

CANADIAN AIR MAIL NOTES

Chris Hargreaves #15

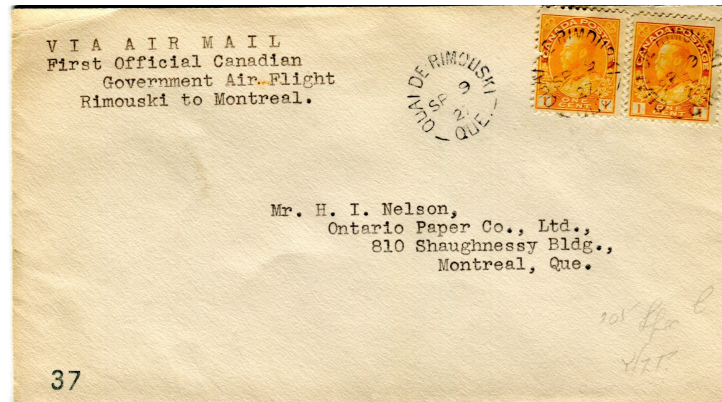


Fig 1 - Postmarked QUAI DE RIMOUSKI SP 9 27 QUE

THE St. LAWRENCE AIR MAIL SERVICE 1927 - 1939

The cover in Figure 1 is endorsed:

**Via Air Mail
First Official Canadian
Government Air Flight
Rimouski to Montreal**

It was prepared for the first continuing air service that was paid for by the Canadian Post Office. - Previous air mail flights had been for special occasions, or were paid for by the bush airline making the flight. [1]

The service was intended to speed up Trans-Atlantic mail, and was similar in many respects to the Victoria - Seattle air mail service, that was described in my column in the September 2014 APJ.

Steamers entering the St. Lawrence normally took on board a river pilot at Father Point, near Rimouski. (See Figure 2.) The plan was to transfer mail from an incoming steamer to the pilot boat, and for the pilot boat to carry the mail to the plane waiting at the shore. The mail would then be flown to Montreal, so speeding up its delivery by a day or more.

According to Richard Beith's research, the St. Lawrence Air Mail Service was proposed by the Deputy Postmaster General in Ottawa, to the GPO in London, in December 1926. [2, page 18.]

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Figure 2

After much discussion, the first flight was scheduled for September 9th 1927, with the mail to be flown to Rimouski by Squadron Leader J H Tudhope, R.C.A.F., and his engineer Gerald LaGrave, in a newly designed and still experimental Vickers Vanessa seaplane. (Figure 3).

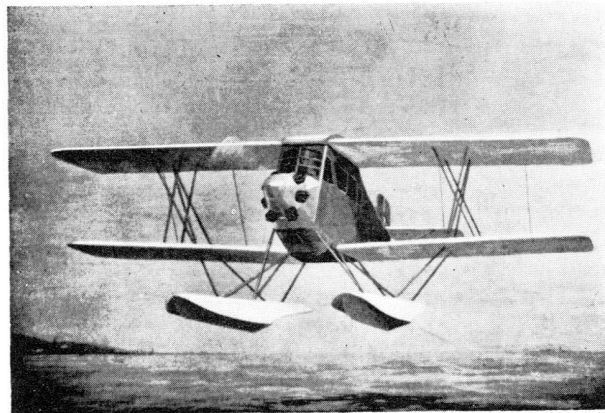


Figure 3 - Vickers Vanessa.

Unfortunately this first flight did not go well. - Frank Ellis related that:

Tudhope and LaGrave flew the machine from Montreal on September 8, arriving at Rimouski during a heavy wind and thunderstorm. In spite of the high seas running, Tudhope managed to bring the craft down in the lee of the Rimouski wharf, but the flotation gear took a very severe pounding, and a strut fitting was damaged, although unnoticed at the time.

At 8.00 am on the 9th, the pilot boat received 500 pounds of selected first-class mail from the incoming *'Empress of France'*, and the bags were transferred to the waiting aircraft.

Since there was still a heavy swell on the river, the Vanessa was towed by the pilot boat to calmer seas, in the lee of Barnaby Island about three miles from Rimouski. While the seaplane was taxiing at speed for the take off, the pounding of the choppy waters against the floats caused the weakened strut fitting to give way. The fuselage immediately tipped to one side, the port wing sliced into the sea and

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was smashed, and the propeller ripped through the forward section of the port float, cutting it in half.

The pilot boat quickly came to the rescue, transferred the precious mail to its sturdy deck, and made fast a line to the crippled seaplane. By the time the pathetic parade had reached Rimouski wharf, the rough seas had battered the *Vanessa* completely under. She was a total wreck; only the engine was worth salvaging. The mail taken off the '*Empress*' arrived at Montreal quite a time after the liner instead of ahead of her. [3, page 313.]

Since Figure 1 is postmarked QUAI DE RIMOUSKI, it cannot have been part of the 500 pounds of mail transferred from the *Empress of France*. - The provenance of this and other September 9th covers from Rimouski was raised in *The Canadian Aerophilatelist*, [2, page 25] and [4, page 4]. It was also the subject of a rigorous and enjoyable discussion at the 2011 Day of Aerophilately in Toronto. (The Toronto Day of Aerophilately is an annual event. The next one will be held on Sunday November 6th 2016 and everyone is invited. - Contact Dick McIntosh at mcintosh47@sympatico.ca for more information.)

The conclusion reached was that these September 9th covers were cancelled by the Rimouski Post Office, and handed back to the creator, who had arranged for them to be carried on the aircraft. This would have been against Post Office regulations, but does seem to have occurred with a number of First Flights.

The franking on Figure 1 is 2 cents, which was the regular rate for letters of 2 cents per ounce within Canada or to the U.S.A. - The Canadian Post Office did not introduce its "5 cents" air mail rate until October 1st 1928, and then only applied it to some airmail services.

The second attempt at a Rimouski - Montreal air mail service was scheduled for Friday September 16th, and this time things went smoothly. - 500 pounds of mail were transferred from the *Empress of Australia*, and flown to Montreal aboard an HS-2L flying boat, chartered by the Canadian Post Office from Canadian Airways Ltd., and arriving there 24 hours before the ship. [5, page 58.]

A few covers, such as Figure 4, are known from the September 16th flight. - It is believed that the cachet was applied after the flight by Montreal stamp dealer Ian C Morgan, who rounded up a number of covers and embellished them. [2, pages 22 and 28.]

The St. Lawrence Air Mail service was also intended to expedite mail from Canada to Europe, as mail which arrived in Montreal shortly after a steamer left could be flown to Rimouski, and transferred to the ship when it dropped off its river pilot.

There has been some debate as to when the first eastbound transfer took place. - Writing in 1954, Ellis said it occurred on September 12th, when 500 pounds of mail were transferred to the *Doric* as it passed Rimouski. [3, page 314.] But R J Hatch, who published an extensively researched article on the St. Lawrence Air Mail in 1978, said that the exchange with the *Doric* was planned but did not take place. According to Hatch, the first eastbound transfer was on September 21st :

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Figure 4 - Postmarked MANCHESTER 8 SEP 1927

On the morning of September 21 the *Empress of Australia* made final preparations for her return voyage and no mail was accepted after 8.30 a.m. However, 500 additional pounds of mail from across Canada, which were received at the Montreal Post Office after she had left, were flown to Rimouski later in the day and picked up that night by the *Empress* on her way downstream. The saving in time on this batch of mail, mainly business correspondence, was considerable. Had it not been for the air service it would most likely have been routed to the United Kingdom via New York involving a delay of up to four days. [5, page 58.]

Figure 5 was sent from Montreal to Scotland via Rimouski and the *Empress of Australia*, and has a private cachet "EXPERIMENTAL FIRST FLIGHT". - No covers are known from the planned but cancelled flight to the *Doric*.

During the remainder of the navigation season, there were additional outbound flights from Montreal on October 2nd and 27th, and on November 11th; and inbound flights from Rimouski on September 28th, October 26th, November 5th and 12th. By November emergency landing fields had been prepared along the route, and the last two flights were made by "landplanes" with wheeled landing gear, rather than by seaplanes.

The service was considered a success, and it was resumed and expanded in 1928. Starting on May 5th/6th, there were two flights per week, each way, between Montreal and Rimouski. These connected with two flights weekly between Toronto and Montreal, and one flight weekly between Ottawa and Montreal.

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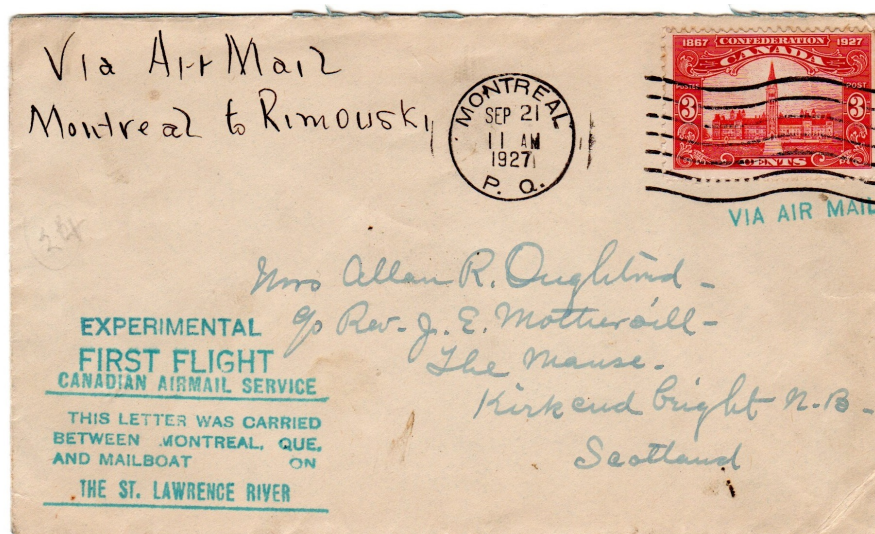


Figure 5 - Franked 3 cents, the regular Empire rate for letters up to one ounce.



Figure 6 - Postmarked LE HAVRE France 17 VIII 1928, addressed to Montreal.

According to the Post Office, “one incoming and two outward trips between Rimouski and Montreal (are) entirely in connection with British and Foreign mails conveyed on trans-Atlantic steamers. The remaining incoming trip is in connection with mails taken off the trains from the Maritime Provinces as well as mail despatched from the Rimouski Post Office.” [6]

During 1928 a special cachet was applied in Montreal to mail received from Rimouski, as shown in Figure 6. Several variations of this cachet are known. However, there was no special marking on the covers flown to Rimouski. The “CARRIED BY POSTAL AIRPLANE TO MONTREAL” cachet was also used at the start of the 1929 season, but its use ceased during the year.

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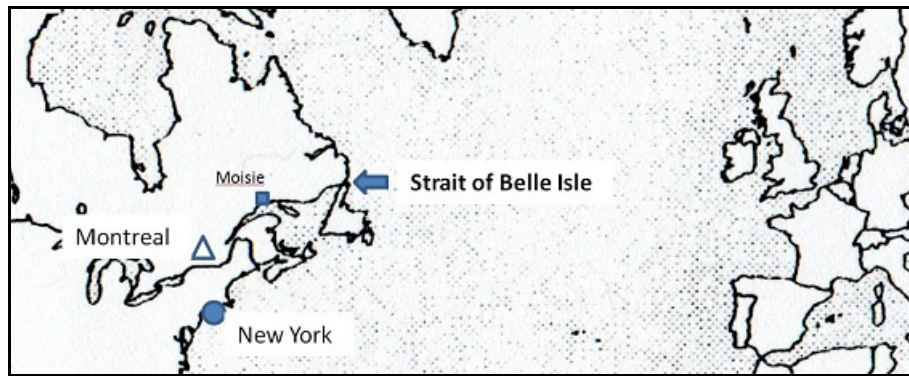


Figure 7

By the end of 1929 the Montreal - Rimouski service was well established, and the Canadian Post Office reported that 114 single trips had been made during the year. [4, page 25]. However, the predominant route for sending mail from Canada to Britain was still by train from Montreal to New York, and then by steamer from New York.

The Montreal - Rimouski flights resumed in 1930, and in September an experimental extension of the service was made, to meet the *Empress of Australia* in the Strait of Belle Isle. (See Figure 7.) This experiment involved two aircraft carrying “half a ton” of letters. [7, page 22.] This accelerated the mail by 48 hours compared to the sea trip from Montreal, and gave the combined air-sea service from Montreal a one-day advantage over the rail-sea route from Montreal via New York.

The cover shown in Figure 8 was carried on this experiment, and a note inside the cover gives details of the flight:

24th September, the hydroplanes of the Canadian Airways Limited, in charge of pilots Schneider and Saunders, took off from Spencer Cove, Quebec, at 7.15 a.m. E.S.T., arrived at Moisie at 11.30 a.m., and after gassing up proceeded onward at 12.30 p.m., reaching Bradore Bay at 4.30 p.m. E.S.T.

The mail was put on board the C.P.R. outward bound liner “EMPRESS OF AUSTRALIA”, which had left Quebec at 4.30 p.m. 23rd September, bearing the Prime Minister and his party, next day, at 6.55 a.m. 25th September.

The Prime Minister, R B Bennett, was en route to London for the 1930 Imperial Conference.

The return flight did not go as smoothly. The same note states that:

25th September, the hydroplanes left Bradore Bay at 9.45 a.m., reaching Moisie at 2.00 p.m. – too late to come onward same day, Thursday. Left Moisie Friday, 26th, and were held up by bad weather and dense fog; so that one was compelled to stop at St-André-de-Kamouraska and the other at Pointe-au-Pic wharf.

On Saturday, 27th, after several futile attempts to get through, it was only when the fog cleared at noon that they succeeded in reaching Quebec. The mail was then put on board C.N.R. train No. 1 passing Levis at 1.55 p.m., reaching Montreal at 7.50 p.m. 27th September.

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Fig 8 Front - Postmarked QUEBEC 7 SP24 30



Fig 8 Reverse - Backstamps: BRADORE BAY SP25 30 and MONTREAL SEP27 9.30PM 1930 with slogan cancellation:

'By Seaplane from Strait of Belle Isle - 1/3 of Shortest Route from Europe'.

Although the experiment was a success, and the time taken for mail to England via Montreal was less than that for mail via New York, the early 1930's were the peak of the Depression. - The Canadian Government was trying to reduce expenditure wherever possible, and in 1931 only a Montreal - Rimouski Air Mail service was provided.

However, in 1932 the Post Office announced that in addition to the regular Montreal - Rimouski flights:

In order to commemorate the opening of the Imperial Conference at Ottawa in July, 1932, and further to demonstrate the time-saving qualities of combined air and fast steamship transport via the Saint Lawrence route to Europe, the Postmaster General of Canada has authorized a special air mail flight between Ottawa and Bradore Bay, on the Strait of Belle Isle, (one-third of the shortest seaway to Europe), on or about the 12th day of July, 1932. A special cachet will be used on letters carried on the commemorative flight.

July 12th 1932 was also the First Day of Issue of a new airmail stamp, "C4", that was part of a set of four stamps issued to commemorate the Imperial Conference. A large number of Special Flight & First Day covers were produced: one of them is shown as Figure 9.

The flights to and from the Strait of Belle Isle were part of a plan to provide a "4 day" mail service between London and Ottawa. The details of this are shown in Figure 10:

- a Westland Wessex carried late mails from Croydon to Cherbourg, to catch up with the *Empress of Britain* after it had left Southampton.

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Figure 9 - Franked with "C4". Backstamped BRADORE BAY 12 JUL 13 32 P.Q.

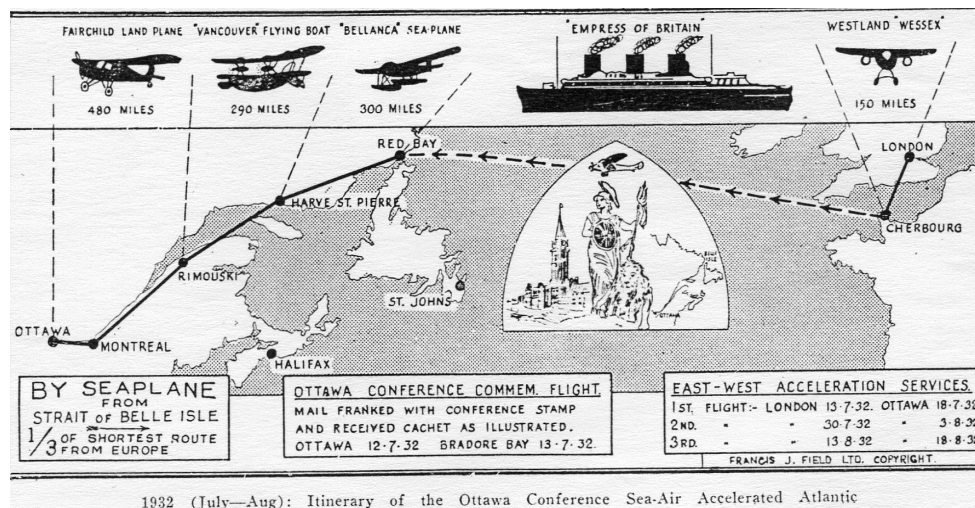


Figure 10 - Map produced by Francis J. Field

(There is an error regarding "Harve St. Pierre", which should be spelt "Havre St. Pierre".)

- the liner carried the mail across the Atlantic, and transferred it to a Royal Canadian Navy minesweeper in the Strait of Belle Isle
- the minesweeper took the mail to the sheltered waters of Red Bay, and transferred it to a Bellanca floatplane
- the mail was then carried to Ottawa in a series of aircraft flown by R.C.A.F. pilots. - The Bellanca flew it to Havre St Pierre; a Vancouver flying boat flew it from Havre St Pierre to Rimouski; and a Fairchild 71 landplane flew it from Rimouski to Ottawa.

The transfer point in the Strait of Belle Isle is sometimes referred to as Bradore Bay, and sometimes as Red Bay. - Red Bay is in Labrador, which is part of Newfoundland, which was a separate country in 1932. (It joined Canada in 1949.) Bradore Bay is in Quebec, and was the closest Canadian post office to Red Bay.

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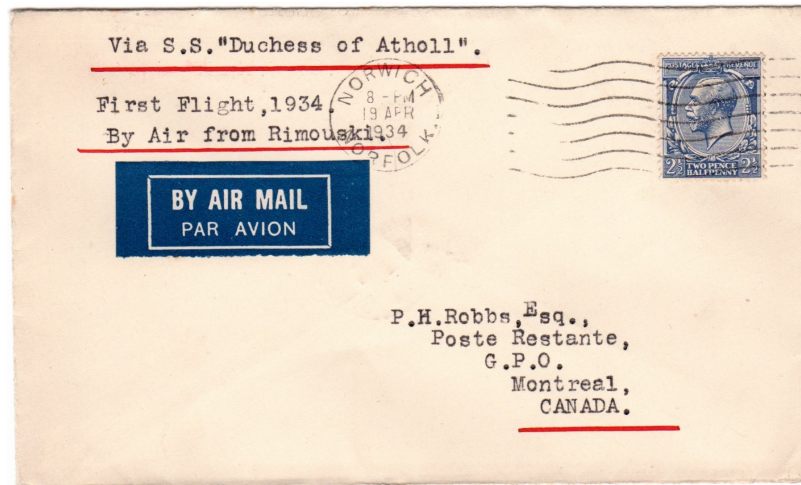


Figure 11 - Typed endorsement “First Flight 1934, By Air from Rimouski”

After the demonstration flight, it was planned to connect with all the sailings of the *Empress of Britain* during the period of the conference. [5, page 59.] Flights met the inbound sailings from Southampton on August 3rd and August 17th, but attempts to connect with outbound sailings on July 20th and August 7th were frustrated by fog. Then the steamer schedule was changed, and the service was terminated. [8]

This accelerated service was very impressive when conditions were favourable. Hugh Halliday noted that, “a British delegate, Stanley Baldwin, congratulated the Minister of National Defense for a feat that had brought mail from Britain in 98 hours”. [8] However, the service was not repeated in future years.

The regular Montreal - Rimouski continued annually after 1932:

Service started	Service ceased
12 April 1933	15 November 1933
14 April 1934	17 November 1934
13 April 1935	16 November 1935
10 April 1936	November 1936
1 April 1937	November 1937
31 March 1938	3 November 1938 [9]

However, covers which were definitely carried by these flights are very difficult to find, as they received no special postal markings. Covers with endorsements, such as Figure 11, are found occasionally, but are most elusive.

For a long time it was uncertain whether the Montreal - Rimouski flights had also operated in 1939. It seemed that they were planned to operate, but may have been cancelled as plans for the Trans-Atlantic air mail services developed. However, this question has recently been resolved, as Diana Trafford found an Annual Report from Quebec Airways Ltd, (a subsidiary of Canadian Airways Ltd.), which stated that the Montreal - Rimouski service had carried 3,089 pounds of mail in 1939, compared to 31,259 pounds in 1938. [10] This report also stated that, “Mail flights to Rimouski were cancelled after the outbreak of war.”

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Acknowledgements

Many thanks to Richard Beith, Neil Hunter, Dick McIntosh, John Symons, and Diana Trafford, with whom I have enjoyed discussing the St. Lawrence Air Mail service from time to time over many years.

For More Information:

The best single source is Richard Beith's article, "The St. Lawrence Seaway Air Mail Service: 1927 to 1939", that was originally published in the May 2008 issue of *Air Mail News*, the journal of the British Air Mail Society. (For more information about BAMS see www.britishairmailsociety.co.uk). An updated version of this article was published in *The Canadian Aerophilatelist*, quarterly journal of The Canadian Aerophilatelic Society, where it was spread over several issues: June 2009, March 2011, June 2011 and September 2011. These backissues of *The Canadian Aerophilatelist* are being posted on the CAS website: www.aerophilately.ca

References

- [1] Information about the various Canadian Pioneer, First and Special Flights can be found in *The Air Mails of Canada and Newfoundland*. For more details see under "publications" at www.americanairmailsociety.org
- [2] *The Canadian Aerophilatelist*, June 2009.
- [3] Frank Ellis *Canada's Flying Heritage* - this is one of the oldest books about the history of aviation in Canada, but still one of the best.
- [4] *The Canadian Aerophilatelist*, March 2011.
- [5] F.J. Hatch, "Ship-to-shore airmail service of the 1920s", in *Canadian Geographic*, August 1978.
- [6] Article "Air Mail Service in Canada" written in 1928, and reproduced in *The Canadian Aerophilatelist*, December 1998, page 14.
- [7] *The Canadian Aerophilatelist*, June 2011.
- [8] Hugh Halliday's article "Up With Mail" described the R.C.A.F. mail carrying flights. Originally published as part of a series of articles in the Canadian Legion's magazine, it was reprinted in *The Canadian Aerophilatelist*, September 2006, pages 18 - 20.
- [9] Dates are from Proud E B, *The Postal History of British Air Mails*, quoted in *The Canadian Aerophilatelist*, September 2011, Page 27.
- [10] Archives of Manitoba, Canadian Airways fonds, M-93-4-12/52-7

END