

Cuba's First Balloon Casualty Remembered In Centennial Flight

By DR. TOMAS TERRY

Through the efforts of the Club Filatelico de la Republica de Cuba the Cuban authorities have helped to celebrate appropriately the centennial of the disappearance of aeronaut Matias Perez on June 29, 1856.

The Cuban P. O. Department commemorated this event by using an official cachet on all mail circulated nationally on June 29 last. On the same day a commemorative exhibit was opened in one of the halls of the City's Museum.

Cuban aeronautical history began over a century ago when a Frenchman, M. Eugene Robertson, arrived in Havana from New York and made the first balloon ascension. After Robertson, other balloon men arrived in Havana, making similar flights. Jose Domingo Blino was the only Cuban to make a balloon ascension at that time. The most prominent of all such fliers was Eugene Godard, one of a distinguished family of aeronauts who later was appointed by Napoleon III as "Emperor's Aeronaut" for his deeds during a military campaign in Italy.

For all the six ascensions Godard made in Habana and Matanzas, he hired for the complicated prepara-

tions a young and courageous Portuguese named Matias Perez, an awning maker, naturally the right person to prepare and repair the balloon covers on Godard's two ships, "Ville de Paris" and "Amerique" in which Matias Perez accompanied Godard in some of his ascensions.

When Godard left for New Orleans, Perez bought the "Ville de Paris" for 1,200 pesos. He also obtained the first pilot certificate granted in Cuba. He then received the approval from Spain's General Governor to make an exhibition ascension for the welfare of a local charitable institution, whose president was wife of the Governor.

He made the first ascension on June 12, 1856 from the Campo de Marte, a military training field, now the Fraternity Park, next to the Capitol.

Eye-witnesses stated the ascension was "rapid and breathtaking". At some seven thousand feet, he showed his skill when he had to make repairs in the gas valve, but the gentle northeast breeze drove him southwest to a distance of some eight miles. He landed near one of the water reservoirs of the city.



The city's newspapers qualified the flight as "perfect". He was requested to make a second ascension, (which became his last), on the 29th of June in front of the palatial residence of Miguel Aldama, adjacent to the same Campo de Marte.

Matias Perez was so thrilled that he paid no attention to the unfavorable weather conditions prevailing that afternoon, and he refused advice from friends to postpone the flight.

Crowds watched in horror as the balloon went up westwards towards the ocean. It swiftly crossed the old coast fort "La Chorrera" at sunset, and a few minutes later was well over the dark seas, which still guard jealously the fate of the aeronaut.

Nothing ever was heard of Matias Perez, although reports and rumors came that he had landed in Yucatan or in Florida.

Popular folklore tales praised this feat of the first interoceanic American balloon flight. Today, a popular Cuban expression for the disappear-

ance of somebody is that he "Flew like Matias Perez".

On his swift and short trip over land, before reaching the ocean, he threw printed leaves with poems "To the Women of Cuba", which he sent as "air messages".

Therefore, the Cubans consider Matias Perez as the pioneer of air-mail following what the American Air Mail Catalogue recognizes in similar circumstances.

A similar recognition was given by France commemorating the Siege of Paris and by Hungary in 1935 celebrating the twentieth anniversary of the Siege of Przemysl: In Cuba, in like fashion, members of the Club Filatelico organized this centennial commemoration, using a small Neoprene balloon, christened the "Ville de Paris II", flying about twenty miles from a hill in Havana. It carried 30 covers, each one numbered, showing the official cachet in memory of the first aviator of Cuban transportation. The cover illustrated

(Continued on page 404)

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Catalogues Received

ROCKET MAIL CATALOGUE:

by Stephen H. Smith

Second Revised Edition 1955, published by Fritz Billig, 16-39 Highland Ave., Jamaica 3, N. Y. 8vo., 68 pages, paper bound, \$3.00

This catalogue is volume 8 of Billig's Specialized Catalogues. It is a revision of an earlier edition, with corrections and additions to the work of the late Mr. Smith by Dr. Max Kronstein and J. Dellenbag. This work is a definite "must" for collectors of Rocket stamps and covers. It contains complete historical and technical information on all rocket firings in the eighteen countries which thus far have had such flights. Prices given are based on realistic factors of quantity available, demand, popularity and historical interest — and a full page note about pricing justifies figures arrived at. 19 illustrations of stamps, cachets and covers help greatly in describing the listings. Copies are available from Mr. Billig or your favorite stamp dealer.

EERSTE SUPPLEMENT OP DE LUCHTPOST CATALOGUS VAN NEDERLAND EN DE OVERZEESE GEBIEDSDELEN 1948/1955 — Compiled by R. TOCHLA, Published by "De Vliegende Hollander," Amsterdam, 1955, 50 pages.

This catalog of Dutch airmails is a continuation of the first volume published in 1948. It lists and prices in Dutch guilders all flight covers, air mail stamps and etiquettes from the Netherlands and its colonies used from 1948 through 1955. Rocket posts, military flights, balloon posts, first air mail flights and crash covers are included. 15 illustrations are clear and readable. Although printed in Dutch, this booklet is easily followed. It can be purchased by sending an international money order for \$1.00 to Mr. W. Dekker, at Ijsselsteinstraat 36, The Hague, Netherlands. The or-

iginal 194 page volume, in board covers, is still available at \$1.50, or both volumes, if ordered together, at \$2.00.

HANDBUCH DER MILITAR-LUFTPOST 1793-1953, By Alfred Clement, published 1955 in Graz, Austria, 15 pages.

This catalogue, printed in German, is replete with illustrations of covers, cachets, stamps, postmarks, V-Mail, labels and censorship markings on air mail of all kinds originating at military posts, or at all concerned with military air transportation. It has a compact arrangement of listings by country of all military air mail material beginning in 1793, and progressing chronologically, subdivided into war and peace periods, for every known military situation. Although written in German, text material is tied in with illustrations, and easily followed. Prices are indicated in Austrian currency. Army Post Office cancels of most countries are identified as to location, making this work valuable particularly in that specialized field. The handbook was recently awarded a German literary prize, the Sieger-Medaille, a high distinction.

It may be ordered directly from Alfred Clement at Schwimmschulkai 6/11, Graz, Austria, and is priced at \$3.00, postage extra.

CUBA'S FIRST BALLOON —

(Continued from page 393)

is from the author's collection. The signatures shown include that of Postmaster of Jaruco where the balloon was found, that of the farmer on whose land the balloon came down, and that of the soldier who reported the find to the postmaster.

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