

Aéropostale and Air France—A Decade of South Atlantic Airmail

by

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AN OVERVIEW

On September 1, 1939, the German invasion of Poland effectively ended a remarkable period of almost three years during which two European airlines cooperated to offer twice-weekly transatlantic airmail service between Europe and South America. Germany's flagship airline Deutsche Lufthansa took the lead in 1934 by establishing dependable bi-weekly, all-air service, with weekly service soon to follow. The French effort to achieve such consistency took considerably longer. My purpose here is to describe the gradual progress that the French made, during that decade of the 1930s, in establishing weekly airmail service to South America, and also to discuss the formidable obstacles, some of them self-imposed, that they encountered, beginning in 1928 with the inaugural service linking Paris and Buenos Aires.

A DAZZLING FIRST STEP

The first flight to carry official air mail across the South Atlantic left St. Louis, near Dakar, Senegal, on May 12, 1930. Flying for Aéropostale, Jean Mermoz and his crew of two (co-pilot Jean Dabry and radioman Léopold Gimié) took 21 hours to traverse the 3200 km to Natal, in northern Brazil, in a single-engine floatplane, the Latécoère 28 (figure 1).¹ Mail bags were offloaded at Natal and loaded onto a Latécoère 25 which Raymond Vanier flew down the coast to Rio de Janeiro.² Figure 2 shows a registered cover cancelled on May 10 in Paris and addressed to the radioman Gimié. It was backstamped upon arrival at Natal, rather than in Buenos Aires. It may well be that, since Mermoz, Dabry, and Gimié were to remain in Natal for the return flight to Europe, they wanted to have these precious souvenirs of their accomplishment in hand. Figure 3 shows a cover which made the full trip down to Buenos Aires, backstamped there on May 13th and bearing a special cachet for the flight. Both covers were signed by Vanier, probably some years later.

This first transatlantic mail flight was obviously a great coup for the French, coming at the beginning of the new decade and heralding a new era for flying the mail. Unfortunately, it would be 1936 before the French could stamp a cachet on envelopes touting 100% weekly air service for transatlantic mail (figure 4). The story of those intervening years is a story of tragedy in the form of internal bickering and mismanagement that led to: (1) the 1933 firing of Didier Daurat, legendary director of operations for Aéropostale; (2) the betrayal of Marcel Bouilloux-Lafont, who established the network of routes in South America; and (3), at least indirectly, the loss of two crews, including the legendary hero Mermoz, just at that point in 1936 when the goal of dependable service was being realized. Eventually, multi-engine land-based aircraft of the sort that Mermoz favored all along would enable the French to achieve the goal of weekly service.³ But the German occupation of France terminated Air France's transatlantic airmail service in June of 1940, a sad end to a remarkable chapter in airmail history.

MERMOZ ACCEPTS THE CHALLENGE

To get a sense of the obstacles that confronted those who dreamed of flying the mail across the South Atlantic, we need only to observe what followed the inaugural transatlantic mail flight in 1930. Jean Mermoz was one of the most extraordinary pilots in aviation history, and this 21-hour, nonstop transatlantic flight went a long way toward establishing his legend (figure 5). Unfortunately, the return flight from Natal to Dakar would be typical of the difficulties of transoceanic flight. After three days and thirty-five fruitless attempts, beginning June 8, to get the floatplane laden with fuel and mail bags to lift off the water, Mermoz reluctantly gave up, and the mail was loaded onto a ship for the transatlantic passage.⁴ Figure 6 shows a dispatch from Paraguay bearing the cachet for the anticipated June 8 return flight. There is no receiving backstamp, but we can assume with some degree of confidence that the cover crossed the

Atlantic by what the French called “aviso,” a swift Navy vessel outfitted for mail duty, when the Latécoère 28 was unable to make the crossing.

Exactly one month later, on July 8, on the 53rd attempt to take off from Natal, Mermoz did succeed in getting the aircraft to break loose from the surface of the water. Once airborne, he flew for fourteen hours, at which point an oil leak developed, forcing him to land the plane in the open ocean near a support ship. From there, the mail and the crew were ferried the final 900 km to the Africa coast, where the mail bags were loaded onto another aircraft and flown on to Casablanca and Toulouse.⁵ In a final indignity, one of the floats on the Latécoère 28 developed a leak and Mermoz’s now-famous aircraft, the “Comte de la Vaulx,” disappeared under the waves, never to be retrieved. Understandably, there was no special cachet applied to the mail. Figure 7 shows an airmail cover from Buenos Aires with the receiving backstamp applied in Paris on July 16, identifying the cover as having been carried on that unheralded first return flight.⁶ (From this point on, I will refer to transatlantic mail flights using the system developed by Pierre Labrousse in his very handy list of flights and crews published in 1974. This July 8 return flight is referred to as 1R, while the earlier May 12 flight in the east to west direction is designated as 1A.)

It would be three years before the French developed the Couzinet 70 “Arc-en-ciel,” a three-engine, land-based aircraft in which Mermoz duplicated his transatlantic flight with considerable ease, this time with a five-man crew which included aircraft designer René Couzinet himself.⁷ Figure 8 is a card carried on flight 2A that bears individual photos of the crew with a photo of the aircraft along the diagonal. By 1933, then, the aircraft was ready. Unfortunately, dependable runways were not. The Germans responded to that difficulty by sticking to flying boats, obviating the need for runways. Deutsche Lufthansa parlayed their

experience with catapult flights launched from ocean liners into a system whereby a Dornier Wal would be mounted on a catapult rail on a specially outfitted ship which would steam away from the African coast at Bathurst for the better part of a day. At that point, the mail plane would be launched on a flight toward the opposite coast, where it would land on the water near a similar ship capable of retrieving the aircraft and quickly carrying the mail to port in Brazil. The return flight proceeded along similar lines.⁸

From 1928 on, the French had been relying upon the aforementioned avisos and then a second generation of fast ships to handle the Atlantic crossing, but the crossing by ship typically took four days. Mermoz's inaugural 1933 flight in the *Arc-en-ciel* took less than 15 hours, but, because of the runway problem, it was a matter of months before he was able to make the return trip. The value of a multi-engine aircraft was in evidence on that return flight, *2R*, however. One engine malfunctioned and had to be shut down, and yet the flight proceeded safely and took less than 18 hours.⁹

In 1934, while Deutsche Lufthansa was enjoying the advantage of the catapult system, most of the mail carried by the French airline, which by then was called Air France, was still being ferried across the Atlantic by ship. Labrousse lists eight roundtrip transatlantic mail flights in 1934 for Air France, compared to twenty-three by the Germans, thirty-five if we include flights of the *Graf Zeppelin*.¹⁰ Of those eight Air France roundtrips in 1934, three were completed by Mermoz in the "*Arc-en-ciel*." Another three were completed by a newly developed 4-engine flying boat, the sleek *Latécoère 300*, the first example of which was called the "*Croix du Sud*" (figure 9). The final two airmail round trips of 1934, flown in November and December, were carried out by a third aircraft, the *Blériot 5190 "Santos Dumont,"* a 4-engine flying boat depicted in figure 10. The competition among the three distinct aircraft designs

should have assured the French of superior equipment for years to come. It was an advantage that they frittered away.

INFIGHTING AND TRAGEDY

The consequences of the incompetence and corruption of French government officials fell on the shoulders of Marcel Boilloux-LaFont, the businessman who heroically worked to establish the network of routes that gave Aéropostale a strong position in flying the mail between Europe and South America. Boilloux-LaFont had the rug pulled out from under him when the government refused to deliver on the promise of continued financial support. Aéropostale was summarily snatched from Boilloux-Lafont's grasp, and, in October of 1933, French airlines were nationalized under the rubric "Air France," as the purple boxed cachet in figure 11 attests.¹¹

Treachery in high places repeated itself twice in the case of the aircraft manufacturers. In 1934, the young designer René Couzinet signed a contract to produce an updated version of his model 70, the three-engine, land-based, transatlantic aircraft that Mermoz so warmly endorsed. Within a year, the government reneged on the contract. Likewise, la Société Blériot Aéronautique contracted to produce three more examples of the 5190, the dependable flying boat that ultimately shared with the Couzinet 70 the distinction of never having failed on a transatlantic mission. No sooner had Louis Blériot borrowed 5 million francs and set up production than the contract was declared nul and void, leaving the first man to fly the channel between France and England, a revered national hero who had been awarded the Legion of Honor, financially destitute. He would die of a heart attack in 1936.¹²

The winner in this rigged game was Latécoère, the company founded in 1918 by Pierre Latécoère, the man whose vision lay behind the routes down the coast of Africa developed by Aéropostale. The manufacturer of the Latécoère 300 *Croix du Sud* was paid to build three more

of the four-engine flying boats, the new ones to be designated model 301.¹³ Two of those four aircraft would be lost in the open ocean in 1936. Indeed, scarcely had the fanfare in January 1936 over the inauguration of 100% weekly transatlantic mail service subsided when Jean Ponce and his crew went down off the coast of Brazil in bad weather on the 10th of February.¹⁴ Among those lost was Alexandre Collenot, Mermoz's favorite mechanic, the man who had found a way to patch their aircraft and repair the engine when they crashed on a frozen ledge high in the Andes in 1929.¹⁵ And then, as that first year of weekly flights was drawing to a close, Mermoz was lost. The *Croix du Sud* had an engine malfunction after departing the African coast on the morning of December 7, 1936. Mermoz turned back for repairs. An oil leak had resulted in fouling of the electrical system in one of the engines.¹⁶ Rather than waiting for another aircraft to be brought down to Dakar, Mermoz took off with his crew of four once the leaked oil had been sopped up. If the engine had to be shut down in flight, so be it. They would continue with three good engines. Predictably, then, one third of the way across the Atlantic, the crew radioed that the engine was being shut down and the propeller feathered. But the radio transmission was cut off by a violent noise, and the aircraft was never found.

COMPETITION GIVES WAY TO COOPERATION

Returning to the comparative figures for round-trip flights, we recall that in 1934, the Germans completed almost three times as many transoceanic flights as the French (23 vs. 8). The French came much closer to achieving bi-weekly service in 1935, completing 21 round-trip flights, but the Germans were moving toward weekly service with their total of 39 round trips.¹⁷ And in 1936, we find that Air France completed 41 of the 43 trips attempted, while Deutsche Lufthansa completed a comparable number of catapult round trips, 40 to be exact.¹⁸ Again, however, that total was supplemented by mail-carrying round trips by their two airships, the Graf

Zeppelin and the Hindenburg. In 1937, the French finally achieved the goal of weekly airmail flights between Europe and South America. And, oddly enough, what had hitherto been a competitive effort with the Germans became something of a cooperative venture involving coordinated flights by Air France and Deutsche Lufthansa departing three or four days apart.¹⁹

Among those of us who have been bitten by the bug of collecting South Atlantic airmail covers, the rule of thumb for this period of cooperation is that a cover received in Europe or down the coast of South America on a Monday is likely to have been carried by Deutsche Lufthansa, whereas a Thursday receiving backstamp identifies a cover as likely to have been carried by Air France. This twice-weekly service by the two airlines continued until the week of the German invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939, when Germany ceased airmail flights to South America. Figure 12 shows a piece of commercial mail which was postmarked in Poland on August 18, 1939, barely two weeks before the German invasion, and was carried by Air France on their flight which left Dakar on August 21 (flight 213A). The cover has a receiving cancel of Aug. 23 in Buenos Aires, confirming that, at that point in the history of transatlantic mail, it was possible to expect 5-day service between Poland and Argentina. The sobering thought is that, within two weeks of the posting of this letter, business as usual essentially ended for the Polish people.

The French would continue their weekly transatlantic mail flights for the next ten months, through June of 1940. Figure 13 shows a commercial letter posted in Valparaiso, Chile, on June 7, 1940, with the typed endorsement "Via Aire France!" and carried on flight 253R, which left Natal on June 10. As is typical of mail addressed to England, there is no receiving backstamp, but the glaring feature of the cover is a wartime marking, the British censor's tape, indicating that it was "opened by Examiner 679." This flight was under the command of Marcel Reine at

the controls of a Farman 2200 four-engine landplane (Figure 14). It seems ironic, in view of the French flair for design, that they would resort, for transoceanic mail flights, to these Farman aircraft, dependable to a fault, but a singularly unattractive adaptation of a military bomber.

ROUTE DEVELOPMENT ON BOTH SIDES OF THE ATLANTIC

This overview of French transatlantic flights from 1930 to 1940 has glossed over an essential element of the development of airmail in the South Atlantic, namely the development of the supporting routes on both sides. That story begins in 1918, with Pierre Latécoère's Christmas flight over the Pyrenées from Toulouse to Barcelona, the first leg in his envisioned route to Dakar, in what was then French West Africa.²⁰ Figure 15 shows a cover prepared nearly five years later that commemorates what amounts to a survey flight on the leg from Casablanca to Dakar. The cachet by the Aéro Club of Morocco rather grandly designates it as the inauguration of the line. Three Breguet 14 aircraft traversed the distance of 2760 km between Casablanca and Dakar with six refueling stops at stations extending down the northwest coast of Africa.²¹ This was not friendly territory, and, at various times over the next decade, pilots who were forced down by weather or mechanical failure, among them Mermoz, would be captured and held for ransom by desert tribes. The aircraft employed in this 1923 flight were not particularly reliable, and, in fact, the return flight of the three aircraft from Dakar to Casablanca took ten days, with one plane having to be ignominiously sent back on a ship.²²

Remarkably, however, nearly three million letters were flown between France and Morocco, in 1923, as well as 1400 passengers.²³ The daily flight between Toulouse and Casablanca left southwest France in the early morning and landed in Morocco at 4 the next afternoon, barring mishap. Within two years, mail and passengers and mail were being routinely flown down to Dakar and, by 1928, the full network of airmail routes was in place on the eastern

side of the Atlantic.

As for the western side, Marcel Bouilloux-Lafont became the point man for the monumental task of securing landing rights and establishing airfields from Natal in northern Brazil down the coast through Uruguay to Rio de Janeiro in southern Brazil. This network would eventually extend further south to Buenos Aires, Argentina, and beyond, as well as westward across the Andes to Santiago de Chile. Figure 16 shows the receiving backstamp and the three-line cachet of a cover flown by Jean Mermoz and Henri Guillaumet, acting as a team, on the return leg of the official first flight over the Andes between Santiago and Buenos Aires. Their flight on July 18, 1929, came just a few months after Mermoz's legendary survival of the crash in the Andes with mechanic Collenot, and a few months before Guillaumet's impossible five-day march through snow and ice after his crash in those mountains.

The previous year, these two pilots were among the many involved in the March 1928 rollout of what was touted as being nine-day service between Paris and Buenos Aires. By this time, Bouilloux-LaFont had signed at least tentative agreements with the governments of Brazil and Argentina, so the pressure was on to move the mail as quickly as possible. Former WWI hero and airmail pilot Didier Daurat was the iron hand in charge of maintaining the schedule. Figure 17 shows a cover carried on the inaugural flight of the new service. On March 1, Mermoz flew the mail north from Buenos Aires but ran into mechanical problems and was late getting into Rio the next day.²⁴ Pierre Deley made a bee-line for Recife, in northern Brazil, with the mail bags, which now included this cover from Rio addressed to Paris. It is, in fact, a "pli de témoin," a cover prepared by Aéropostale in order to demonstrate the efficiency of their new service. Unfortunately, the aviso that carried the mail across the Atlantic also developed mechanical problems, and the arrival backstamp of March 14 in Paris attests to a 13-day airmail

journey.

Mail moving in the direction France to South America on this 1928 inaugural effort is demonstrated here by two covers. The first, illustrated in figure 18, is a registered postcard bearing France's first two airmail stamps—actually overprints of existing stamps. The card was cancelled in Nice on February 29, with a special cachet, dated March 1, prepared by the “Friendly Aérophilately Club” of Nice. The flight left Toulouse on March 2, and all went well for a while. The cover illustrated in figure 19 is a registered cover for the leg from Casablanca to Buenos Aires, dated March 2. There was a two-day delay when the mail out of Casablanca had to be rescued from an aircraft which ran into high winds and was downed in the desert. After yet another aircraft malfunction, the aviso “Lunéville” departed from the Canary Islands with the mail bags early on March 7.²⁵

What occurred after the bags arrived in Recife, Brazil, was an exercise in ineptitude that must have left the French wondering if they would ever catch a break. The mail bags from the second west-to-east trip up the coast from Buenos Aires were to be loaded onto the Lunéville for its return voyage to Africa. But, sitting on the dock, those bags got switched with the bags from the first trip from Europe that had just been offloaded from the Lunéville. So the two covers that we have just viewed went chugging back toward Africa in those bags which should have been flying toward Buenos Aires. It was some time before pilot Pierre Deley noticed, in offloading the mail that he had picked up in Recife to fly south toward Buenos Aires, that he had the wrong bags. A subsequent radio dispatch to the captain of the Lunéville instructed him to turn back to Recife to correct the exchange of mail bags. The European mail finally arrived in Buenos Aires, with Mermoz flying the final leg, on March 17, completing a bizarre fifteen-day journey. Aéropostale's much ballyhooed inaugural turned out to be nothing to boast about.

A PIVOTAL YEAR

I have alluded to the unfortunate political infighting which resulted in the demise of Aéropostale and the birth of Air France. The bureaucratic skullduggery that led to the financial ruin of Marcel Bouilloux-LaFont also claimed as a victim Didier Daurat, the World War I hero and early airmail pilot who served with the iron hand as director of operations for Aéropostale. Daurat was let go in 1933, and, as previously mentioned, Air France struggled mightily in 1934 to complete eight round-trip transatlantic mail flights as they strove to emulate the consistency of their German competition. The next two covers illustrate both the frustration and the potential for success during that pivotal year of 1934. Figure 20 shows a letter posted in Nice at 4:30 pm on May 25 addressed to Buenos Aires. France's internal airmail network did not include Nice until 1938, so this cover traveled by train to Marseilles, where it was backstamped at 11:30 pm on that same day, the 25th. The mail destined for South America passed through Barcelona and Casablanca before being loaded onto the aircraft for the transatlantic flight. Flight 4A departed from St. Louis (the airfield on the outskirts of Dakar) very early on the morning of May 28th with Jean Mermoz at the controls of the Couzinet "Arc-en-Ciel." His crew included the same two men who had made the historic 1930 flight with him, Dabry and Gimié, with the addition of his favorite mechanic, Collenot.²⁶ Labrousse lists the flying time to Brazil for flight 4A as 16 hours, 10 minutes, an excellent run by Mermoz in his favorite aircraft on its second east-to-west transatlantic journey. The letter was backstamped upon arrival in Buenos Aires at midnight on May 29th, capping a four-and-one-half day journey from Nice. This 1934 flight clearly demonstrated the potential of the French to realize their dream.

The second 1934 cover worthy of note (figure 21) was posted in Seville, in Spain, on August 30. It is a commercial letter addressed to Buenos Aires. What's interesting, here, is that

Air France was obviously promoting itself in Seville, since the sender had on hand an envelope with a printed caption “Via Air France” and, on the reverse, a circled Air France hippocampe, the symbol appropriated by the new airline from Air Orient, which, like Aéropostale, was swallowed up in the 1933 consolidation.²⁷ Seville was actually a Deutsche Lufthansa stop on the way down to Bathurst, but, the DLH flights were only twice-monthly, at the time this letter was posted. So the next available transatlantic flight was Air France flight 6A. This, the third and penultimate transatlantic flight of the “Arc-en-ciel,” originated in Villa Cisneros, in what was then called Rio de Oro, and then departed from Porto Praia in the Canary Islands on September 3, arriving at Natal on September 4. The cover was cancelled upon arrival in Buenos Aires on September 7, eight days after being posted in Seville. This flight was a credible showing for Air France, and the return flight of the “Arc-en-ciel, flight 6R, would occur three weeks later, a considerable improvement over the turnaround time between 4A and 4R. It was a solid move in the direction of the ultimate goal of weekly air mail between Europe and South America.

CONCLUSION

Given the dismal experience of the French in World War II, it is not surprising that the triumphs of what is typically referred to as “Ligne Mermoz” should be so fervently celebrated right up to the present time. With figures such as Jean Mermoz, Antoine de St. Exupéry, Henri Guillaumet, and Didier Daurat burning so brightly in its aeronautical pantheon, French aviation, in particular the effort to move the mail across the South-Atlantic, has left an amazing legacy. If closer study reveals chinks in the armor, if fortune dealt more than one devastating blow, that is to be expected in an effort involving the kinds of risks and complications that overwater flight imposed in the 1930s. There is no denying that establishing an extensive system of airmail delivery across three continents and rendering transatlantic airmail flight a routine affair, as the

French did between 1937 and 1940, is an achievement to be celebrated.

NOTES

1. P. Labrousse, *Répertoire des Traversées Aériennes de l'Atlantique Sud par l'Aéropostale et Air-France, 1930-1940* (Libourne: Labrousse, 1974), 12-13.
2. G. Collot and A. Cornu. *Ligne Mermoz: Histoire aérophilatélique, Latécoère, Aéropostale, Air France, 1918-1940* (Paris: Editions Bertrand Sinais, 1990), 148.
3. See Collot and Cornu, *Ligne Mermoz*, 195, regarding Mermoz's differences with the Air Ministry over the virtues of land-based aircraft. For an account of Mermoz's feelings about the Latécoère 300 flying boat, the exact model in which he and his crew would die, see B. Heimermann and O. Margot, *L'Aéropostale: La fabuleuse épopée de Mermoz, Saint-Exupéry, Guillaumet* (Paris: Artaud, 2003), 177.
4. Collot and Cornu, *Ligne Mermoz*, 154.
5. Collot and Cornu, *Ligne Mermoz*, 155.
6. Collot and Cornu, *Ligne Mermoz*, 155. See also, E. Proud, *Intercontinental Airmails, Volume 1: Transatlantic and Transpacific* (East Sussex, England: Proud Publications, 2008), 182.
7. Collot and Cornu, *Ligne Mermoz*, 189.
8. J. Graue and J. Duggan, *Deutsche Lufthansa: South Atlantic airmail service, 1934-1939* (Ickenham, England: Zeppelin Study Group, 2000), 6-7.
9. Collot and Cornu, *Ligne Mermoz*, 193.
10. Labrousse, *Répertoire des Traversées*, 12-13; J. Graue and J. Duggan, *Deutsche Lufthansa*, 150-154, 186-190.
11. G. de Bure, *Les Secrets de l'Aéropostale: Les années Bouilloux-Lafont, 1926-1944* (Toulouse: Editions Privat, 2006), 153-325.
12. B. Heimermann and O. Margot, *L'Aéropostale*, 175-176.
13. B. Heimermann and O. Margot, *L'Aéropostale*, 176.
14. Collot and Cornu, *Ligne Mermoz*, 216.

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15. For a version of this event based on interviews with Mermoz, see J. Kessel, *Mermoz* (Paris: Gallimard, 1938; Folio edition, pb, 1965) chapter IV, “Le plateau des trois condors,” 288-310.
 16. Collot and Cornu, *Ligne Mermoz*, 216.
 17. Labrousse, *Répertoire des Traversées*, 14-17; J. Graue and J. Duggan, *Deutsche Lufthansa*, 155-160, 191-197.
 18. Labrousse, *Répertoire des Traversées*, 17-23; J. Graue and J. Duggan, *Deutsche Lufthansa*, 161-167, 198-204.
 19. The French and Germans actually signed an agreement to cooperate in their transatlantic efforts in 1935. James Grau found the agreement in the *Luftschiffbau Zeppelin Archiv: 17/0445* in the Zeppelin Museum in Friedrichshafen, Germany.
 20. Collot and Cornu, *Ligne Mermoz*, 9.
 21. Collot and Cornu, *Ligne Mermoz*, 35.
 22. Collot and Cornu, *Ligne Mermoz*, 36.
 23. Collot and Cornu, *Ligne Mermoz*, 31.
 24. Collot and Cornu, *Ligne Mermoz*, 96.
 25. Collot and Cornu, *Ligne Mermoz*, 89.
 26. Labrousse, *Répertoire des Traversées*, 12-13.
 27. Collot and Cornu, *Ligne Mermoz*, 189

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