

AIRPLANES & AIRMAIL in SOUTH AFRICA 1911 - 1925

Danie van Zyl



1911. SOUTH AFRICA. Postcard of the First Flight Kenilworth - Muizenberg 'DEC 27 11'.

The Bleriot monoplane carrying 729 cards was flown by pilot Bok Driver.

The first return flight on the same day, Muizenberg - Kenilworth, carried 210 cards.

The flight took 7½ minutes over approx. 12.9 km, making a speed of 103 km/h or 64 mph.

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Airplanes and Airmail in South Africa 1911–1925

This Exhibit Strives

to record airmail flights from 1917 to 1925 carrying officially sanctioned mail
to investigate
to analyse and
to evaluate the South African Governmental Airmail Experiment of 1925.

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The First British Officially Sanctioned Airmail

Hendon-Windsor Flights in Great Britain – 9 to 26 September 1911

The first country to have officially sanctioned mail was India, then Great Britain and then South Africa, all in 1911. The first U.K. aerial post was flown from Hendon Aerodrome (London) to Windsor as part of the celebrations marking the coronation of King George V. Special postcards and envelopes were made available for purchase by the public. His Majesty's Postmaster sanctioned the carrying of mail by airplane. E.F. Driver was chosen to be one of four pilots to fly the mail.



The envelope (top: 1d stamp) and postcard (bottom: ½d stamp) issued for the first airmail flights in the U.K. where E.F. Driver was a selected pilot.

The flights took place on 9 and 11 September 1911.



The First South African Officially Sanctioned Airmail

The Kenilworth-Muizenberg Flights of December 1911/January 1912

There is a very close and special link between the flights in England and those that took place in Kenilworth, South Africa. The link is in the person of E.F. "Bok" Driver. He was a South African who learnt to fly at the Grahame-White Aviation School in England. He was one of the pilots who flew the Hendon-Windsor Flights in Britain.

When Evelyn "Bok" Driver returned from the U.K. to South Africa he, together with two other pilots, formed the South African Aviation Syndicate Ltd. The Syndicate obtained permission from the Minister of Posts and Telegraphs, Sir David Graaff, to carry mail on flights between Kenilworth and Muizenberg in the Cape. The mail consisted of pictorial postcards very similar to the postcards carried in the U.K. They were of similar design, featuring a picture of the flying machine, special date stamps and a declaration of authenticity.



Postcard of the first flight from Kenilworth to Muizenberg on 27 December 1911. The Bleriot monoplane was flown by pilot Bok Driver. The distance travelled was approximately 12.9 kilometres and lasted 7½ minutes.



Postcard of the second flight from Kenilworth to Muizenberg on 2 January 1912. Both flights were flown by Bok Driver in a Bleriot monoplane.

L.A. Wyndham records the flights in his book, *The Airposts of South Africa*, as follows:

- 27 December 1911 – First flight Kenilworth-Muizenberg (729 cards)
- 27 December 1911 – First return flight Muizenberg-Kenilworth (210 cards)
- 2 January 1912 – Second flight Kenilworth-Muizenberg (1479 cards)
- 3 January 1912 – Second return flight Muizenberg-Kenilworth (179 cards).

It is part of the record that the second return flight was supposed to have taken place on 2 January but bad weather prevented a landing in Kenilworth. The flight was completed on 3 January but not by air. Once again fog prevented a landing in Kenilworth. Driver had his plane with the mail towed to Kenilworth where he delivered the mail to the post office.

Flying for Charity

The "Our Day" Red Cross Aerial Post of 1918

In September 1918 a campaign was started to raise money for soldiers wounded in the Great War and for dependants of soldiers killed while in service. The campaign covered the whole of South Africa. One of the fund-raising efforts entailed selling a souvenir postcard known as "Make Your Sixpence Fly" for 6d. These postcards were then flown in special flights by Lieut. A.H. Gearing in a BE.2e airplane. The Post Office gave its approval and full support. The mail was confined to the souvenir postcards. A special "Aerial Post" datestamp was provided by the Post Office. The cards required to be stamped with a halfpenny stamp for inland and a one penny stamp for overseas delivery. The datestamp was the actual date the card was flown.

The first mail was organised for the 7th October, 1918, in conjunction with an aerial display which was intended to be given by Lt Gearing at the "Naval and Military Tournament" to be held at the Green Point Cycle Track in Cape Town. Although the Tournament did not take place due to the severity of the Spanish influenza pandemic, the aerial post was made from the military aerodrome at Young's Field, Wynberg to Green Point Common. Three bags of mail were carried.

A second flight over the same route was made on the 26th October, but as the intention to carry mail was only announced on the 24th, the mail is much scarcer and only a single mailbag was handed over to the postal system.



One of the postcards carried on the first flight on 7 October 1918 from Young's Field to Green Point.

The "Make Your Sixpence Fly" Postcards

The special datestamp was used for all the flights in both the Cape and Transvaal. The postcards were of two slightly different designs, known as "Large Wings" and "Small Wings". The required postage was 1/2d inland and 1d for overseas delivery.

Lt Gearing and his two mechanics were transferred to Johannesburg on military duty where a Black revolt was threatening. Lt Gearing's plane followed by rail. By that time the war had ended, but the Red Cross knew that its work would continue for many months to come. The organisers of the Transvaal "Our Day" adopted the Cape Town plan with a similar postal scheme. The flight plans however were different. The flights in Cape Town had been no more than demonstration flights, whereas in Johannesburg, in addition to two demonstration flights, three flights were made which carried mail from one location to another, with mail being carried on both the outward and return journeys. It is however not possible to tell from a card whether it was carried on an outward or inward flight.



One of the postcards carried on the first flight on 7 October 1918 from Young's Field to Green Point. The card here shown was also machine date stamped - not a regular occurrence.



This postcard was carried on the 26th October flight. Only one mailbag was carried making cards of this date much scarcer.



"Make Your Sixpence Fly" postcard of the "Small Wings" design. This flight was from Johannesburg to Germiston on the 24th November.

The 3d Souvenir Cinderella

An "Our Day" souvenir "stamp" of 3d value was also made available but this did not catch on and very few survived. The Cinderella stamp on a flown card is even more rare.



On 27 November Lt Gearing flew from Johannesburg to Pretoria and back.

The card as illustrated here is of the "Small Wings" variety.

Leaflet and Pamphlet Distribution

Apart from carrying the postcards Lt Gearing also distributed leaflets and notices by dropping them from the air. These drops took place on 20 November, where the leaflet advertised the Military Exhibition at the Wanderer's Ground in Johannesburg, and on 14 December advertising the Military and Naval Tournament on 16 December at the Rosebank Show Grounds in Cape Town.

AN AERIAL MESSAGE: Dropped by Military Aeroplane in the Transvaal, November, 1918.	
From The Red Cross.	To The Public of the Transvaal.
<p>Although Peace has come, the work of the Red Cross will go on for very many months, until all the sick and wounded soldiers have gone to their homes. To assist in providing funds to continue the work until the end, a Great Military Exhibition is being held at the Wanderers Grounds, Johannesburg, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday, November 20th, 21st, 22nd and 23rd. Nothing like it has ever been seen in South Africa. There will be an air show daily from 2.15 to 10 p.m. the wonderful reproduction of Ypres Trenches and Dog Outc and the Aerobians which drops this Message. On Wednesday and Saturday afternoons, the S.A.M.E. Artillery, the boys of the Naval Brigade and the Boy Scouts will give displays. Bairnfather's Old Bill will be there. On Wednesday and Saturday evenings there will be a Great Military Spectacle portraying Old and New Warfare in which 800 troops from Potchefstroom will demonstrate how the Springboks went "Over the Top" commencing with a Grand Military Torchlight Tattoo by troops and massed bands. The only opportunity of seeing the War at your Door. Support the Red Cross by coming in your thousands, and Buy and Post at once the RED CROSS AERIAL POST CARD.</p>	



The "Aerial Message" dropped from Lt Gearing's airplane on 20 November over Johannesburg and the "Military and Naval Tournament" pamphlet dropped from Lt Gearing's airplane on 14 December over Cape Town. (Images greatly reduced.)

South African Dilemma: Surplus Airplanes and Unemployed Pilots

The British Gift

Britain presented South Africa with 100 DH9 airplanes with all the supporting parts and tools as a thank you gift for the support during the Great War. South Africa had supplied hundreds of pilots who had now returned from the war and found themselves unemployed. Some found employment with private companies, others managed to buy their own planes from the cheap surplus war market and flew them at shows and used them privately.

The South African Government was quite aware of the developments in the United States and across Europe using ex-war planes as mail carriers. The DH9s, the British gift, were very suitable as mail carriers. Thus came about the 1925 Government Experimental Airmail plan.



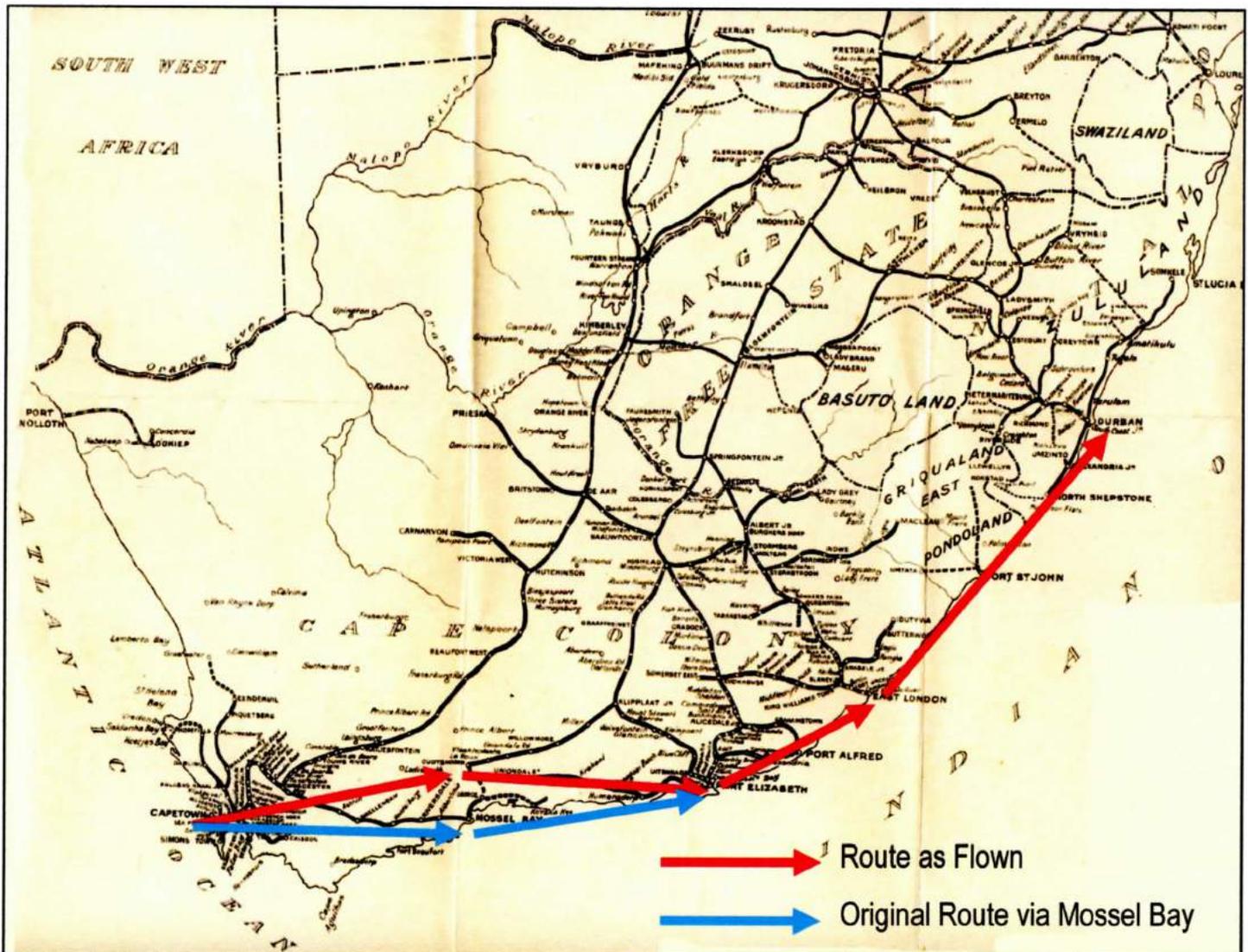
An unused postcard showing the De Haviland DH9 airplane. 100 of these airplanes were given to South Africa by the British government in appreciation of South Africa's commitment in the Great War. These airplanes were eminently suited for carrying mail.

The Government Experimental Airmail Service - 1925

While South Africa had a superior railway system the geography of the land made the direct connecting of southern and eastern towns and cities problematic. Mail from Cape Town to any of Mossel Bay, Port Elizabeth, East London and even Durban had to travel inland before it could be redirected south again. Connecting these towns and cities by air would speed up the delivering of mail considerably.

United Kingdom mail was sent to South Africa by Union-Castle mail boats. The boats arrived in Cape Town on a Monday and boats left on the return journey on the Friday. The motivating force behind the plan was that airplanes could receive overseas mail from the mail boat on the Monday, deliver it to the coastal towns and cities then make a return flight from Durban to Cape Town to deliver mail to the mail boat on the Friday. This would enable business correspondents to reply to UK mail in the same week. The Government planners expected this feature to be readily adopted by business and commercial mail users both in the UK and in South Africa. In presenting this experiment to Parliament for approval much was made of this expedited overseas link.

South African railway map showing the planned routes



The Airmail Experiment and the Cabinet

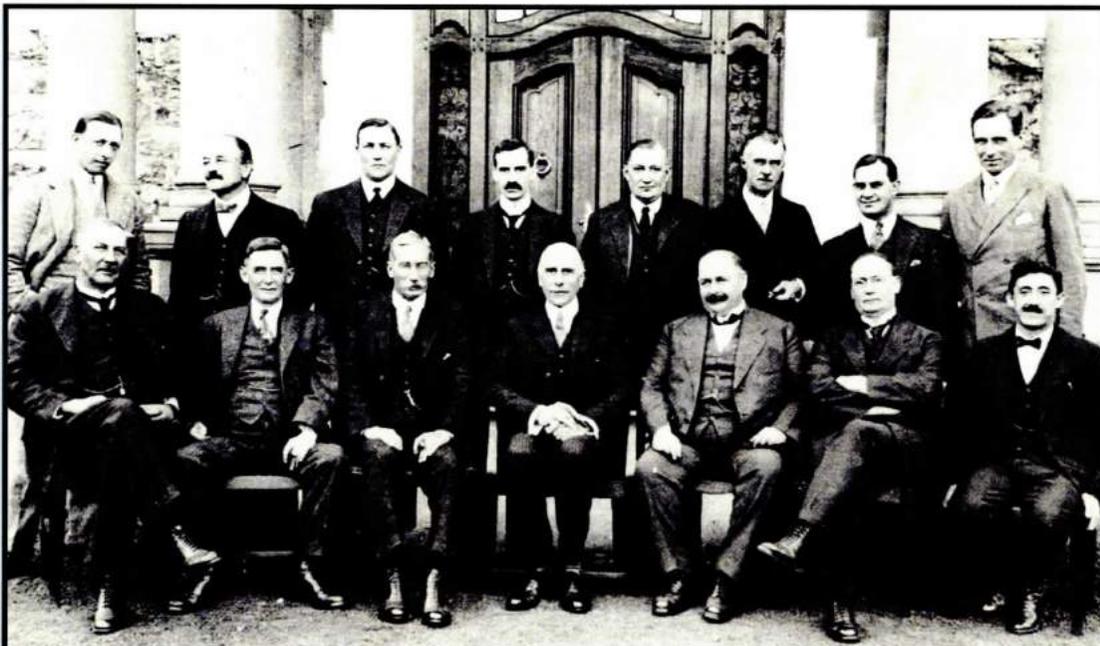
The Cabinet of Gen. Hertzog had to agree to Minister Tommy Boydell's Experimental Airmail plan.

Mr Boydell emphasised two matters in his arguments for the Airmail experiment. The first was that South Africa was falling very much behind other countries in the matter of civil aviation. We would now be able to prove that in this country an air service was possible and practical. The people themselves will have to prove by using the service that such a service was wanted. There was every indication that the people intended to support the service.

In other countries civil aviation was not an experiment. It had long passed that stage. It was an established, regular and reliable means of rapid transport for mail, passengers and goods.

We surely could not fail where others had succeeded. Europe was already a network of air services. Across the American continent a daily airmail service flew from New York to San Francisco. In Australia services of over 1000 miles had been running successfully for several years without mishap.

The other argument was economic. Airmail could save the country thousands in sterling every year. The banks alone stood to make quite a pretty profit out of wool transactions, for instance, apart from anything else. The reason was the saving made possible on drafts on London. A case in point was a shipment of 1,500 bales of wool made by one firm from a port the previous week. The value of the wool could be placed at £52,500. The steamer on which the wool was loaded left after the mail boat and after the ordinary overseas mail had closed. The bank concerned sending the draft by airmail caught the mail steamer at Cape Town. The bank gained one week's interest on the draft for £52,500.



25 The Hertzog 'Pact' Cabinet of 1924

Front row, l. to r.: P. G. W. Grobler, F. H. P. Creswell, J. B. M. Hertzog, Earl of Athlone (Governor-General), T. J. de V. Roos, D. F. Malan, T. Boydell.
Back row, l. to r.: official, F. W. Beyers, N. C. Havenga, C. W. Malan, J. C. G. Kemp, three officials

Minister of Posts and Telegraphs, Tommy Boydell, is seated on the far right in this photograph of the 1924/25 Cabinet.

The Announcement

In January 1925 Mr Thomas Boydell, Minister of Posts and Telegraphs for the Union of S.A., announced that an experimental airmail service would commence on 2 March, 1925. He explained that the object of the service was to facilitate the receipt and dispatch of European mail. It would be possible for members of the public in Mossel Bay (subsequently changed to Oudtshoorn because of fog), Port Elizabeth, East London and Durban to receive their inbound mail a few hours after the mail boat berthed in Cape Town and to dispatch their outbound mail much earlier than previously possible. The reason why the service was confined to the Durban-Cape Town route was because the train connection between these coastal cities was indirect and slow.

In addition to the ordinary postage (2d per ounce) the following airmail fees had to be prepaid in stamps:

Letters Inland 3d per ounce, overseas 6d per oz.

Postcards Inland 1d each, overseas 3d

Parcels Inland 6d per lb, overseas 9d per lb.

The Post Office issued a set of stamps in denominations of 1d (red), 3d (blue), 6d (mauve) and 9d (green). The stamps were not valid for ordinary postage. The printing was done by the Cape Times Ltd, Cape Town at a cost of 3s per thousand. The stamps were printed on soft wove non-watermarked paper in sheets consisting of upper and lower panes, each pane comprising six horizontal rows of ten stamps.

A Trio of Firsts

These were the first airmail stamps in the British Empire. They were also South Africa's first set of commemorative stamps and the first Afrikaans stamps where Zuid was replaced by Suid. These stamps here displayed were cancelled and flown.





An unused postcard picturing a DH9 being loaded with mail, probably in the UK. Similar airplanes were used in South Africa in the Airmail Experimental service.

The Airplanes Used for the Experiment

The British Government had presented South Africa with 100 DH9 aircraft fitted with 230 h.p. Siddeley Puma engines and capable of carrying a pay load of 400 lbs. The 1925 Airmail experiment used 11 of these machines for conveying the mail.

In order to ensure efficiency the service was conducted on the relay principle, two machines operating together over each of the four sections of the route. By 21 February 1925 the pilots and their machines were in readiness at the five stations; Cape Town, Mossel Bay (changed to Oudtshoorn before the first flight because of fog), Port Elizabeth, East London and Durban. The dress rehearsal took place on 23 February. The trial service demonstrated that it would be necessary for the aeroplanes to leave Durban on the Thursday afternoon and proceed as far as East London, from where the flight to Cape Town could be completed the following day in time to connect the mail with the outgoing mail boat which left Cape town at 4 p.m.

On Monday morning, 2 March, two DH9 wartime machines, Nos.113 and 127 were wheeled from the hangars to institute the first airmail postal service in South Africa. The mail from overseas had arrived in the "Windsor Castle". Capt H.C. Daniel (113) and Lieut. L. Tasker (127) flew the first relay to Oudtshoorn.

The Airmail Experiment

Pilots

Fourteen pilots flew the 36 flights of the Airmail Experiment. They were:

Lt R R Bentley

Lt Burger

Lt R F Caspereuthus

Capt H C Daniel

Capt J J C Hamman

Lt Hattersley

Lt L Hiscock

Lt Joubert

Major Meintjes

Lt C W Meredith

Lt Roos

Lt H P Schoeman

Lt L Tasker and

Capt C J (Boetie) Venter



Lt R F Caspereuthus



Lt C W Meredith



Col. Pierre van Rhyneveld who was in charge of the Air Force side of the arrangements.



Some of the first S.A. Air Force pilots of 1922. Standing from left to right: C.G. Ross, J.J.C. Hamman, H.C. Daniel, D. Cloete, A.L.M. van der Bijl, G.E.B. Lawson, J. Daniel. Seated from left to right: M.T.S. Papenfus, C.J. Venter, H.J.C. Gray, J. Holthouse, H.P. Schoeman.

Pilots Hamman, Daniel, Venter and Schoeman appear in this photo.

Standing: Hamman is second from the left, Daniel third.

Sitting: Venter is second from the left and Schoeman last in row.



The De Haviland DH9 in the air

The Airmail Stamps of South Africa



The four airmail stamps, mint

Information about the stamps

To ensure that the stamps would be available in time, the formality of calling for tenders was dispensed with and an order placed with the Cape Times, Ltd, Cape Town at a cost of 3s per thousand. At this time Union postage stamps were printed in England. The stamps were designed by one of the Posts and Telegraphs staff members. The design selected was engraved by Mr A. Cooper of the Cape Times. The actual printing was done on a baby Mann litho-offset machine and supervised by a Post Office official.

The number of stamps printed was as follows:

1d	1750 sheets or 210 000 stamps	3d	1750 sheets or 210 000 stamps
6d	1225 sheets or 147 000 stamps	9d	917 sheets or 110 040 stamps.

The stamps were printed on soft wove un-watermarked paper in sheets consisting of upper and lower panes, each pane comprising six horizontal rows of ten stamps.

The Cape Times did not have the special machinery for perforating sheets of stamps. This process was performed by an ordinary treadle perforating machine which had only a single row of perforating pins.

The stamps were released for sale on the 26th February 1925. The sale of the stamps was discontinued at the end of June, except at Pretoria, where the sale was continued until 31st October.

Airmail Stamp Varieties

In his book *The Airposts of South Africa* (page 97) L.A. Wyndham reported as follows on varieties:

Having regard to the fact that the special machinery needed for stamp printing was not available, the work of the Cape Times, Ltd., was exceptionally well done and no errors exist. The only important constant plate flaws occur in the 9d. stamp, viz. :

(1) First stamp in the fifth row, both upper and lower panes, shows three white scratches alongside the forward left strut and running through the lower wing and fuselage of the aeroplane. This has inappropriately been referred to as the "Strut" variety by stamp collectors. (Twelve copies of this variety exist imperf. on left, i.e. from the six imperf. sheets.)

(2) Sixth stamp in the fifth row, both upper and lower panes, the white frame line under "Lugpos" extends right through the left-hand circle of value tablet. This flaw is referred to as the "Stroke through Tablet" variety.

The only really important varieties are the Imperfs. As previously explained the perforating machinery was not really suitable and a few sheets imperfectly perforated escaped the supervision.

These are reported as being: One sheet of the 1d. imperf. down left-hand marginal (12 stamps). There is reason to believe that two sheets showed this variety. Two sheets of the 3d., similarly imperf. (24 stamps). Six sheets of the 9d. similarly imperf. (72 stamps) and three sheets of the 9d., imperf. along bottom of marginal paper on upper pane (30 stamps).



The 9d stamp imperf. on left margin. Only 36 blocks of 4 left margin imperf. were printed and some of these blocks were separated into either single stamps or single rows.

Other Airmail Stamp Varieties



The serif of the d of the left 1d is distorted



There is a stroke through the top of the strut



The extended strut variety



There is a stroke through the left hand 9d



There were no controls on the stamp sheets but on each sheet the particular value was expressed in a coloured circle four times on the marginal paper, once at the top, twice on the right-hand side and once at the bottom. The values 3d and 9d are shown.

Stamp Varieties on Cover



Above: A broken R in SUIDAFRIKA on the stamp top left. Note the "H" instead of a "B" in CAMHRIDGE in the datestamp on both covers.

The overstepping and colouring strongly suggest that both these covers were intended as philatelic items.

Below: Broken d of the left 1d value.



The Souvenir Card issued to V.I.P.s

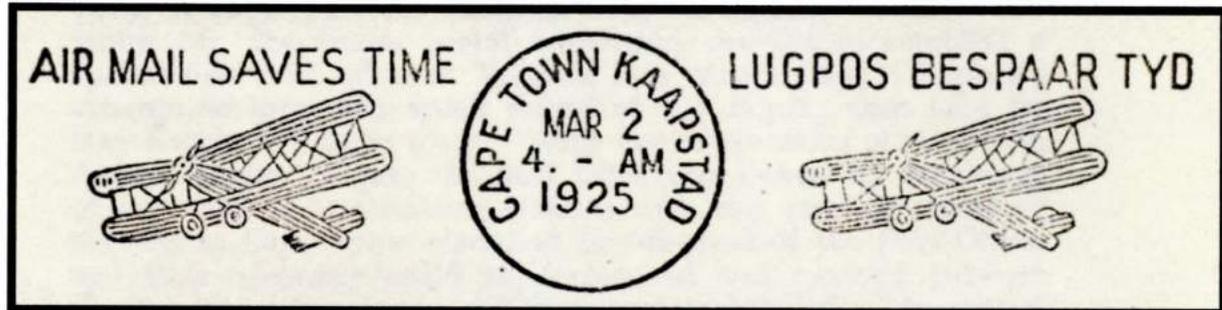
Wyndham also reported that special Souvenir Cards were issued. "It having been decided that sets of the special air mail stamps should be presented by the Minister of Posts and Telegraphs and the Postmaster-General as commemorative souvenirs to the pilots and other persons associated with the service and to a few other people, a special presentation card was printed on which to mount the stamps. No official record was kept of the number of sets of stamps used for this purpose, but it is believed that under 30 of the souvenir cards were presented. These are of very great rarity."



The very rare VIP souvenir card presented by the Minister of Posts and Telegraphs and the Postmaster-General.

Machine Cancellers Publicising the Airmail Service

Machine slogan cancellers were used in Cape Town and in Durban on all mail, publicising the airmail service. Reisener reports a canceller used in Cape Town up to October 1925, well beyond the last flight on 15 June.



In Durban



Example of the machine canceller used in Durban. The airmail slogan "AIRMAIL SAVES TIME" and "LUGPOS BESPAAR TYD" advertised the Airmail Experiment as did the image of a bi-plane. The full set of four stamps is conclusive evidence that this was a philatelic postal item. Note the distorted black S.A. AIR MAIL cachet and the early date of 6 March. The significance and how it came about is explained on pages 27 and 28.

In Cape Town



Two machine cancellers of different design were used in Cape Town. Above: Cape Town and Kaapstad separated top and bottom. Below: Cape Town and Kaapstad adjacent. The airmail slogans "AIRMAIL SAVES TIME" and "LUGPOS BE-SPAAR TYD" advertised the Airmail Experiment as did the image of a bi-plane.



The Schedule of Flights

The following table gives a summary of all the flights that took place. It should be noted that no deadline for a mail boat was missed during the period of the experiment, although at one time the boat was reached with ten minutes to spare.

Journey UP							Journey DOWN					
Date	C.T.	Oudt	M.B.	P.E.	E.L.	Dbn	Dbn	E.L.	P.E.	Oudt	C.T.	Date
02/03/25			■									05/03/25
09-10/03/25												12/03/25
16/03/25												19/03/25
23/03/25												26/03/25
30/03/25			■									02/04/25
06/04/25			■									09/04/25
13/04/25												16/04/25
20/04/25			■									23/04/25
27/04/25			■									30/04/25
4-5/05/25												07/05/25
11/05/25												14/05/25
18/05/25			■									21/05/25
25/05/25			■									28/05/25
01/06/25			■									04/06/25
08/06/25			■									11/06/25
15-16/06/25												
17/06/25												To Pretoria

 = Red square indicates a flight to Mossel Bay on that day.

Mossel Bay Flights

Mossel Bay was originally intended as a stopping over place for airplanes from Cape Town, but was then replaced by Oudtshoorn because of Mossel Bay's unreliable weather patterns. Mail from Cape Town was flown to Mossel Bay from Oudtshoorn when the quantity of mail justified the extra flight. Airmail was flown to Mossel Bay on the days marked by red squares in the table above.

The flight schedule to Mossel Bay is known. Mail destined for Mossel Bay but originating in Durban, East London or Port Elizabeth was not flown but taken by train from Oudtshoorn to Mossel Bay. When weather or small mail quantity resulted in no special flight being made mail was sent to Mossel Bay by train. The planes dropped the mail from the air. Mail from Mossel Bay went by train to Oudtshoorn.



This letter was posted in Cape Town on 28 February, addressed to Mossel Bay and flown on the first flight. An example of a letter that was flown from Oudtshoorn to Mossel Bay. This cover was clearly a philatelic item indicated by the excessive 9d postage paid.



A postcard posted in Cape Town and addressed to Swellendam via Mossel Bay. This postcard was flown from Oudtshoorn to Mossel Bay and was then taken from Mossel Bay to Swellendam by train. The postage is correct for a postcard.



Mail from Durban to Mossel Bay was never flown to Mossel Bay but was always sent by train. A full set of stamps on a cover is almost certainly an indication of philatelic mail.



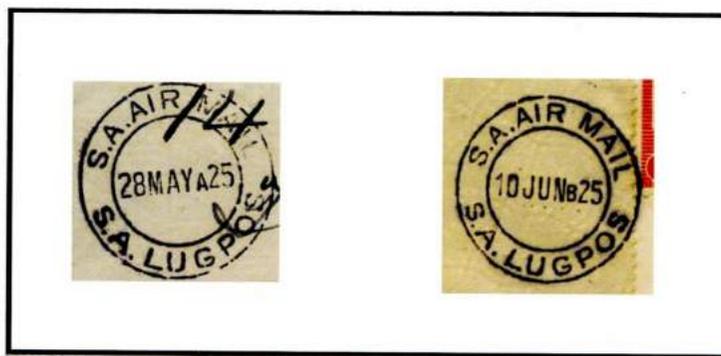
On 13 June a letter addressed to Mossel Bay was posted in Cape Town. The flight logs indicate that there was no flight to Mossel Bay on that day. Apparently there were so few postal items for Mossel Bay on this last flight that they were forwarded by train from Oudtshoorn to Mossel Bay, therefore potentially a scarce item. No yellow airmail label.

The Durban Airmail Cachet

The cachet used in Durban had an interesting history. In Durban the black ink used on the pad interacted with the rubber of the cachet hand stamp, causing it to deform and finally disintegrate. The deterioration can be seen on covers stamped on different dates:



Finally the rubber hand stamps had to be replaced. The replacement was a steel hand stamp of smaller size and with a changeable 'a' and 'b' in the date, as seen in these examples:



A cover showing the early use of the Durban cachet on the incorrect black Indian-ink inkpad. Also of interest is that the cover had no airmail stamp but was accepted and flown.



This cover shows to what extent the Durban rubber cachet had deteriorated over a period of one month in spite of the fact that the correct purple inkpad was now in use.



This cover shows the new metal cachet which was much smaller than the previous rubber cachet.

Overseas Mail: To and From South Africa

The following cover illustrates what the experiment was all about: overseas commercial mail coming by Union-Castle Line mail boat from Southampton, arriving in Cape Town 10 days later, then to continue the journey to its destination by airplane. This cover posted in London addressed to Miss Cecil Myers in Durban.



A letter posted in the United Kingdom and destined for Durban. The postage was the normal UK-South Africa postage plus 8 pence surcharge being the airmail fee Cape Town to Durban. All incoming mail was supposed to receive the Cape Town airmail cachet but in this instance it did not happen. The cachet applied at the destination was the quite distinctive black Durban cachet. The sender was clearly well informed about the experimental service and marked the letter accordingly. Overseas mail such as this is rare and a registered item even more so.

A letter posted in Durban. The stamps were machine cancelled on 28 May on which day the letter also received the airmail cachet. The postage was normal overseas 2d plus the correct 6d airmail surcharge. The replacement Durban metal cachet was used.



A letter posted in Durban. The stamps were hand cancelled on 4 June on which day the letter also received the airmail cachet. The postage was normal overseas 2d plus the correct 6d airmail surcharge. The Durban replacement metal cachet was used.





It seems that much of the UK mail was posted to reach Cape Town in time for the first outward flight. That was the intention of the sender as is clearly seen in the annotation on the letter.



A letter posted in Oudtshoorn destined for Dorset in the UK. Covers with an Oudtshoorn post mark are scarce. This cover made mention of the Cango Caves.



This letter to Hamburg in Germany travelled via Southampton and London and apparently then by air to Hannover in Germany as indicated by the faint red cachet. Note the deformed Durban cachet now with violet ink but beyond repair and the Durban airmail machine canceller.



A letter from Durban to Surrey. The cover has no airmail label but the hand written annotation was sufficient. The Durban replacement metal cachet was used.



A letter posted in Durban destined for York in the UK. The early stage of distortion in the Durban cachet is clearly seen after only a few days of use.



A letter from Port Elizabeth destined for London. The cover has the name of a firm Lockheed & Co and is addressed to Robt. Lockheed, perhaps an associate or relative.



From Port Elizabeth to London. The postage is correct.



A letter destined for Scotland. No airmail label, but the handwritten annotation was sufficient to ensure airmail transportation in South Africa.

Local Mail: Commercial and Philatelic

It is important to note the difference between commercial mail and philatelic mail: philatelic mail was on the whole confined to South Africa while overseas mail was mainly commercial. Mail specially prepared by collectors can often be picked out by the total value of the stamps being unrelated to the required postage. Another matter of importance concerns the condition of mail. Philatelic mail is generally destined for stamp collections to be preserved in albums at best or boxes at least. Commercial mail envelopes are ephemeral and are often discarded, only surviving by chance. Philatelic items usually are thus far better preserved than most commercial mail, but commercial mail is the scarcer of the two. The division between commercial and philatelic mail is a matter of personal judgement and is therefore often arbitrary.



Posted at Stalstreet post office in Cape Town. A pair of 1d stamps affixed on back and cancelled. A Stalstreet Registration cachet appears on the back with a Hlobane cancelation. The excessive postage clearly indicates a philatelic item.

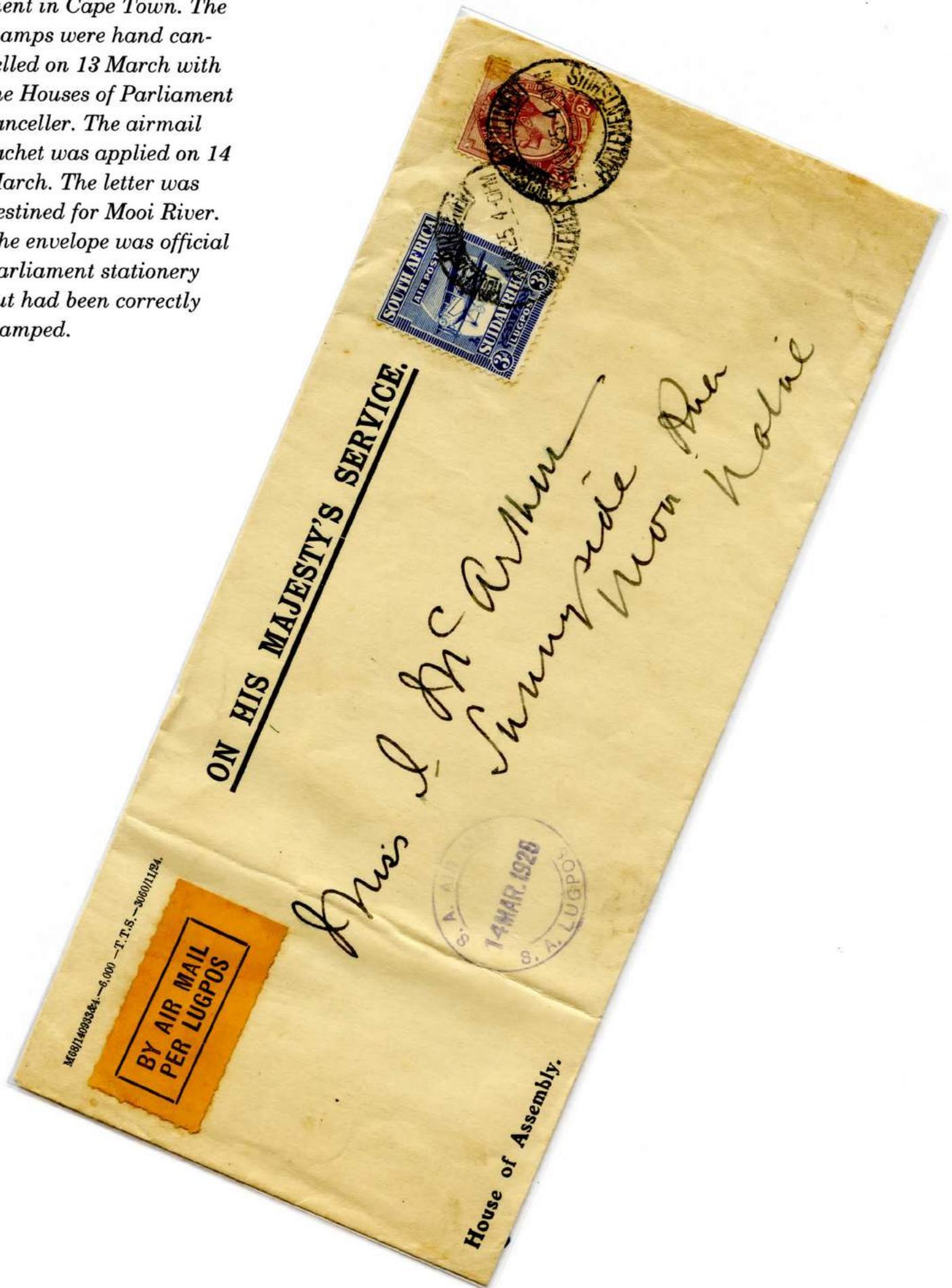


The earliest use of the Airmail cachet, 26 Feb 1925. The cover was incorrectly machine cancelled. A hand canceller was then used on the stamps. The machine and hand canceller have the same time coding, 4.30 pm. The postcard is correctly franked.



An interesting cover. The pair of 1d stamps had a 1d control number below. The post office clerk miscalculated postage and taxed the item 1d. This was later cancelled when the mistake was noticed. The extra 1d necessary postage was covered by the ordinary postage stamps, an acceptable payment.

A letter posted at Parliament in Cape Town. The stamps were hand cancelled on 13 March with the Houses of Parliament canceller. The airmail cachet was applied on 14 March. The letter was destined for Mooi River. The envelope was official Parliament stationery but had been correctly stamped.



A letter posted in East London. The stamps were hand cancelled on 19 March on which day the letter also received the airmail cachet. The addressee was the General Manager of a local Cape Town company.





Somerset West,
6th. June, 1925.

Dear Mr. Reynolds,
Many thanks for your letter of the 4th. received this morning. All the covers mentioned by you have come to hand, and I shall return the ones you mention during the week.

I think you are mistaken in supposing that the mail on Thursday was the last from Durban. I have just got our Postmaster to get into touch with Cape Town and the position is this: Mail will be carried between Cape Town and Durban on 8th. and 10th. inst., and from Durban to Cape Town (last flight) on 11th. inst. I shall be very pleased if you could manage to post me at least half a doz. postcards and a like number of envelopes including a couple with full sets. I shall remit you the cost. Kind regards,
Yours sincerely,
H. J. J. J.

A postcard addressed to G.W. Reynolds in Durban, a well known philatelic dealer. The reverse makes interesting reading. There appears to have been uncertainty about when the flights would end. The postcard is dated 6th June, 1925. The airmail cachet was applied twice both of the same date.



A letter of some interest. It was posted and machine cancelled in Pretoria and addressed to a person in Cape Town. The normal route for a letter from Pretoria to Cape Town would have been by mail train but in this case it apparently went by train to Durban to catch the airmail service first flight to Cape Town. Clearly of philatelic interest.

A cover that flew first east, Cape Town to East London, and then west, East London to Port Elizabeth. It has both airmail cachets imprinted, 28 February and then 5 March.



A very interesting cover.
 Over weight and
 charged a 4d tax. The
 extra airmail stamps
 were not acceptable for
 payment of ordinary
 mail, 2d being too little.



On face an ordinary commercial item in itself scarce but with the added interest of a double airmail cachet imprint, first on the 7th March and then again on the day of the flight, 9th March. Perhaps the cachet imprint of 7th March was too indistinct for the post office official.





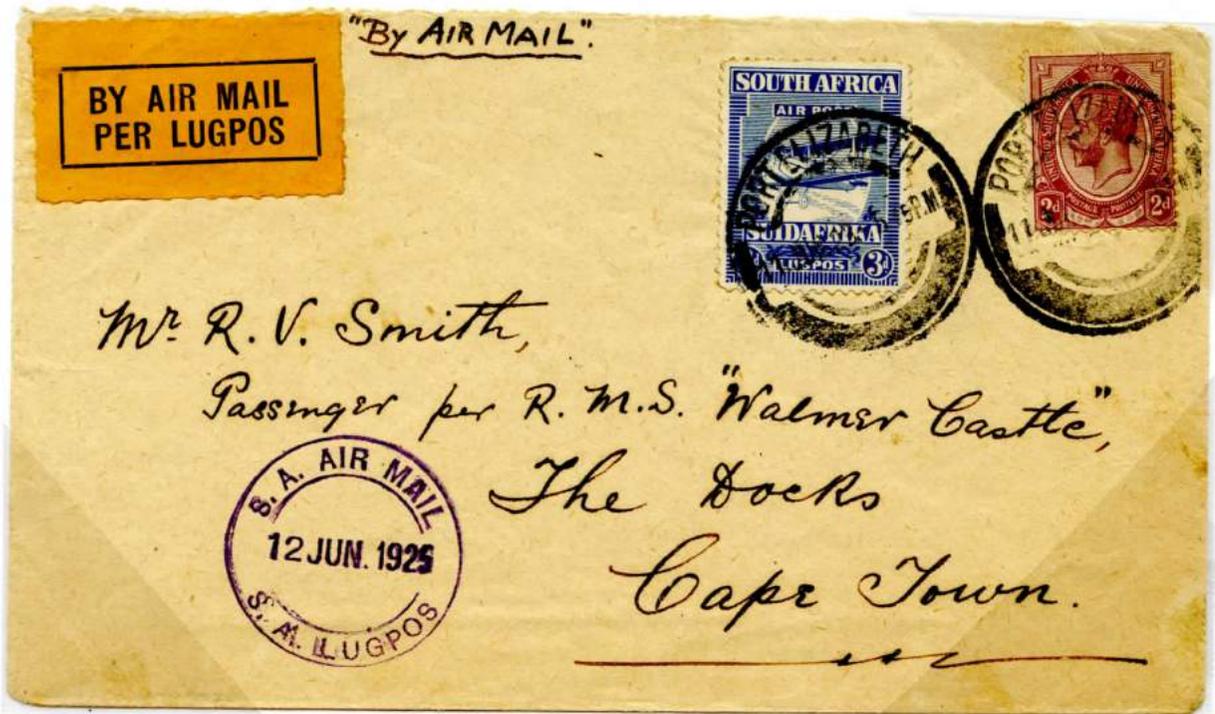
A Parcel sent by airmail—a very scarce item. This parcel from the Cape Argus to the Railway Bookstall in Port Elizabeth probably contained newspapers now available in Port Elizabeth on the day of issue. The parcel was carried on the first flight from Cape Town to Port Elizabeth.



Letter from Durban to Cape Town. The cover has the full set of four stamps. Such covers were much sought after by philatelists.



A philatelic postcard sent from Oudtshoorn to Heidelberg in the Transvaal. The dates are 15 June, the day of the last flight. The card is marked "via Durban". Oudtshoorn mail of any kind is scarce.



The Walmer Castle was due to sail on Friday 11 June at 4 pm. The Port Elizabeth cancellation has a time stamp of 5 pm. Although it received an airmail cachet dated 12 June the last flight from Port Elizabeth to Cape Town was on the 11th. Alas, Mr Smith sailed away without his letter. Would Union-Castle have forwarded the mail?



Although the envelope has an airmail label the airmail stamp is absent. Could the Oudtshoorn post office have run out of airmail stamps considering that Oudtshoorn had not originally been on the proposed route? The envelope was carelessly opened, cutting into the address. Perhaps it was never meant to be preserved as a philatelic item.

Airmail Traffic Statistics

The following table gives the number of stamps printed and sold.

	Printed	Sold	Value
1d	210 000	65 269	£271 19s 1d
3d	210 000	75 500	£943 15s 0d
6d	147 000	53 415	£1335 7s 6d
9d	110 040	27 642	£1036 11s 6d

(Source: Wyndham, page 96)

The *South African Philatelist* reported (June 1925, page 57) that 95% of the mail carried by air consisted of philatelic material specially prepared and mailed by stamp collectors. Only 5% was commercial mail. The first and the last flights carried far more philatelic items proportionally than the other flights, again an indication of collector interest.

An Evaluation of the Experiment: Success or Failure?

Success yes: the experiment showed that an airmail service was technically possible.

In the end failure: The public was not ready for it, therefore it was not economically viable. The government ran the service at a considerable loss. Insufficient commercial mail was carried and the support from Britain was minimal. The public had not developed a trust in flying. During the Experiment newspapers continually published reports on how difficult the journey had been and how courageous the pilots were. For the public, luck played a role and luck has an awkward way of changing against you. Potential business users were wary of entrusting their mail to the sky. Why risk losing the mail when the railway system ensured delivery. For philatelic users taking a risk was of little consequence.

In the 1920's South African business enterprises were centered in Johannesburg and Kimberley and they were well serviced by rail. Government departments were centered in Cape Town and Pretoria, both without the need for airmail.

Business users in the UK and Europe had to send mail by boat. For them an extra day or so in South Africa made little difference, and how many letters had to be answered within a day or three.

For most users Airmail was showy and adventurous but risky and dangerous.

Conclusion

While its time had not come in South Africa in 1925, airmail was the future, as was already seen in other countries especially in the United States.

Tailpiece

An interesting aside was that although the last flight took place on 15 June, airmail stamps continued to be on sale at the Pretoria Post Office until 31 October 1925. These stamps could not be used for ordinary postage. This brought forth an angry response from the South African Philatelist, asking the Government whether it was now selling "little pictures gummed on one side and perforated all round, which the said Government declares are not valid for any postal purpose."

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The Cape Times Newspaper, February to June 1925, Microfiche, National Archives, Pretoria.

Various issues of The South African Philatelist



THE END

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A grateful South African Philately Club thanks

Danie van Zyl

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13/01/2021

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