

## Air Mail in the Twenties

"The first United States mail ever carried from Chicago to Omaha by air route", it was reported, passed through Iowa City on January 8, 1920. This initial flight carried no regular mail for Iowa nor was any Iowa mail taken on board. At Iowa City, however, when the plane stopped en route, Pilot Walter Smith carried a letter which he personally delivered to Robert N. Carson on the airplane field. Presumably this was the first airmail letter ever delivered in Iowa.

As a part of the publicity campaign for the inauguration of a new day in air transportation, Mr. Carson had planned to send a small Iowa pig to Chicago with Pilot Smith upon his return from Omaha. Accordingly at 1:33 o'clock on the morning of January 9th, Smith, piloting plane No. 104, left Iowa City with a live pig consigned to John Burke, manager of the Congress Hotel in Chicago. It was originally planned to send the pig on the previous day and so before the consignment arrived the consignee was reported to be "getting impatient". A message from E. E. Peake, manager of an automobile exhibit being held in Chicago, addressed to "R. N. Carson, Chief

Good Roads Booster, Iowa City," said: "Johnny Burke is standing out on Lake front watching for airplane pig. Hurry up or it will be a hog. No one here believes your story."

The Carson pig created considerable comment in Iowa City, and perhaps it created not a little merriment when, decorated with blue ribbons, it was led across the lobby at the Congress Hotel. But in reality regularly scheduled shipments of mail or products by air were left for the future.

Thirteen months later, on February 21, 1921, the United States Post Office Department conducted a series of experimental flights in anticipation of the establishment of regular coast to coast mail service, involving night-time flying.

A message from Hazelhurst, New York, on February 24th reveals something of the results. "Eight bags of mail dispatched from San Francisco by airplane at 4:30 Tuesday morning, arrived at Hazelhurst field yesterday at 4:50 p. m., establishing a cross-country mail record of 33 hours and 20 minutes, with allowance for time zones changes in the coast to coast flight."

To accomplish this difficult and dangerous feat, the Post Office Department had dispatched four airplanes on a transcontinental mission. Two planes had left Hazelhurst Field with mail addressed to San Francisco. At the same time two

planes had left San Francisco with mail for New York City. The mail was transferred from plane to plane in a relay flight. Pilots were changed from time to time, but only one of the relays succeeded in spanning the continent.

One of the west-bound planes was grounded at Debois, Pennsylvania. The other continued its journey as far as Chicago. One of the east-bound planes flew from San Francisco to Elko, Nevada, where the plane was wrecked and its pilot W. F. Lewis was killed. The east-bound plane which was successful in reaching New York was piloted on the last leg of the journey by E. M. Allison. Allison had left the New York field on the west-bound plane which arrived at Chicago. He had piloted as far as Cleveland, Ohio, and had remained there to take over the east-bound plane which was piloted from Chicago to Cleveland by Jack Webster. Other pilots who participated in this successful relay were Farr Nutter, who started the flight at San Fransisco and carried the mail to Reno, Nevada. There the relay was taken up by Easton who piloted the ship to Salt Lake City, Utah. The distance from Salt Lake to Cheyenne, Wyoming, was traversed by Pilot Jimmie Murray. Pilot Yager flew the plane from Cheyenne to North Platte, Nebraska. From there to Chicago, the mail plane was flown,

chiefly during the hours of darkness, by Jack Knight, one of the best aviators of his day.

On February 23, 1921, the *Iowa City Press-Citizen* carried a story of the flight, and of the landing at Iowa City — the only stop that was made in Iowa. "A splendid flight through darkness; with a perfect landing on a strange field — after a journey of countless miles over a tract he had never beheld before, by day or night — that is the admirable record of Lieut. Jack Knight, a transcontinental flyer in Uncle Sam's air mail service, who reached here this morning, at 4:45 o'clock — only 20 minutes behind a schedule that covered the extraordinary aerial voyage", began the account.

"For many miles, Lieut. Knight fought adverse conditions", the reporter continued. From North Platte to Omaha "clear weather favored him", but after he left there two hours after midnight, "gloomy and forbidding" clouds covered the sky all the way to Des Moines. "Thus, through Stygian gloom, he pursued his way, fought bravely on."

After passing the capital city, "he was a bit more fortunate for a time, as the murky atmosphere cleared, and, at an altitude of 1000 feet, he flew Iowa Cityward." Near Williamsburg, "he met the forces of nature that made for renewed

danger — snow and fog, and banks of depressing clouds, through which he was compelled to fight his way, blindly, determinedly, desperately. This was about 4:15. Temporarily, the fog and snow, hostile and perilous, almost induced him to attempt a landing at some spot — but he would not descend”.

Presently he was in the vicinity of Coralville, but “could not locate the aviation field far to the south. He flew around in the gloomy heights for about 15 minutes, and finally succeeded in locating the Iowa City field, where Chief H. S. Long awaited his coming. The lights on the local field helped him, of course, after he reached a point within the scope of his vision on high. Espying the gleaming beacons 1000 feet or so down, he then descended, and made a perfect landing.”

“It was a wonderful feat”, declared Chief Long, of the Iowa City station. “Many a time a pilot, new to the territory over which he is flying, and whereon he desires to descend, finds it difficult, even in the daytime, to locate a strange field. This has been true right here.

“With Jack Knight coming to a perfectly strange city and field; and at night; and under adverse conditions, too, what he accomplished is about as fine a piece of work in the air as I ever saw.”

On the following day the *New York Times* quoted Knight as saying in Chicago that he was "feeling fine" except that he needed something to eat and some sleep. "I got tangled up in the fog and snow a little bit," he said. "Once or twice I had to go down and mow some trees to find out where I was, but it did not amount to much, except for all that stretch between Des Moines and Iowa City. Say if you ever want to worry your head, just try to find Iowa City on a dark night with a good snow and fog hanging around. Finding Chicago — why, that was a cinch, I could see it a hundred miles away by the smoke. But Iowa City — well, that was tough."

Two more years passed while planning and experimentation in air-mail transportation continued. *Current Opinion* for September, 1923, said: "Brilliant illumination along a pathway 1,000 miles long will be one of the features of the cross continent air-mail service to be inaugurated by the Post Office Department shortly. A line of beacons will extend from Chicago to Cheyenne, covering one-third of the route from New York to San Francisco. Over this part of the course, mail carrying planes will travel at night. The schedule calls for departure from New York daily at noon, and arrival at Frisco toward evening of the following day — an elapsed time of only 28 hours."

Prior to this time there had been much planning and intermittent attempts to improve the service. But transcontinental air-mail transportation had not yet become a through service. Rather it was auxiliary to railway mail service. Early-morning mail planes would pick up mail bags in New York, carry them to Cleveland, and place them on the Chicago express train which left New York the night before. The new system was intended to "lift the air mail out of its auxiliary status and give it the standing of an independent service from coast to coast."

To perfect this plan and to facilitate night flying, powerful beacon lights were installed at each of the five regular flying fields — Chicago, Iowa City, Omaha, North Platte, and Cheyenne. Each was to have a 600,000,000 candlepower light, which would swing slowly around on top of a tower, where it would be visible for fifty miles. In addition to these terminal lights, less powerful lights were located at twenty-mile intervals to mark emergency landing fields. As a final safeguard flashing traffic lights directed upward were located every three miles along the line of flight.

In accordance with a well-laid plan of the Post Office Department a trial flight was made over this route on August 21, 1923. The plane which left San Francisco on this flight was delayed en

route. But an east-bound plane which left Cheyenne at 6:53 o'clock Tuesday evening without waiting for the San Francisco plane arrived at Hazelhurst Field at 5:04 Wednesday evening.

Only about fifty persons, among them J. E. Whitlock, Superintendent of the Eastern Division of the Air Mail, and W. E. Clecknen, detailed by Postmaster Morgan for the arrival, were at Hazelhurst Field when the Cheyenne plane landed. Word had been received that Pilot Eugene Johnson had left Cleveland at 2:02 Wednesday afternoon on the last lap of the eastward flight, which usually required three and a half hours. At 5 o'clock a plane appeared in the sky. Four minutes later it taxied up to the hangar, and the officials were surprised to see Johnson climb out. He had arrived fifty-nine minutes ahead of his schedule.

Johnson had averaged 140 miles an hour over the 435-mile air way between Cleveland and Hazelhurst Field, at one time attaining an altitude of 11,000 feet over Bellefonte, Ohio. With favoring weather and wind, he had just "opened up for all she's worth" in the last lap of the race. Mail which had arrived on the plane was hastened to the New York post office whence it was distributed yet that night.

One of the letters carried on this trip was dispatched by Robert N. Carson from Iowa City at



three A. M. to the editor of the New York *Times*. "Greetings, with the inauguration of the night flying of the Air Mail", it began. "The mail that left New York City Aug. 21, at 11 a. m., arrived here the same date at 8:50 p. m. and left for the West at 9 p. m. en route to Frisco. The ship arriving here was slightly ahead of schedule.

"Let us hope", the letter concluded, "that the flying of the Air Mail by night as well as by day is a permanent thing".

The westward flight which was made at this time was equally successful. Mail which left New York on Tuesday morning was delivered in San Francisco on Wednesday evening. This was the first mail ever carried westward by air the complete distance between these two cities. Jack Knight, ace flyer of 1921, was one of the pilots on this relay flight.

In 1938 Knight visited Iowa City and recalled those early flights. At that time he predicted that flying in the near future would be "in four-motor, 42 passenger planes, which will fly non-stop coast to coast." Trans-Atlantic plane service as well as trans-Pacific service, he said, would soon come.

Knight's prophecies have now been richly fulfilled. But Iowans should not forget those heroic days of small beginnings in the development of air mail transportation in the decade of the twenties.

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