes in the air with their planes.

Earle was not one to waste any time. He immediately contacted some of his fellow MIT alumni who agreed to finance his plans to attend aviation school in France and the purchase of a plane. Within two weeks of his enlightenment at the Belmont aviation meet, Earle was headed across the Atlantic, where he enrolled in the Bleirot Aviation School at Pau in the south of France. The first couple of days at Pau were spent “grass cutting” as Earle called it in his diary. On January 20, 1911, with implicit instructions to keep the plane on the ground, Earle accidentally slipped off the plane's seat, and in doing so, pulled the plane's elevator control toward him. Before he had realized what had happened, his plane had lifted off the ground and was over 300 feet in the air. Earle acted quickly, taking the controls and maneuvering the plane over the airfield. After circling the field a few times, he safely landed the plane and proudly returned to his hotel. Earle had spent many hours on his back in bed practicing imaginary flight techniques and he credited his “in-bed flight training” with saving his life that day.

Earle completed eight flights as part of his training at Pau and, on January 20, 1911, he received his pilot's license. He sent a postcard of the Pau aviation hangers to his brother Harold in New York:

Passed my “brevet” [license] de l'Aero-club de France in fine style. Am now officially an aviator and can take part in meets all over the world.

Earle.

At the bottom of the card he assured his brother that he was okay:

Your “face” is on my bureau. I am not dead yet.
Another card picturing him in the cockpit of a plane was sent to his other brother, Edward:

Passed aero Club de France aviator’s license at Bleriot’s school, Pau, 1/20/11 after 8th lesson.

In March 1911, Earle returned to New York on the Atlantic Transport Line’s SS Minnetonka. Sitting at the captain’s table one evening Earle met his future wife, Adelaide Alexander. They married soon after their return to New York and moved into an apartment in Queens, New York, across from Aviation Field at Belmont Park, where Earle’s plane was hanged. Earle had returned from France the proud owner of a Bleriot monoplane with a 70-horsepower Gnome motor. At the time, this was a state-of-the-art flying machine capable of attaining speeds of sixty miles per hour. Earle had his lucky number, a large and very conspicuous “13” painted on the tail of his plane.

Earle’s first flight in his new plane was at Belmont Park on May 21, 1911. Over the next several months he would thrill spectators in aviation meets and tournaments throughout the Northeast and Midwest. He would be the first to fly in the state of Connecticut, and the first pilot to fly over the city of Boston. He flew in aviation meets in Columbus, Ohio and Chicago, Illinois. The Columbus meet was attended by more than 20,000 children who were fascinated with Earle’s plane, which resembled a dragonfly. Adelaide Ovington explained in her 1920 book, *An Aviator’s Wife* (page 64):

Photo postcard of Earle in flight in his Bleriot monoplane, sent by Adelaide Ovington to Earle’s brother Harold, postmarked “MINEOLA N.Y. JUL 29 1911 11AM.”

“Dear Pickie — Don’t believe anything the papers say, Ovie was not hurt at all yesterday....”
The children nicknamed it the dragonfly and Ovie liked the name so much that he had it painted in large letters on the underside of the wings.

Earle wanted to ensure that everyone on the ground would recognize his plane in the air. And it was hard to mistake him for other flyers with the large words “Dragon Fly” painted on the wings, the number “13” painted on the tail, and his mascot “treize” — a small doll resembling a French gendarme — dangling from the fuselage.

The first tournament of the fall 1911 season was the International Aviation Meet hosted by the Aero Club of New York on its flying grounds at Nassau Boulevard, Garden City, New York. More than thirty aviators participated in the event, including Earle Ovington. The aviation meet ran from September 23rd to October 1st. On the first day of the event, more than 10,000 visitors flocked to the Nassau Boulevard aviation field. Adelaide would later describe features of the aviation grounds:

The airfield was as smooth and green as a piece of velvet.... A long row of hangers with electric lights and roomy work benches bordered two sides of the aerodrome.... The sheds were painted green and each one had a large white number on it.

The circumstances surrounding Ovington’s carrying of that first pouch of mail are memorable. The Postmaster General at the time, Frank Hitchcock, was a proponent of mail delivery by airplane. Several previous attempts had failed, but with the upcoming International Aviation Meet, Hitchcock saw an opportunity to revive his dream of transporting the U.S. Mail around the country by airplane. He contacted his friend, ex-Lieutenant Governor Timothy Woodruff, who, at the time, was president of both the Aero Club and Garden City Estates. Woodruff had developed the Nassau Boulevard Aerodrome to encourage aviation and promote flying schools. He used his political influence to help P.M. Hitchcock acquire the necessary approvals to carry the U.S. Mail by airplane during the aviation meet. With the sanction of the U.S. Postal Service, preparations were made in anticipation of that historic flight.

When the spectators arrived on the opening day of the event, they were handed a flyer especially prepared by the Post Office Department to announce the inaugural flight of the U.S. Air Mail Service. The single-page leaflet read:

**U.S. AERIAL POST**

During the meet, mail matter will be daily conveyed from the grounds to Mineola by aeroplane, thence to its destination in the usual way. To conduct this interesting
epoch-making experiment, the government has established AEROPLANE STATION No. 1 on the field, in charge of inspector Boyle, and under the general direction of Postmaster General Hitchcock. The Special Cancellation Stamp Reads:
AEROPLANE STATION No. 1 / GARDEN CITY ESTATES, N.Y. A piece of mail with that stamp on it, is bound to be historically valuable, for it is the first time in the hemisphere that government mail has been carried by aeroplane. POSTCARDS AND STAMPS are on sale at the sub-stations back of the stands. They may also be purchased from salesmen on the grounds.

When Adelaide Ovington arrived at the airfield on the opening day of the meet, she was astounded by the preparations that the U.S. Postal Service made for the event. More than twenty years later she reminisced about the historic day:

Next morning when we went to the airfield, it had been transformed. Twenty regulation mail boxes had been set up, marked “Aerial U.S. Mail,” and two collections were to be made daily by uniformed postmen.

In one corner of the field, like a huge mushroom that had sprung up at night, was a round white tent, labeled:
U.S. MAIL
AEROPLANE STATION NO. 1

Then people began to come, and they kept on coming. They thought at first that they were just coming to the meet, but when they heard that they were to see the birth of the U.S. Air Mail they were thrilled and excited.2

Most aviation historians agree that Ovington was not the first pilot selected to carry the mail on the opening day of the aviation meet. There are many conflicting stories of how Earle ended up carrying the first pouch of air mail. Some reports stated that
two British aviators were asked to carry the first U.S. air mail but turned down the opportunity due to lack of remuneration. At some point Woodruff approached Major Paul Beck of the U.S. army, who accepted the honor, and an announcement to that effect was made by the Post Office Department. The day prior to the aviation meet, September 22, 1911, the Brooklyn Daily Eagle published the following article:

**MAIL ARRANGEMENTS**

Arrangements have been completed between Warren W. Dickson, post office inspector in charge of the New York Division and General Manager Woodruff for carrying United States mail by aeroplane twice daily from the International Aviation Meet, to be held September 23 to October 1, at Nassau Boulevard.

Captain Paul Beck of the United States Army is the aviator who will carry the first special delivery mail sack that has ever been transported through the air in this country. Captain Beck will receive the aero mail sack from a temporary postmaster in charge of what will be known as Aeroplane Station No. 1. The aviator will start from the aviation field each day, one half hour before the regular programme begins. The next delivery will be made at any hour during the afternoon before the end of the programme.

The station will be a large new canvas pavilion in mid-field, near the judges’ stand. Its sloping crown will bear in large letters, easily seen from any part of the field, the sign “U.S. Mail: Aeroplane Station No. 1.” This postal station will be completely fitted for handling all the mail taken up from the grounds by postal carriers. Large assorting tables for handling mail will be arranged around the inside walls of the tent and several postal clerks will be in attendance.

On the day of the event, however, Beck had mechanical difficulties with his plane. Woodruff needed another aviator to take his place. According to Adelaide’s memoire (page 118), he approached Earle and asked him if he would volunteer to carry the mail. Earle responded, “Is this the first time it has ever been carried in America,” to which Woodruff responded, “The very first.” Earle understood the significance of being “the first” to carry the U.S. mail by aeroplane and his intuition would land him in the annals of aviation history.

On September 23, 1911, Earle was sworn in as the “first Aeroplane Mail Carrier in the post office of the United States” by W.W. Dickson, Post Office Inspector in Charge. Earle would carry the mail on the newly assigned route number 607003.

Postmaster General Hitchcock was also cognizant of the significance of the first air mail flight on that day. He himself intended to physically tote the pouch of mail and thus be forever remembered as the first to carry U.S. air mail, overshadowing the role of the pilot. Paul Beck’s plane was a two-seater, and it seemed that Hitchcock’s plan and dream would soon become a reality. When Beck’s plane was not ready, Hitchcock stalled the takeoff for two hours, before finally agreeing to allow Ovington to carry the mail. Ovington’s plane had only one seat and thus Hitchcock would not be able to accompany the pilot on the inaugural flight.

At the twentieth anniversary celebration in 1931, Hitchcock reminisced:

> Throughout the preliminary period during which I was making arrangements for the initial airmail flight...
I expected to accompany the pilot on that occasion and carry the first pouch of airmail. Having previously flown in Bleriot monoplanes of the standard type I took it for granted that Earle Ovington’s ship was a two-seater like the ones with which I was familiar. Not until I arrived at the field at Nassau Boulevard did I learn that his Bleriot was of a smaller pattern and not capable of carrying more than one person. Not wishing to surrender distinction of being the first airmail carrier in history I immediately decided to postpone the flight until a two-seater plane could be procured. I was dissuaded from this purpose, however, by the appeal of Earle Ovington himself, supplemented by the urging of others who felt it was a pity to disappoint the throngs of people assembled there to witness the event. So I handed the pouch to Mr. Ovington, whom I had commissioned as the first airmail pilot, and permitted him to proceed on the first flight alone. Meanwhile, I had arranged to have an Army biplane brought over from Washington and so was able, a couple of days later, to fly the course myself with a pouch of airmail and deliver it to Mineola.

There are conflicting accounts as to whether Hitchcock was actually present on the first day of the event. That famous press photograph of Hitchcock handing the first pouch of mail to Ovington, a photo that was depicted on many philatelic covers, was most likely staged several days later. However, it is hard to believe that with all of the effort he put into pulling off his dream of seeing the mail carried by plane Hitchcock would miss the opportunity of being present at the inaugural flight. What is known is that he was definitely there on September 26th, for on that day he actually did carry a pouch of mail in Captain Beck’s plane.

The stage was now set for Ovington’s appearance. The post office officials were busy all day collecting the letters and postcards that were stuffed into mailboxes strategically placed around the grounds. The mail was then brought to the main post office tent, the large white canvas tent with the words Aeroplane Station No. 1. All the mail was postmarked with a circular date stamp “AEROPLANE STATION No. 1, GARDEN CITY ESTATES, N.Y.” with the date and either an “A.M.” or “P.M.” A straight-line “AERIAL SPECIAL DESPATCH” imprinted on each piece of outgoing mail. Post Office officials inside the tent stacked and tied the letters and postcards into neat bundles with twine and then placed them into the aviator’s pouch.

Adelaide would describe what happened next in her memoir:

About three in the afternoon a hush fell over the field. The time for the flight had come. Noiselessly the big crowd watched Ovie’s three French mechanics wheel out his Bleriot monoplane, “The Dragonfly.” A murmur went through the crowd. A small boy broke away from his mother, ran up to Ovie, and asked him for his autograph. Ovie gave it to him. The mechanics made a few last minute adjustments. Governor Woodruff said something to Ovie. Flash bulbs went off, and cameras clicked. The police held the roped crowd back. Now the sun, which a few minutes before had dropped behind one of the white, fleecy clouds, came out again in all of its glory. The stage was set, and Ovie took center of it. Putting on his goggles and his “crash” helmet, he climbed into the cockpit of the plane. Taking a last look at the crowd, he winked at the little boy, and waved goodbye to me.

Once in the plane, Ovington was handed the mail bag containing 640 letters and 1,280 postcards. He had to balance the bag on his knees as there was nowhere in the plane to put the pouch. This made it very difficult to fly the plane and impossible to land. He was forced...
to drop the pouch from the plane to the waiting postmaster on the ground. When the pouch hit the ground it split open and the letters and postcards covered the field. Once retrieved, they were taken to the Mineola, New York post office and sent on their way. Earle then returned to the Nassau Boulevard Aerodrome to the cheers of awaiting spectators. He had made the round trip in less than ten minutes and he would deliver the mail in this manner on every day of the event, weather permitting.

Hitchcock was satisfied with the results of the air mail flights. After the event he commented: “I am very much pleased with the results of the experiment in carrying mails by aeroplane at the aviation meet at Nassau Boulevard. It would seem that aeroplane service is practicable.” Hitchcock and Ovington would meet again in 1931 at the twentieth anniversary of that first flight.

Earle continued to fly for the rest of his life. He and Adela moved to California in the early 1920s and there he constructed the Earle Ovington Air Terminal in Santa Barbara.

Earle was well known in the philatelic community and was an avid stamp collector. He cacheted and signed thousands of covers relating to that first flight in 1911. Even after his death cacheted covers bearing that unforgettable photo of Postmaster Hitchcock handing Earle the pouch of mail adorned many first day of issue air mail stamp issues. It is ironic though, that even after being formally recognized by the Post Office Department as the first to carry the U.S. Air Mail, Earle would never have a stamp issued in his honor and there has never been a stamp issued to commemorate that first air mail flight of September 23, 1911.

In 1961 the Post Office Department approved a stamp design commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of Earle’s first flight, but when the popular United Nations Secretary General Dag Hammarskjold died suddenly in an airplane crash that year, Adelaide was asked if she would mind waiting until the following year for her husband’s commemorative to be issued. Of course, she agreed, but the stamp would never be issued. Many years later, both of Earle’s children petitioned the Post Office for a commemorative stamp honoring their father but they, too, would die without ever seeing their father so honored.

Earle died on July 21, 1936 at the age of 56. The Nassau Boulevard Aerodrome would yield to suburban development and, the year after Earl’s first flight, would move to the larger Hempstead Plains Aerodrome, just a few miles away. The Nassau Boulevard Aerodrome is now a sleepy Garden City community with an elementary school standing where aviators and planes once soared. If only the school children knew that one hundred years ago a young avia-

Earle was well known in the philatelic community and was an avid stamp collector. He cacheted and signed thousands of covers relating to that first flight in 1911.

Endnotes
3. For a comprehensive study of the 1911 aviation tournament, see The Pioneer Flights of Garden City Estates, New York: 1911 by Robert Schoendorf (Bronx, NY: Al Zimmerman Publisher, 1982).
5. The Christian Herald, October 11, 1911, page 1008.

The Author
Glen DeSalvo is a postal historian and has been collecting stamps for more than fifty years. He specializes in the early aviation history of Long Island, New York.