

The West Indian Aerial Express

By George W. Hoffmann

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PART I

In 1927 all over Europe a net of air transport was carrying passengers, airmail and air freight on scheduled flights, pushing continuously further across national borders. The British went across France and Italy and over the Adriatic to Egypt and toward India. The French flew south into their colonial empires of North and West Africa.

By far the best organized and most ambitious, however, were the Germans. Not content with already covering all of Russia and having pushed on across Siberia into China, they penetrated all of the developed South American continent and flew along the Atlantic east coast from Buenos Aires to Natal, Brazil, and up the Amazonas river as far as Manaus. Lloyd Boliviano covered the Andean center of South America and SCADTA linked Colombia, Venezuela and Ecuador. A Deutsche Luft Hansa arm was operating in Peru.

The power for such a far-flung undertaking emanated from a consolidation of all of post-World War I aircraft manufacturers and commercial airlines into a Government-sponsored airline, Deutsche Luft Hansa. They had united the best aircraft of their times with Junkers and Rumpier for land machines and Dornier for amphibians. To accomplish their ambition of crossing the South Atlantic Ocean to unite their European-African lines with their already operating South American lines, they anchored the specially-built steamer "Schwabenland" at mid-Atlantic to refuel the Dornier Wals flying in from Dakar, West Africa, and catapulting them on for their second half of the trans-Atlantic flight to the Brazilian island of Fernando Noronha and Natal. On their return flights airmail had been consolidated from all over South America and was flown on to Spain, France, England and Germany.

U.S. air transport, however, was another story. While the operating staff of European airlines, all left-over flyboys from World War I, piloted and navigated the aircraft of their respective native countries, our U.S. air force veterans were barnstorming at country fairs and enjoying life and living dangerously for the thrill and the five dollars' fee for an around-the-airfield flight. Only a very few were fortunate enough to be employed by the struggling airmail services that winged their fumbling ways from coast to coast, along railroad tracks and railway station signs. For night flying the Government's Aviation Board, under President Hoover's personal efforts, was stringing a line of beacons over the wide open spaces, and when flying weather was not good the airmail had to be landed at the nearest facilities and sent on by the next railway train passing nearby.

One of the successful barnstorming flyboys playing the county fairs in the eastern states was the "Rowe Flyer." Although pilot Rowe had no previous war hero glories to advertise, he was considered one of the best known



The "Rowe Flyer," with Basil Rowe at the controls. (Photo from Irving Rosenberg Collection)

barnstorming and acrobatic flying team masters, well known all along the eastern seaboard. On his flights in Florida, however, he became acquainted with connections toward the West Indies and the Caribbean islands and began to take a look at the string of island nations that seemed very promising both for barnstorming shows and eventually for scheduled airmail services between Florida and South America.

Basil D. Rowe thus came to settle for a while with a couple of old WACO barnstorming planes in Santo Domingo of the then Dominican Republic, today's Hispaniola. It was early 1927 and by the middle of the year he was already flying airmail between the post offices of Haiti and the Dominican Republic and sometimes as far as San Juan, Puerto Rico. The friendly people of the West Indies and the great wealth of sugar cane crops here made him feel better than home in his native air circus environments. The friendly American soon knew the highest of Government authorities and was a welcome guest at the homes of the wealthy sugar refinery owners who shipped sugar cane juice in the form of thick, black West Indies molasses and fragrant rum all over the world. Their principal refineries were located at the seaport of Barahona on the southern Caribbean coast of the Hispaniolan island. Mail and passenger transport between Barahona and the capital of Santo Domingo and on to San Juan or Miami soon developed out of Basil Rowe's operation with his old WACO machines that began to forget all about air acrobatics.

One of Mr. Rowe's friends, Austin Brewer, director of one of the Barahona sugar refineries, organized meetings between Dominican Republic government officials and owners of sugar plantations and refineries and founded the West Indian Aerial Express airline. With the capital subscribed by the new airline owners Basil Rowe took off for the United States to buy some airplanes that would carry a great amount of cargo and passengers

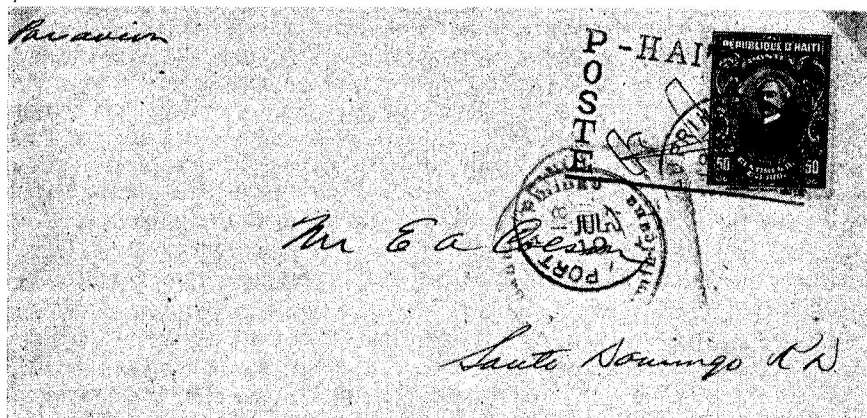
and had a reach of several hundred miles on one load of fuel.

Of the two planes Mr. Rowe bought then, one was a high-wing Fairchild machine equipped with a set of pontoons for water landings and a flap-down set of wheels. In Bristol, Pennsylvania, he visited old friends at the Keystone shops. They had built for delivery earlier in 1927 a huge biplane, equipped with three powerful engines, on order of two men named Wooster and Davis who wanted to fly the New York-to-Paris north Atlantic route. Shortly before Charles Lindbergh's successful flight to Paris, Messrs. Wood and Davis had started on their transatlantic attempt; however, the overloaded Keystone did not get off the ground, toppled over some hedges around the airfield and nosed into the ground. The accident would have been unimportant if not for the fact that, on impact with the ground, some gasoline tanks had burst so both men, pinned down in their flight harness, actually drowned in the gasoline. The Keystone machine had been salvaged and had since the accident been resting in a corner of the Keystone field.

Mr. Rowe bought that machine and called her "Santa Maria." He had her rebuilt in the forward cockpit area to withstand any possible further nose-landing. He had the huge gasoline tanks replaced with cargo railings on which up to 35 bucket seats could be mounted. For his co-pilot in the new WIAE airline he hired an old friend, Capt. Cy Caldwell, against whom he had flown in air races at Cleveland and Buffalo. Thus, in the fall of 1927 the two old stunt pilots flew down to Florida; Cy Caldwell in the pontoon equipped Fairchild flew to Key West while Basil Rowe sat his spanking "new" Santa Maria down at Miami's Opa-locka airport.

On the front cover we show the "Santa Maria" at the Barahona airfield in the Dominican Republic. (Photo from Irving Rosenberg Collection)

The day was October 18, 1927. As Cy Caldwell checked into the old wooden Grand Hotel in Key West that afternoon he found himself immediately in a group of old flyboy friends together with a dignified gentleman who introduced himself as Juan T. Trippe, president of another spanking new airline creation from Miami, Pan American Airways. The group had been waiting for a Ford tri-motor land plane that had been promised for delivery that



Early airmail cover flown by Capt. Rowe from Haiti to Santo Domingo July 18, 1927 (AAMC WI-2a). The Poste-Haiti-Avion cachet is in red.

day, but an announcement had just been made that it had been held up for last-minute repairs at the shops up north. Then things began to happen fast. Mr. Trippe urged Cy Caldwell to take his Fairchild next morning on the ninety-mile flight from Key West to Habana, Cuba, and back to Key West again. Cy phoned Basil Rowe in Miami and between Mr. Trippe and Mr. Rowe the deal for the flight to Habana was closed. Thus, early on October 19, 1927, the little Fairchild took off from the old wooden pier of Key West and as Pan American Airways, flew the first contract airmail flight for the U.S. Post Office from Florida to Habana and back. The date was the very last one of Pan American's contract with the U.S. postal authorities. The flight as such was uneventful. Airmail pouches were exchanged in Habana and handed back to the Key West post office. No one person could dream in his fondest expectations that out of this first flight the great Pan American World Airways would grow — Pan Am which today straddles Park Avenue in New York with a colossal skyscraper and daily flies around the world in uneventful routine.

Next day, while Cy Caldwell was flying the Fairchild over Cuba and Haiti to Santo Domingo, Basil Rowe flew the Santa Maria to some central Cuban landing area. On his arrival the whole village, whose patron saint happened to be the Holy Mother, came out to the landing field and began a long celebration that finalized next day in an official Catholic christening of the big tri-motor biplane to the name of "Santa Maria." So blessed Captain Rowe then took off for Santo Domingo and Barahona.

On December 6, 1927 the Santa Maria flew her inaugural airmail flight from Santo Domingo to Port-au-Prince, Haiti, and from thereon the West Indian Aerial Express was in busy operation between Cuba, Haiti, the Dominican Republic and the island of Puerto Rico. On our front cover is shown one of Rowe's printed first flight covers from that inaugural, liberally sprinkled with markings, all in various shades of blue. There is also a second cachet in blue on the back and a Port-au-Prince backstamp of the 6th.

(To Be Concluded)

NOTICE OF ANNUAL MEETING of Members of the American Air Mail Society

An Ohio Non-Profit Corporation

To the Members of the American Air Mail Society:

Notice is hereby given that the annual meeting of the members of the American Air Mail Society, a non-profit corporation of the State of Ohio, will be held at the Palmer House, Chicago, Illinois, on Saturday, October 18, 1975, at 10:30 A.M., Central Daylight Time, for the following purpose:

1. To transact such business as may properly come before the meeting or any adjournment or adjournments thereof.

The Board of Directors has fixed October 7, 1975, as the date for the determination of the members entitled to vote at the meeting; and only such members in good standing on the records as such time will be entitled to voting rights.

Dated Lutherville, Maryland, August 1, 1975.

Richard H. Thompson, President
Gerhard S. Wolff, Secretary

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PART II

The Pan American inaugural international flight from Florida to Cuba sparked a great deal of activity in the Post Office Department at Washington. Mr. Juan T. Trippe had already prepared the grounds for an extended air transport operation by his company throughout the Caribbean Sea and the first contracts were drawn up for public bids for an airmail service between Miami and San Juan, Puerto Rico, via Cuba, Haiti and Hispaniola. For the opening ceremony at the U.S. Post Office in Washington, Mr. Austin Brewer presented the West Indies Aerial Express bid which was identical to that presented by Mr. Trippe for his PAA. Although the Postmaster General admitted that WIAE had a whole year of successful no-accident airmail operation over the route, he awarded the contract to PAA on the strength that an American company should be the inter-American flag-line which was scheduled eventually to cover all of Central America and the South American nations.

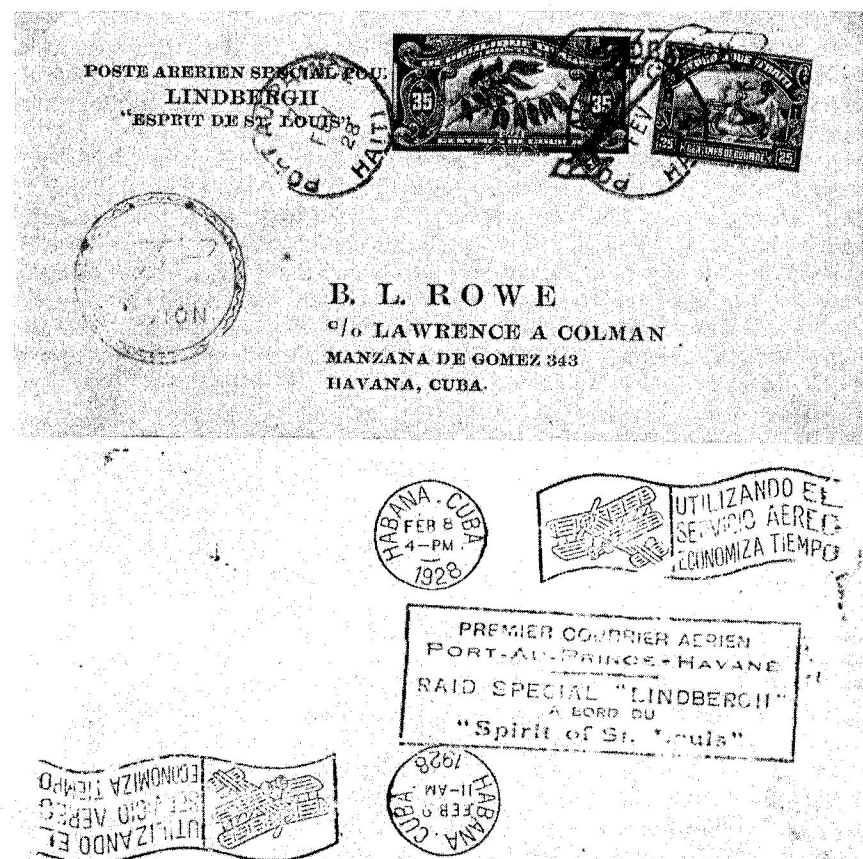
In the meantime another memorable event had taken place on the future FAM 6 (Foreign Air Mail Route No. 6). On February 6, 1928, Charles Lindbergh was returning from his good-will flight to Central and South America in the "Spirit of St. Louis." He had flown 1,050 miles non-stop from Maracaibo, Venezuela, to the airport of Santo Domingo. Next morning Col. Lindbergh took off from Santo Domingo again, carrying on board three small airmail pouches, "the only airmail the Spirit of St. Louis ever carried," according to Col. Lindbergh's own report on the historic flight, published in the National Geographic Society's magazine (May 1928 issue, page 599, second column, paragraph three). It was West Indian Aerial Express airmail addressed to Habana, Cuba, and Capt. Basil Rowe was flying in the "Santa Maria" as official escort alongside the "Spirit of St. Louis" as far as Port-au-Prince, Haiti (according to "Under My Wings," by Capt. Basil L. Rowe, page 127, paragraph two).

In September 1928 a devastating hurricane swept the West Indies and left much destruction in its path. Capt. Rowe was in Miami discussing with Mr. Trippe terms of a possible takeover of his airline by Pan American. Much of WIAE's aircraft and landing field facilities had been destroyed by the hurricane, including the historic Fairchild. The "Santa Maria," however, had been riding out the backlash of the storm on her way to San Juan, Puerto Rico. A few days later a brand new Loening plane landed in San Juan, flown in from New York via Miami with Mr. Trippe and some important looking briefcase-carrying Wall Street dudes. The official takeover of WIAE by PAA was the object of the meeting. The shiny Loening was parked not far from the old spruced-up "Santa Maria," the only actually tangible asset left to

WIAE. On taking inventory of the airline one of the PAA directors remarked: "This old crock will have to go to the factory for a whole overhaul." Capt. Rowe was feeling sick in his stomach but was in no position to voice a protest.

With all formalities settled and the contract properly signed by all participants on both sides, the dignified New Yorkers climbed back into their Loening for their return flight home. The lumbering heavy amphibian, however, could not get off the somewhat uneven runway and plowed with much of a crash into the low airport wall. Luckily no one was hurt but the plane was a total loss and as the old fire engine carried the somewhat shocked New Yorkers back to the WIAE airfield office Capt. Rowe offered them a flight back to Miami on his "Santa Maria."

This last WIAE flight to Miami was an uneventful routine for the old tri-motored Keystone and, on disembarking at Miami, the elegant New Yorkers shook Capt. Rowe's hands in gratitude but in his humble and warm-hearted ways the cocky Captain told the gentlemen: "There is nothing to thank me for



Face and reverse of cover flown on "Spirit of St. Louis" from Port-au-Prince to Havana, February 7-8, 1928.

PRIMER CORREO AEREO
SANTIAGO DE CUBA A SAN JUAN DE P.



Austin Brewer

Room 304 Cehoa Bldg

San Juan, P. R.

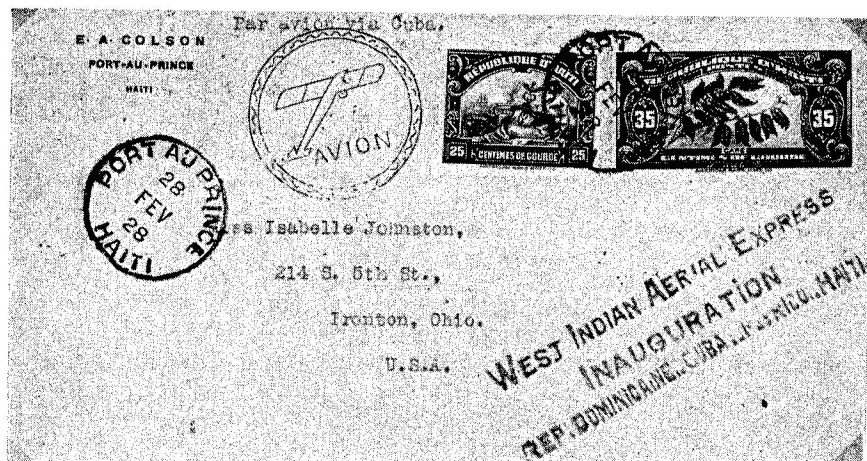
WIAE first flight cover from Santiago de Cuba to San Juan, February 23, 1928 (backstamped Feb. 26, 8 A.M.).

a routine operation BUT one thing I am asking for is never to call the "Santa Maria" an old crock again."

In the years that followed, Capt. Basil Rowe, now in a blue and white PAA captain's uniform, flew the U.S. airmail from Habana via Santiago de Cuba, Haiti and the Dominican Republic as far as San Juan, while PAA's chief pilot Capt. Musick flew the Miami to Habana round trip.

Pan American Airways meanwhile grew by leaps and bounds and changed their aircraft to a whole developing line of Sikorsky amphibians. Col. Lindbergh, who had accepted a position in PAA, flew many missions with Capt. Rowe, co-piloting their exploration flights in and out of possible landing facilities along the Caribbean islands and the northern coast of South America, preparing for PAA's scheduled operations soon to follow.

Capt. Basil Rowe eventually became chief pilot of PAA and flew distinguished missions on WWII and Korean War charter flights halfway around the World (see "Under My Wings").



This Port-au-Prince dispatch was backstamped at Santiago de Cuba Feb. 28 at 3:30 P.M. and finally at Ironton, Ohio, on Mar. 4.

Winners of AAMS' Aerophilatelic Literature Exhibit

By Kendall C. Sanford

The first Aerophilatelic Literature Exhibit sponsored by the **American Air Mail Society** was organized in connection with the 1974 **AAMS** Annual Convention held in conjunction with NOJEX at Cranford, N.J., last October.

The quality of the entries received was quite high. The literature was on display during the entire Convention, out in the open on a table set up for that purpose. Anyone could come and sit down and read the material on display, and ask questions about it. There were order forms for some of the catalogues and journals, or at least the name and address of the person from whom it could be obtained. The judges for the Literature Exhibit were Dr. Max Kronstein, Ernest A. Kehr and Kendall C. Sanford. Ribbons were awarded for the best literature in each of five categories. (The **AAMS** publications in the Exhibit were not in competition, as obviously the **Society** could not award ribbons to its own publications.) The award winners in each category were as follows:

Best Single Article.

"Metz Papillons: George T. Robinson's Airmail of 1870," by Ernst M. Cohn and Cyril H. C. Harmer. Published in the 1973 Yearbook of the American Philatelic Congress and available from the authors as a reprint. The complete story of the second airmail from Metz by balloon during the 1870 siege. Separate ribbons were awarded to each author.

Best Article Series

"The DO-X," a series of articles by George W. Hoffmann. Published in **The Airpost Journal**, April 1971 through November 1974. A history of the famous German aircraft and its epic trip to South America and the United States, with details on the various flown covers.

Best Journal or Periodical

"The Jack Knight Air Log," quarterly journal of the Jack Knight Collectors Club Federation. Editor, Earl H. Wellman. Volume 30, Nos. 3 & 4, and Volume 31, Nos. 1 & 2, July 1973 - June 1974.

Best Book or Catalog

Two first prize ribbons were awarded, as the following two publications were considered of equal merit:

"Schweizerischer Luftpost-Katalog" (Swiss Airmail Catalog). 1972 Edition. Published by the Schweizerischer Aerophilatelidtes Verein (Swiss Aerophilatelic Society). Lists and prices all known air mail items to/from/thru Switzerland, including stamps, first & special flight covers and postmarks. In German.

"Aerofilatelia Italiana Catalogo" (Italian Aerophilatelic Catalog). Edited by Fernando Corsari & Ugo De Simoni. Lists all items connected with Italian aerophilately. In Italian.

An Honorable Mention was also awarded to "The Rhyl-Wallazel Hovercraft Service and its Mails," by Harry Goodall & Christopher J. Richards. Published by the Hovermail Collectors Club, Great Britain 1972. A complete account of the world's first official hovermail service and all of the known covers, cards, newspapers, etc. Illustrated.

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