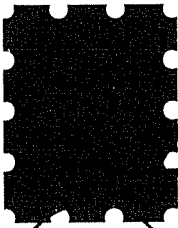
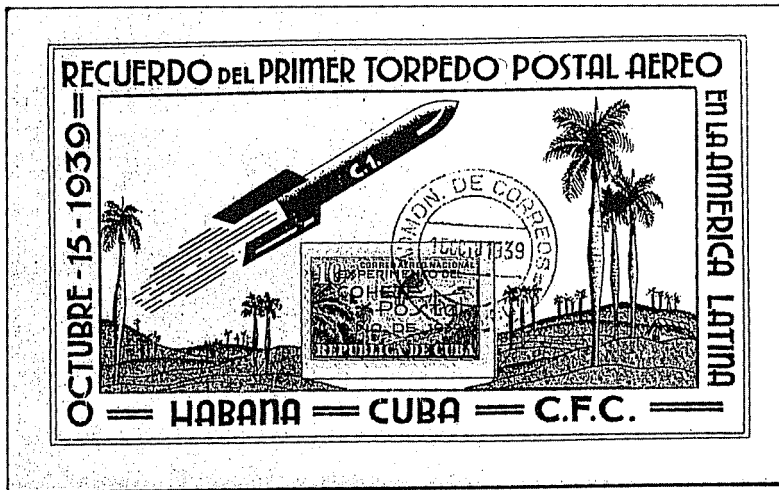


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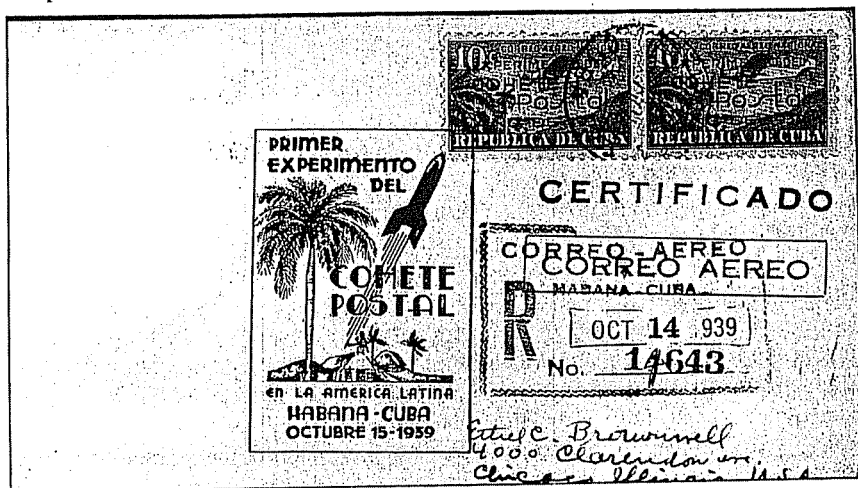
Official Flight
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Official Flight of the Cuban Postal Rocket

Robert B. Spooner

Introduction

Culminating a series of rocket mail test flights in early October 1939, on October 15, after great publicity and the issuance of special stamps, the official launch of the Cuban postal rocket C-1 *Marilyn* was made. While this rocket flight was a failure in virtually every sense of the word, the experiment did establish what then-existing rocket technology was capable of producing. Even though the flight was a disaster and the covers carried may be considered crash covers, it lives in history. The Castro regime, even today, continues to celebrate its anniversaries with stamp issues and covers.



Registered cover for flight has October 14 date

Test Flights

The postal rocket experiments were undertaken by Dr. Tomás Terry and the Rocket Commission of the Cuba Philatelic Club with the support of funding from the post office. Cuban pyrotechnics expert E. Funes used two different rocket motor configurations and various payloads of covers in three test flights conducted on October 1, 3, and 8, 1939. These flights and the covers carried on them were described in "Covers from 1939 Cuban Rocket Trials," *Airpost Journal*, November 1988.

The test flights were sufficient to draw some conclusions about the future of postal rockets:

- The distance covered varied inversely with the payload.
- Larger rockets would be required to carry desired loads over intercity distances in Cuba.
- A guidance system would be required to avoid the problem encountered



Mrs. Teté Rivera de Ferrán christens the *Marilyn*. (Courtesy of Les Winick.)

Some collectors took the occasion of the official flight to prepare other covers. By way of example, a few used the overprinted tax stamp prepared for the first trial flight, and even though unofficial these were canceled with the official Havana postmark.

Events of Launch Day

Bernabe de Varona, official photographer for the proceedings, reported that the day began with scattered showers. Otherwise, it was a good day for the festivities. The Rocket Commission collected mail for the flight in a locked post office box.

A featured event of the day was the christening of the rocket. Until then, the rocket had the official designation of C-1, and no name. Mrs. Teté Rivera de Ferrán christened the rocket *Marilyn*, after the Terry's daughter, carefully only touching the relatively fragile rocket with the heavy glass champagne bottle lest it be crushed by the impact.

Tomás Terry later wrote an article for the Philatelic Club's journal on an interesting by-play that occurred next. A shower was threatening and Sr. Funes, who had been watching anxiously, gathered up the rocket and its auxiliaries to protect



Block of four official rocket stamps.

PRIMER COHETE POSTAL
C - 1.

PREMIER FUSEE POSTALE



FIRST MAIL ROCKET

VALOR 20 C.

Souvenir sheet issued by rocket commission

them while everyone headed for shelter. But where was the champagne bottle? It seems a couple of fellows who were there were more intrigued by the champagne than rocketry, and when it was unwatched they "liberated" it and retired to enjoy it. Imagine their reaction when they discovered it contained only colored water!

After everyone had their opportunity to deposit covers in the locked post office box, the Rocket Commission, in secrecy, took 200 of the covers and sealed them in a packet to be carried by the rocket. After the flight, these 200 covers were to be returned and mixed back into the original total of 2,581 covers (reported by Dr.

Terry) so that no one would know which covers had been flown and which had not. This plan apparently worked because there were no claims by preparers that their covers had definitely not been flown.

Even with precautions, as the rocket was loaded some collectors tried to stuff their own covers around the packet. These were removed before launch because the rocket load had been carefully calculated. It was expected to get off the launcher, but not fly so far as to be lost.

Rocket Flight

When the *Marilyn* was finally loaded with its payload of mail, Sr. Funes placed it on the launcher and fired it. *Marilyn* cleared the launcher but flew a twisting path into the ground! With that possibility in mind, Funes had prepared another smaller rocket with no payload, and it was immediately launched for a spectacular flight into the sky. Thus, everyone saw a successful rocket launch, even though the official flight fell short. Not everyone was impressed. The next day, some Havana newspapers called for the resignation of the Secretary of Commerce because of the rocket's failure.

Conclusion

The failure of the official Cuban Rocket mail presaged the future. In fact, postal rockets never became a practical reality. Military demands for missiles eventually funded rocket development, not the post office.

Acknowledgements

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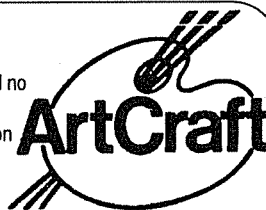
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