

Postal History Symposium
Development of Transoceanic Air Mail Service

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German Trans-Atlantic Airmail Services 1929–1939

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Abstract

The role of Germany was paramount in the development and operation of successful trans-Atlantic airmail transport. The competition from France was overcome by superior aviation technology, service consistency and continuing performance advantage.

The primary German competition to the French arose in the form of the airship *Graf Zeppelin*, which concluded a series of successful demonstration flights to South America in 1930 – 1931, and began scheduled seasonal commercial airship service to Brazil in 1932. The German success in the North Atlantic with catapult airmail flights (while French catapult flights failed), prompted the creation of a system similar in principle for the South Atlantic in 1934. It proved very successful and more than a match for the French.

The competition issues in the South Atlantic were resolved in mid-1935 by a cooperative agreement between Deutsche Lufthansa and Air France that provided twice-weekly scheduled South Atlantic airmail service. At the same time, continuing technological improvements gave DLH a major performance advantage over the Zeppelin airships and exclusive rights for flying trans-South Atlantic letter airmail was granted to the DLH / Air France service (even though France did not meet its commitment for weekly all-air service until February 1936).

DLH took a major financial interest in Zeppelin flight operations in 1935 and the airships were integrated into a successful support role for DLH in late 1935 and 1936, thereby minimizing duplication of service and reducing operating costs.

The Zeppelin era ended in May 1937 when the *Hindenburg* burned, but by that time the successes of flying boats, constantly improved since 1925, had taken a permanent lead. More importantly, major advancements in civilian land-based aircraft could be easily seen as the near future of trans-ocean flight.

Meanwhile, the great success of the DLH South Atlantic airmail service prompted similar trial flights in the North Atlantic in 1936 and 1937. Germany enjoyed the lead in advancements in civilian aircraft development through the 1930s, providing airplanes to airlines world-wide, and clearly demonstrating both its superiority and the future with non-stop flights from Berlin to both New York and Tokyo in 1938.

Although clearly the world leader in aviation technology, the German initiative in the North Atlantic was trumped by the power and realities of politics. Pan American Airways, already operating a successful, albeit thin, trans-Pacific service, aspired to be the leader in global air services. In 1937, their only competition was seen as DLH and the North Atlantic was the confrontation site. Pan American was not going to allow DLH an entry into the United States, so, at its behest, a condition for the approval of the DLH service to North America was reciprocal landing rights. This was a condition the United States knew Germany could not meet as it was a nation in central Europe with no frontage on the Atlantic. Although DLH made additional trial flights in 1938, the cause was lost and the aircraft and ships built for the German North Atlantic system were sent to the South Atlantic where they set new records and reliable fast airmail service through August 1939.