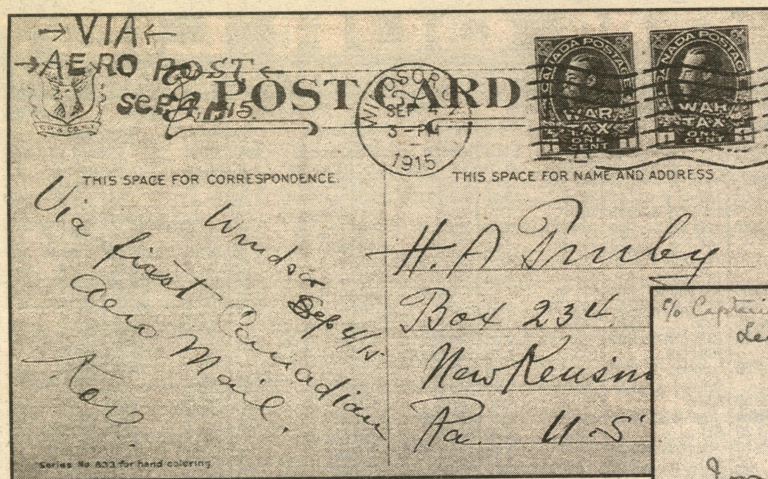


Figure 1: Canada's first airmail crash cover. One of three recorded.



# Canada's Interrupted Air Mail

▼ CHARLES J.G. VERGE

Canada is the second largest country in the world after Russia. Virtually 90 percent of Canada's population lives within 100 miles of the American border. It is therefore not surprising that, in the 1910s, once aviation was well underway, Canadians were among the first to use airplanes to expedite the mail to remote places and over long distances.

Contract airmail started in Canada in 1928, but many pioneer flights were made before that. Some of them carried mail. In the early days of aviation and experimental flights, some of these encountered mishaps, sometimes fatal ones, where passengers and crew were killed and mail was destroyed, damaged and/or delayed.

The centuries old tradition of the mail going through was carried to this new form of mail transportation. Every effort was made by Canadian and foreign post offices to ensure that mail was safely delivered to the addressee.

Interrupted mail includes not only mail that was recovered from crashed airplanes but also, in the early days, mail that was delayed because of weather, mechanical difficulties or other reasons.

This column will provide a glimpse of this kind of mail during the pioneer years of airmail in Canada. It is a virtually unknown facet of the fascinating world of Canadian and Newfoundland airmail collecting.

Most of the illustrations are from the collection of Major R.K. Malott who has specialized in Canadian Air Mail collecting for more than 40 years. He is the editor of the recent sixth edition of *The Airmails of Canada and Newfoundland* published by the American Air Mail Society.

Canada's first recorded "crash cover" was cancelled on Sept. 4, 1915. The flight was scheduled to leave Windsor, Ontario, and make its way to the Michigan State Fair near Detroit. Flown by the Patterson brothers, the aircraft crashed during a trial flight and never carried the three postcards prepared for the flight (Figure 1).

Canada's first "official" airmail was flown from Montreal to Toronto by Capt. Brian A. Peck of the 43rd Squadron of the Royal Air Force (Canada). The flight was scheduled to depart on June 23, 1918, but was delayed one day because of inclement weather. There were 124 envelopes on the flight and all received the triangular red cachet found in Figure 2.

The well-known June 14-15, 1919 flight by Alcock and Brown from St. John's, Newfoundland to Clifden, Ireland was the first successful Transatlantic flight. The airplane carried 196 covers on an 1,800-mile flight and ended up crash landing in a bog near Clifden.

Figure 3 shows one of these covers. It bears the \$1 overprinted stamp issued by Newfoundland to pay the airmail rate for this flight. Ten thousand 15-cent stamps were overprinted in sheets of 25. At least five different varieties are known.

Figure 4 shows an envelope that was salvaged from the crash at Golden, British Columbia, of a Curtiss JN-4 flown by Captain Ernest C. Hoy from Calgary to Vancouver. Hoy carried a small quantity of

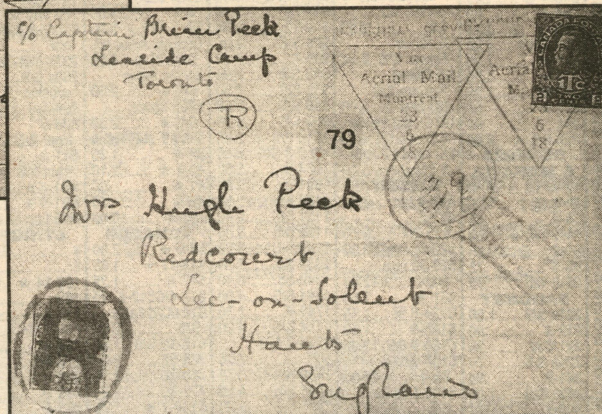
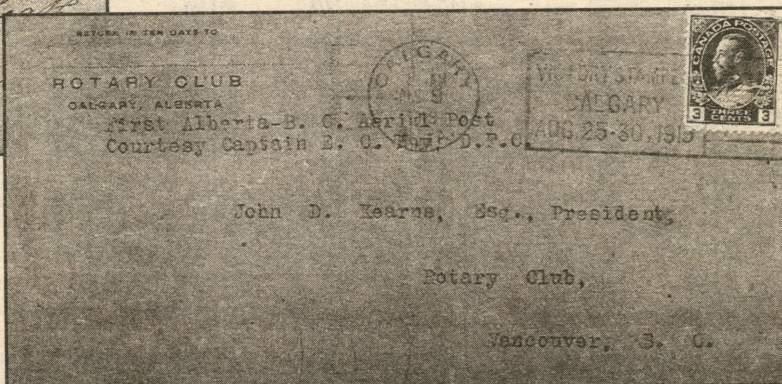


Figure 2: One of the 134 envelopes carried on the first official airmail flight between Montreal and Toronto on June 24, 1918.



Figure 3: A cover from the Alcock and Brown successful Transatlantic flight of 1919 that crashed in a bog near Clifden, Ireland.

Figure 4: Salvaged at Golden, B.C., from the Calgary-Vancouver return leg on Aug. 9, 1919.



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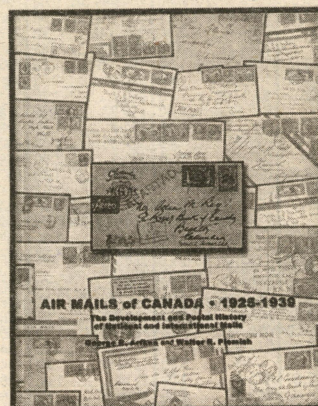
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1925-1939

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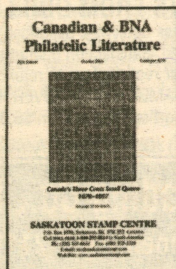
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mail on this return leg of the flight that had originated in Vancouver. He had landed at Golden to refuel and when he took off he had to avoid two children who darted out onto the field. As a result, the aircraft crashed, smashing the wings and cracking the engine. The salvaged mail continued on to Vancouver by rail.

In the Maritimes, after several delays, an airmail service was inaugurated between Botwood, Newfoundland and Halifax, Nova Scotia. The first flight, to be flown by Major F. Sidney Cotton, was scheduled for Nov. 27, 1921. The de Havilland 9 finally left Botwood on December 10 and carried about 5,000 pieces of mail. Some 14,000 special stamps were issued by Newfoundland for the purpose (many varieties exist). After flying 95 miles the plane was forced down by engine trouble. Letters, such as that shown in Figure 5, were later sent to their destinations by surface routes.

On June 22, 1922, Capt. J.E. Palmer and Lt. H.H. Fitzsimmons (Figure 6) were at the command of a test flight attempting to establish an airmail link between Lethbridge, Alberta, and Ottawa, Ontario, when they had to swerve to miss a car on landing at Minot, N.D. Two women were in the car; one was learning to drive. The aircraft was severely damaged and the mail was sent on to Ottawa by train.

In a letter to Harry S. Trubey of New Kensington, Pa., and enclosed with the envelope in Figure 7, Fitzsimmons explains the purpose of the flight. "The writer is the originator of the first Trans International Air mail flight, and received permission from the Canadian Government and the U.S. as well to deliver and lift mail en route. The flight was in the nature of an experimental one for mail service and was entirely financed by myself..." The flight carried 993 covers of which about 150 are known to survive today.

One of Canada's most famous airmail disasters of the experimental era was the London, Ontario, to London, England, flight of Aug. 29-Sept. 7, 1927. The flight was sponsored by Labatt Breweries which offered \$25,000 to any Canadian or British pilot who could make a nonstop flight from one London to the other. After much preparation, Capt. Terrence B. Tully and Lt. James V. Metcalf took off from London, Ontario, on September 1 in their specially built Stinson SM-1 aircraft, the "Sir John Carling" (Figure 8).

A special stamp (100 were printed) was issued for the flight and 90 covers were prepared and carried on the plane. The plane left London, Ontario, on August 29 but quickly ran into very bad fog near Kingston, Ontario, and had to return to London. The rules of the flight were revised allowing a refueling stop at Harbour Grace, Newfoundland. The plane took off again and got as far as Caribou, Maine, where it had to land due to mechanical difficulty. The pilots finally managed to fly into Harbour Grace on September 5.

They left for England on September 7 and were never seen again. A lengthy search followed but no trace was ever found. A telegram sent by Tully to his wife on September 7 was the last time either pilot was heard from (Figure 9). All the mail was lost except one letter that, for some unknown reason, was taken off at Harbour Grace (Figure 10). This letter is one of the most important pieces of aerophilatelic history in Canada.

As airmail became a more important means of mail transportation and as aviation technology improved, fewer and fewer Canadian or foreign flights carrying mail had their service interrupted by crashes. Some, like those at Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan, on April 8, 1954 or that at Toronto of July 5, 1970, had a lot of mail salvaged and many postal markings were used to explain the poor condition of the mail sent on.

Other crash mail, such as that salvaged from the Air Canada crash of June 26, 1978, at Toronto, was virtually undamaged and no special markings were used at the time to notify receivers why the mail might have been delayed. Only one piece has any markings and that was inscribed in felt pen on a box carrying wedding invitations (Figure 11). Since that flight there has been no other recorded crash mail in Canada.

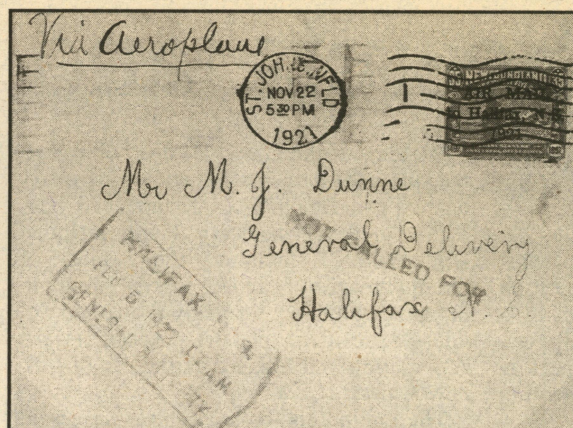


Figure 5: This letter was posted by surface means on Nov. 27, 1921, after the flight from Botwood, Newfoundland, to Halifax, Nova Scotia, was grounded because of engine trouble.

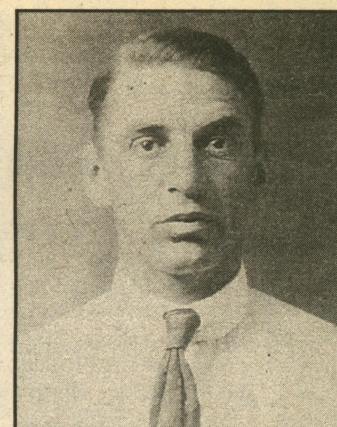


Figure 6: Lt. H.H. Fitzsimmons, the copilot of the Lethbridge, Alberta to Ottawa, Ontario flight that crashed at Minot, N.D., on June 22, 1922.

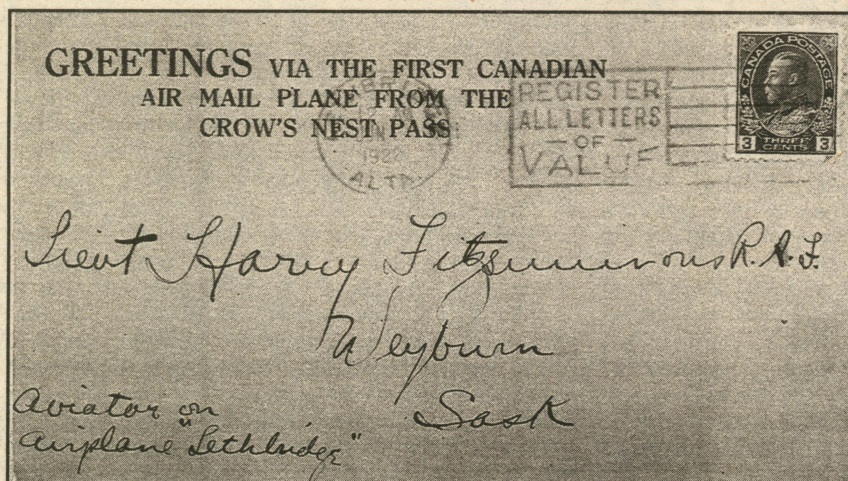


Figure 7: One of the 993 covers carried on the trial flight from Lethbridge to Ottawa.

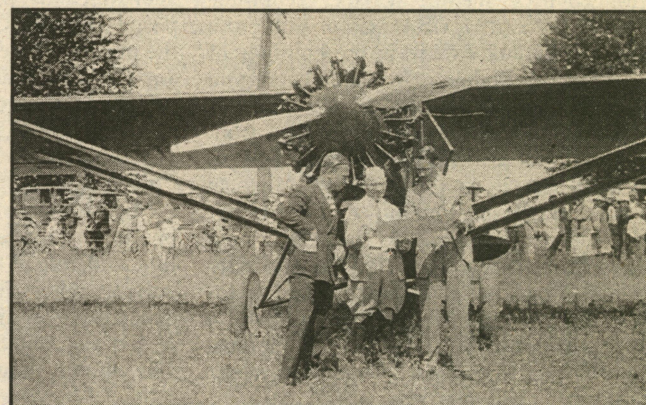


Figure 8: Capt. Tully and Lt. Metcalf in front of their plane the "Sir John Carling" that disappeared without a trace over the Atlantic in September 1927.



Figure 9: Capt. Tully's last message to his wife prior to his plane disappearing.

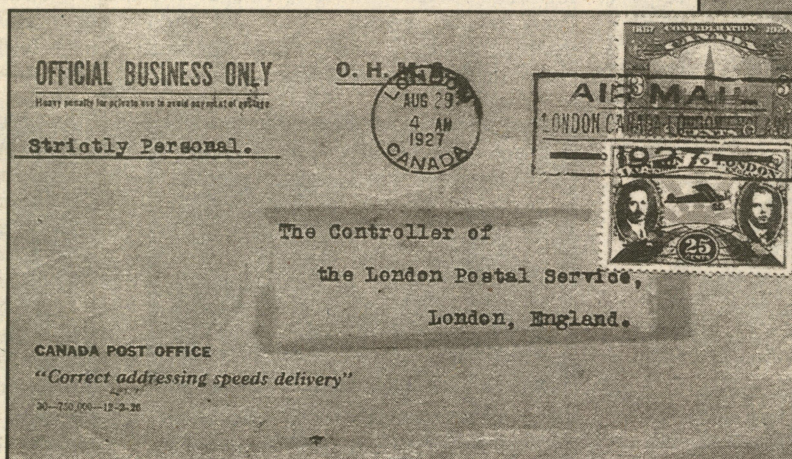


Figure 10: One of Canada's most important aerophilatelic items. The only surviving cover from the London to London flight.

DAMAGED  
FLT. 187  
CRASH 26/78

Figure 11: Part of a box containing wedding invitations. The only provable piece of mail from the ill-fated Toronto to Winnipeg flight of June 26, 1978.