

April 2010
Volume 6, Issue 11



1546-204454

Book Reports

Northwest Philatelic Library, Inc.



NPL Research
THE 'OUTLAW' RETURN FLIGHT OF F.A.M. 5
Charles Neyhart

In his article "Outlaw Flight from Panama" [*Mekeel's Weekly*, April 29, 1929], author Geo. T. Street irately condemns Pan American Airways and the U.S. Post Office Department for secretly promoting and then obfuscating the details of an air mail flight between Cristóbal in the Canal Zone and Miami, Florida. Most egregious, in Street's view, was that Pan American not only colluded with the USPOD to arrange the prohibited flight, but it prepared and sent 4,000 flight covers to its New York office ostensibly "to protect collectors" and, thereby, effectively closed out many dealers who could not get covers onto the flight. He concludes his short diatribe by stating "Anything that smells bad is not attractive to the average Air Mail collector, either in the U.S. or abroad." Well, well.

GEO. T. STREET

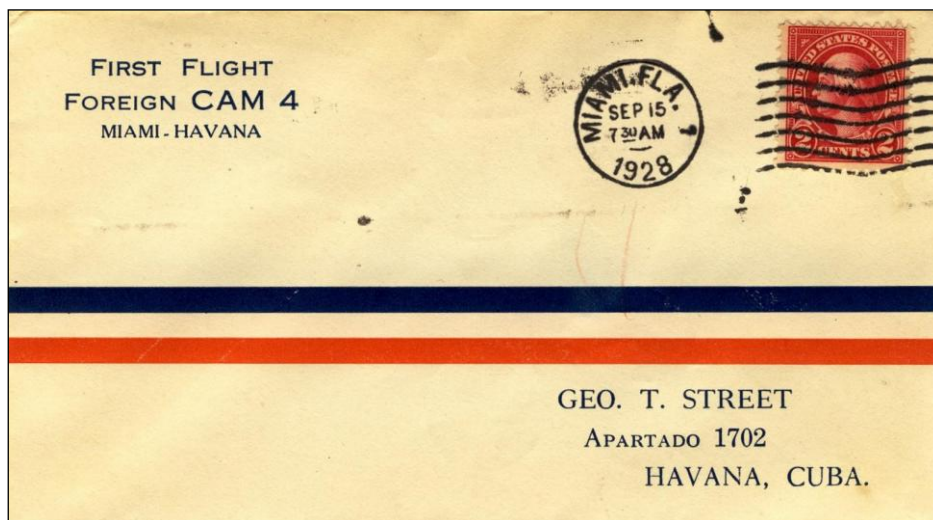
George Street was a familiar name to aerophilatelists in the 1920s and 30s. George held AAMS membership number 275. He serviced flight covers and worked as a stringer 'correspondent' for a number of stamp publications with an emphasis on aerophilately on the West Indies and Central America routes. He was a long-time resident of the area who probably supplemented his income doing these things. [His would have been a perfect 'front' for the protagonist James Wormold in Graham Greene's *Our Man in Havana*. Wormold, instead, sold vacuum cleaners.] I own a few FAM 4 flight covers serviced by Geo. T. Street. It was my interest in FAM 4 that introduced me to George's columns. George was well-placed to react to the fast-changing and fluid world of airmail flights and arrangements. He witnessed, first hand, some exciting and historical events from an aerpostal history context.

But Geo. T. Street was cranky. He complained regularly in his dispatches. His usual target was the USPOD, or as he called it, "Washington." In one case, George stumbled onto a Miami-to-Havana overlap between two routes that were charged at different rates: 5-cents on FAM 6 versus 2-cents on FAM 4, both routes operated by PAA. Thus, in the February, 1929 *Air Mail Collector*, George could not constrain himself.

Washington should wake up to the fact that her not inconsiderable income from first flight cover fans merits information that can be relied on, and that the wildest flight of imagination cannot reconcile charging 5 cents for a cachet on F.A.M. 6 when mail leaving the Miami Post Office [on FAM 4, *Author*] at the same time, and flown to Havana by the same company, and arriving at the Havana Post Office at the same time, gets over without the five cents. It would almost appear that we are a bunch of boobs to pay it.

On another occasion, George prepared last- and first- flight covers for a rumored internal routing change on FAM 4. He was irritated at being unable to pin down Washington on exact dates. So George was forced to send his covers to the Havana post office in advance with his best advice as to handling. The unannounced changes took place December 4 and 5, 1928, respectively, but George's covers stayed put in the Havana post office. The subsequent headline, printed over his byline in the January, 1929 *Air Mail Collector*, screamed "I Missed Out." He blamed this on having to send the covers to the Havana post office. He then tried to peddle his non-flown covers for 50-cents each.

Finally, in the same issue of *Air Mail Collector*, George recounts in some detail his misadventures regarding the opening dates and applicable rates for FAM Routes 5, 6, and 7. Intimating that he'd been purposely led on by Washington, George ended up scrambling to get his covers out for the route openings and had to incur additional charges to cable updated remittances and revised handling instructions to the various postmasters. He wrote cantankerously: "Total \$16.28 spent because I got misinformation on rates and dates, and official information at that!"



MIAMI – CRISTOBAL

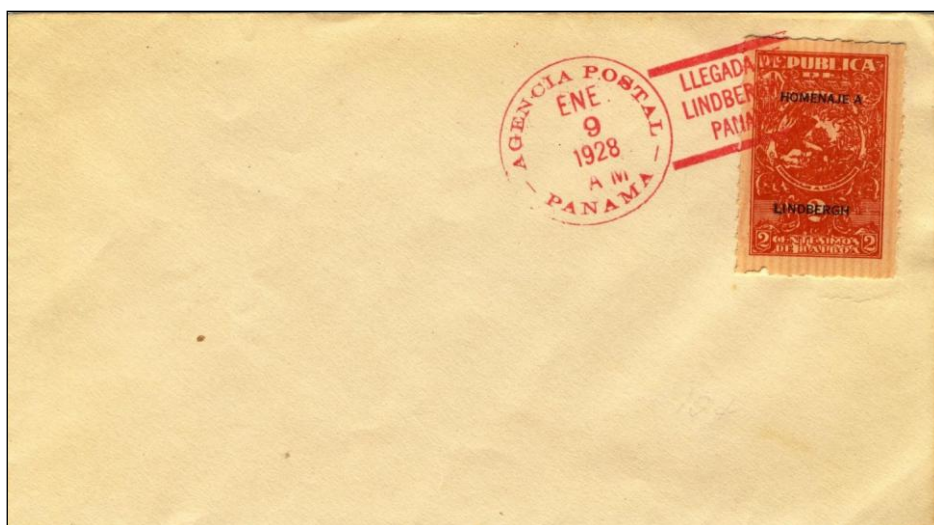
The initial routing of FAM 5 was Miami to Cristobal in the Canal Zone. FAM5 was part of a family of PAA-contracted routes to originate in the area at the time: FAM 6, Miami-San Juan [January 9, 1929] and FAM 7, Miami-Nassau [January 2, 1929]. The inaugural flight, delayed from a planned mid-January departure, left Miami February 4, 1929 and arrived in Cristobal as scheduled February 6.¹ Approximately 500 pounds of mail was carried aboard this flight. The fully-envisioned FAM 5 route was not yet fully operational; thus, this was a trial flight with limiting provisions, one of which was that mail for the flight could be dispatched and delivered only at Miami and Cristobal, despite the fact that the flight landed at several intermediate sites. The airmail rate for the flight was 25-cents per ½-ounce plus

¹ This trip included overnight stays in Belize and Managua and numerous fueling stops. The flight plan was also amended to conduct aerial surveys over the Yucatan and between Belize and Managua.

regular postage of two cents. Most covers carried on this leg were philatelic, as will be noted later.

CHAS. A. LINDBERGH

Charles Lindbergh unknowingly was to become a central character in the ‘outlaw flight.’ Lindbergh had done much to set the stage for opening the Pan American routes in the West Indies and Latin America. During his tour of the area, from December, 1927 to February, 1928 and piloting the *Spirit of St. Louis*, Lindbergh conducted aerial surveys of those future routes. The many goodwill stops on the tour were wildly celebrated, some even resulting in special stamp issues. A case in point: Panama issued two stamps for Lindbergh’s January 9, 1928 stop in Panama City. One of these, Panama Scott 256 on a January 9, 1928 Lindbergh commemorative cover, is shown below. Panama would soon loom large in the ‘outlaw flight’ saga.



Charles Lindbergh was the pilot on the inaugural flight of FAM 5. Serving as co-pilot was John Hambleton, a vice-president of Pan American. Juan Trippe, Pan Am’s president, flew on the Miami-Havana leg of that flight. As might be expected, the presence of Lindbergh added to the flight’s prestige; hence, most of the mail flown to Cristobal was philatelically inspired. Mail for the return trip would later prove to be a problem.

PANAMA WANTS TO BE INCLUDED

Postal regulations in the Canal Zone were explicit: Mail originating in the Canal Zone must be franked with Canal Zone postage stamps. Panama had other ideas. It wanted covers, franked with Panamanian stamps and postmarked in Panama, to be included on the FAM 5 return flight. In fact, Panama had gone so far as to print 50,000 special surcharged airmail stamps² for this purpose. The lure of a ‘Lindbergh cover’ was simply too great an

² The 25-centesimos surcharged stamp was the Panama 10-centesimos special delivery stamp E3.

opportunity. The economics penciled out here as well: a nice potential financial windfall, particularly if collectors retained copies. Perhaps sensing difficulties in getting covers aboard the return flight of FAM 5, Panamanian diplomats entered into discussions with Washington.



THE OUTLAW FLIGHT

The story of the ‘outlaw flight’ is well known by aerophilatelists and Canal Zone specialists. The flight’s moniker is attributed to Irving Glover, Second Assistant Postmaster General, who stated the Panama covers were not official and that carrying them on the flight would be illegal. At ground level, diplomatic negotiations had stalled and there was rumor of Congressional action to stop the flight. It seemed then that the Panamanian covers would not catch the flight.

Pan American then stepped forward, agreeing not only to provide a second aircraft and crew for the Cristobal-Miami flight, but also prepared 4,000 Panama first flight covers. If you are skeptical about Pan American’s largesse, you are not alone. While unconfirmed by the written record, the word is that Juan Trippe exerted enough pressure on Washington to have the arbitrary POD policy overruled. Moreover, Pan American eventually wanted to establish an air route to include Panama.³ Thus, PAA dispatched a matching Sikorsky S-38 to France Field in Cristobal, piloted by R. J. Merritt, ostensibly to carry the [outlaw] Panama covers.

As it developed, there was too much Canal Zone mail for Lindbergh to carry it all, and a portion of it was shifted to Merritt’s aircraft.⁴ Thus, in theory, Lindbergh carried only Canal Zone mail; Merritt carried the excess Canal Zone mail and the Panama mail that had been accumulated and transferred to France Field from the Colon, Panama post office. The two aircraft departed Cristobal together February 10 and landed in Miami February 13. Even though Merritt carried both Canal Zone and Panama mails, his flight was tainted by the term ‘outlaw.’ Yet, the USPOD got the last laugh. The Panama covers did not receive a Miami backstamp [unless registered mail], nor were they forwarded via airmail. Both of these services were provided for the ‘legal’ Canal Zone covers.

CONCLUSIONS

Geo. T. Street may have had legitimate issues with how the Cristobal-Miami flight unfolded, although I suspect George may have first been more concerned about whether his own covers had been serviced. Regrettably, George seemed to fade from the aerophilatelic scene soon thereafter. I don’t know why, nor does the record tell us. Yet, George was always an enjoyable read. And, amusing, too. Despite his crankiness, he was able to tie down the many complexities and uncertainties of air routes and mail rates at that early stage of development. George didn’t talk down to his audience; he was in our corner. He and Harry

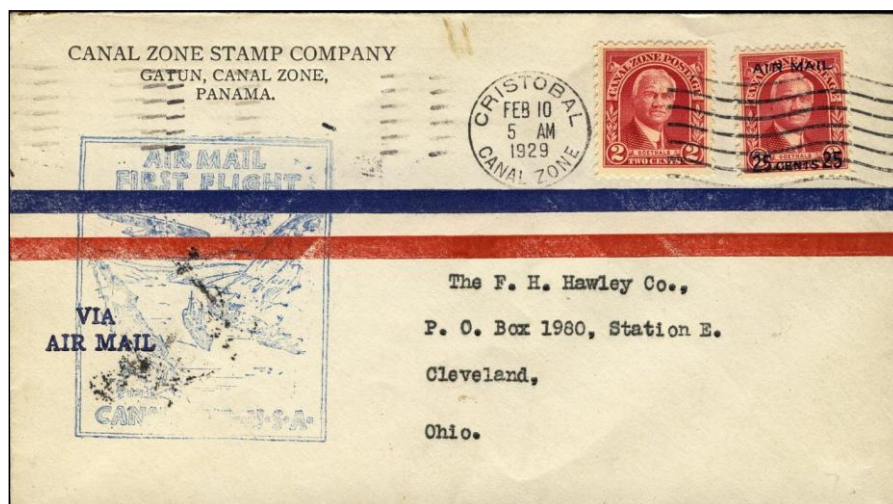
³ In 1930, mail from the Panamanian cities of Colon and Panama City was added to the FAM 5 Express service.

⁴ There appeared to be some sentiment that it would have been bad PR for Lindbergh to carry any of the Panama mail; hence, he supposedly carried only Canal Zone mail. Because the Canal Zone mail was split up, it is indistinguishable between aircraft and pilots.

Huber, another noted correspondent of the time, complemented one another – Huber, the serious facts-only type of writer and George, the grouchy guy who seemed to infuse his words with a more personal outlook in tracking down a story. His dispatches were personal, interesting and informative, generally outspoken, but usually perceptive.⁵



An 'Illegal' Panama Cover Carried on the "Outlaw" Flight
(Len Lukens Collection)



A 'Legal' Canal Zone Cover Carried on the FAM 5 Return Flight
(Len Lukens Collection)

⁵ My thanks to Ellen Peachey of the American Philatelic Research Library who provided biographical information about Geo. T. Street.



February 13 Miami receiving backstamp on the Canal Zone cover above.
(No receiving backstamp was applied to the Panama covers.)

Many philatelic references include information about the ‘outlaw flight.’ Those I used for this study **from the NPL Collection** are:

- American Air Mail Society, *American Air Mail Catalogue*, 6th ed., Vol. 3 [2005].
- Norman Alan Cohen, *A Philatelic Guide to the Postal History of the West Indian Aerial Express and Pan American Airways, 1927-1931* [1997].
- Armand Cote, “Lindbergh’s February 1929 F.A.M. 5 Inaugural Flight, Covers and Cancellations,” *The Canal Zone Philatelist*, Vol. 37, No. 1 [2001].
- David J. Leeds & David T. Zemer, “Panama Lindbergh Proofs,” *The Canal Zone Philatelist*, Vol. 29, no. 2 [1993].
- Mitch Mayborn, “Lindbergh Flies the Mail in Panama,” *The Airpost Journal* [May 1972].
- Robert B. Spooner, “A Comparison of Lindbergh FAM-5 and ‘Outlaw’ Covers to Havana,” *The Airpost Journal* [October 1989].
- Geo. T. Street, “I Missed Out,” *The Air Mail Collector* [January 1929].
- _____, “Development of the Air Mail Service to the West Indies and Central America,” *The Air Mail Collector* [February 1929 and April 1929].
- _____, “‘Outlaw’ Flight from Panama,” *Mekeel’s Weekly* [April 29, 1929]; reprinted in *Mekeel’s and Stamps Magazine* [June 5, 2009].

Northwest Philatelic Library, Inc.

President - Charles Neyhart, Vice president - Grant Babb [ex-officio], Secretary - W. F. ‘Buzz’ Oerding, Treasurer - Wayne Holmes, Directors: Darlene Lengacher, Don Overstreet, Greg Alexander, Janice Weinstock. Secretary Emeritus - Tom Current.

Contact: P.O. Box 6375, Portland, OR 97228-6375
(503) 284-6770 nwpl@qwestoffice.net www.nwpl.org

Northwest Philatelic Library, Inc. is a nonprofit, tax exempt organization under Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code. Any contributions to NPL may be deductible as charitable contributions on the donor’s tax return.