

ROUND THE WORLD BY AIRMAIL / ZEPPELIN ATTEMPT

-by Piyush Khaitan

A tale of high drama, twists and turns, and finally a terrible tragedy.



Intended for the second 1937 Westward flight of the Hindenburg LZ-129 Zeppelin Airship.

In 1937 by airmail round the world?

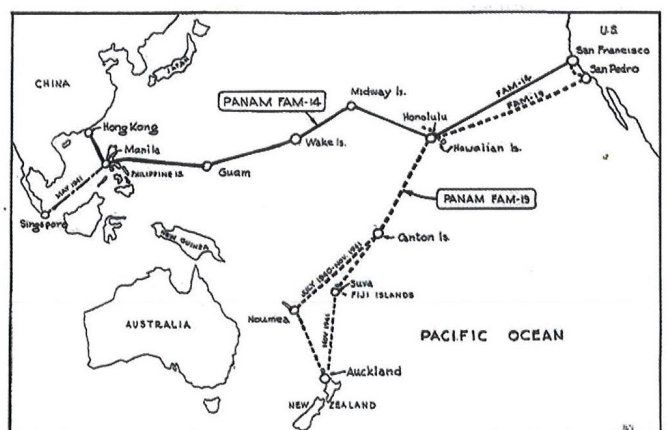
This was not yet possible due to a small gap in the worldwide airmail network. Imperial Airways Ltd (IAL) was flying from Europe via the Middle East to Hong Kong; while Pan American Airways (PAA) was flying from San Francisco via Hawaii only as far as Manila, Philippine Islands. However, there was no airmail service existing between Manila and Hong Kong, thus the mail between Manila and Hong Kong was sent by surface transportation.

Until April 1937, airmail from the US to India was routed only via Europe with airmail service from Amsterdam to India. This service was subject to an airmail fee of 22 cents per half ounce. If additional trans-Atlantic airmail service by airship LZ-129 Hindenburg was requested, an extra 40 cents postage was added making it a total of 62 cents.

Pan American Airways and Imperial Airways link up at Hong Kong

In early 1937, PAA worked on plans to extend their trans-Pacific service from Manila to Hong Kong. In early March, PAA announced plans to extend the flights (FAM 14 route) to Hong Kong starting with the April 21st departure from San Francisco.

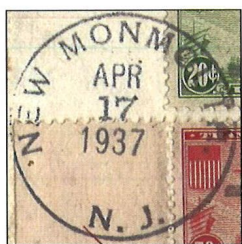
On March 10th 1937, the US Postal Service announced a 70 cents airmail rate per half ounce for US airmail to be flown by PAA via the Pacific to Hong Kong and onward by IAL service to India. The first flight carrying such mail was to be the April 21st 1937 Clipper departure from San Francisco which was also the first scheduled extended Clipper flight to Hong Kong.



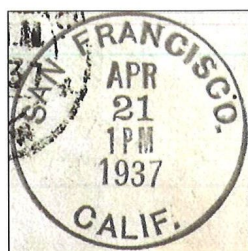
The FAM-14 route, 21st April, 1937

The sender of the cover paid the 70 cents rate and addressed the cover first to Bombay. The cover was dispatched from New Jersey on April 17th and was flown by the trans-continental CAM service to San Francisco. On April 21st the cover received a San Francisco transit postmark, which

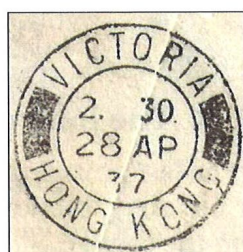
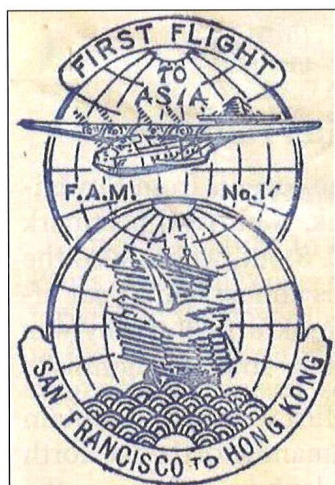
also marks the Clipper departure. The cover then flew via Hawaii, Midway, Wake, Guam, Manila and Macau to Hong Kong to arrive there on April 28th with a corresponding Victoria/HKG transit postmark. The cover also received the blue first flight cachet on which later the India postage was placed. Two days later, on April 30th, the IAL feeder service left Hong Kong for Penang and arrived there on May 1st. On May 2nd, the IAL Australia service (IW544) originating from Brisbane arrived at Penang, and the cover was transferred onto it and the flight continued westwards.



NEW MONMOUTH, N.J.,
APR 17 1937



SAN FRANCISCO,
CALIF, APR 21, 1937



VICTORIA, HONG KONG,
28 AP 37

FIRST FLIGHT TO ASIA,
SAN FRANCISCO TO HONG
KONG, F.A.M. No.14

Now in India for the second posting

On May 3rd, IW544 reached Calcutta, the first port of call in India, and all mail to India was offloaded. The scheduled arrival was 3.45 p.m., the cover has a 5.30 p.m. Calcutta transit postmark. From Calcutta the cover was sent by surface transportation to the addressee at Bombay, with a Bombay GPO Window delivery postmark dated May 5th at 11 a.m.

The addressee at Bombay resent the cover, adding India postage stamps with a value of 9½ annas (3½ annas ordinary postage + 6 annas air fee), and the stamps are cancelled Bombay GPO, May 6th, 1937 at 3 p.m. The Tata Airlines flight left Bombay on Friday May 7th at 9.15 a.m. and the scheduled arrival was at 6.30 p.m. at Karachi same evening. The next morning, the IAL flight IW545 left Karachi.

This was again an IAL flight from Australia to

Europe. IAL arrived at Brindisi, Italy on May 11th at 4.09 p.m. According to actual flight reports, this flight was on time.



CALCUTTA G.P.O. BOMBAY G.P.O. BOMBAY G.P.O.
3 MAY 37 5 MAY 37 6 MAY 37

From Brindisi, the cover went by railway to the second addressee at Frankfurt, Germany. Departure at Brindisi was at 8.22 p.m., the train went via Rome 7.15 a.m. (May 12th), Milan 4.15 p.m. and Basle (midnight) to Frankfurt, arrival there on May 13th at 5.34 a.m.

Too late for the airship

The cover is addressed to airship captain Max Pruss at the airship at Frankfurt. He was to dispatch the cover for the third time, this was for the Hindenburg Zeppelin flight from Frankfurt to the US. The second North America Flight 1937 was scheduled for May 11th, so the cover would have been two days too late to make the Zeppelin flight.

The reader may wonder how such a carefully-planned exercise for a letter intended to go round the world by air in the fastest possible time have such a fate. The answer perhaps lies in the Bombay GPO, and understanding of Indian postage rates.

When RL Thornton, the addressee at Bombay, went to collect the cover from the GPO window on 5th May and re-post the same adding Indian postage stamps, there were two postage rates available for airmail to Germany. One was 9½ annas for covers to be superscribed *India-Italy* and these would go by air within India and all the way to Brindisi from where they would go by surface to Germany, which is the route our cover followed. There was another rate scheme where, by franking the cover with 11½ annas postage and superscribing the cover *India-Greece-Germany* the cover would be offloaded at Athens and then connect to Frankfurt via Lufthansa.

This would perhaps save the vital time needed to make the scheduled Zeppelin departure on 11th May. All this for 2 annas (1/8th of a Rupee), or about 2d. in equivalent sterling at that time.

King George VI saves the day

However, on May 4th it was announced that the 2nd North America Flight would be postponed by

two days with a new departure date on May 13th. The reason for postponing this flight was the coronation of King George VI and Queen Elizabeth at Westminster Abbey at London on May 12th.



The Coronation, 12th May, 1937

The Zeppelin airship was required fly the latest film rolls from the coronation for US newsreels. This now made it possible for our cover which arrived in Frankfurt on the early morning of the 13th May to make it on the Zeppelin flight rescheduled to depart later that day at 8 p.m. and create the record as the first round the world by airmail cover.

A sad twist in the tale

But this is all history, because *during the first North America Flight 1937, on May 6th the airship crashed while landing at Lakehurst and all further Zeppelin flights were suspended.*

This also had an impact on the cover from India. After early morning arrival at Frankfurt, the post office at first had no idea to whom to deliver the cover as the airship Hindenburg did not exist any more.

However, the May 13th, 3-4 p.m. Frankfurt arrival postmark indicates a small delay from the early morning train arrival to afternoon delivery. And it is also evidence of the further handling of the cover.

The local post office #17 was the downtown post office near the railway station (keep in mind that the post office handling the Zeppelin mail was nearby railway post office/Bahnpostamt #19). So the cover was delivered to the Deutsche Zeppelin Reederei office (DZR, Zeppelin Line operating the airship). Their office was located at Hindenburgplatz 10 at Frankfurt downtown, just opposite the railway station. The post office Frankfurt #17 was in charge of this quarter. And DZR forwarded the cover to the home of the personal addressee, this was airship captain Max Pruss, who was residing at Frankfurt.

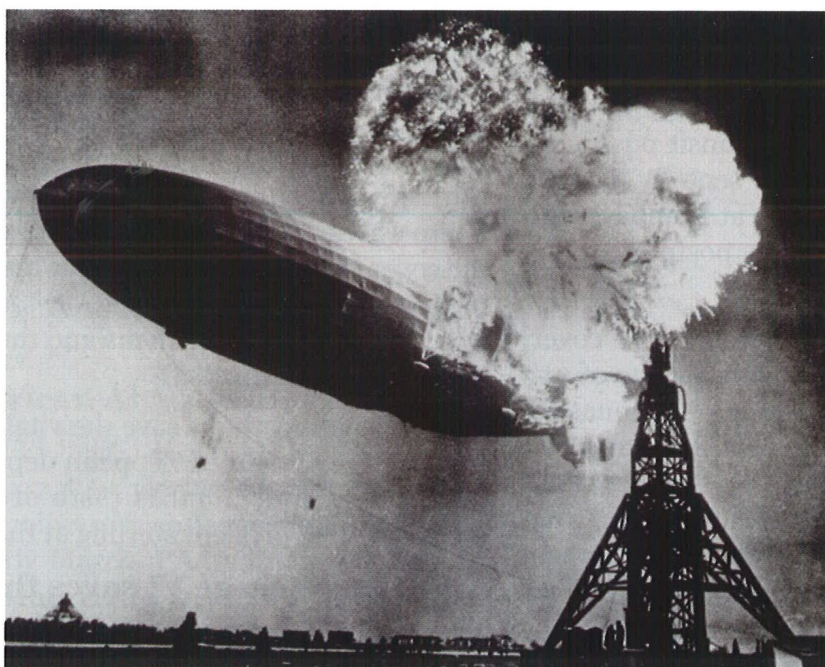


*FRANKFURT, (MAIN)
17, 13-5-37. 15-16*

The long wait in Frankfurt

The last postmark on the cover is from November 6th 1937, the Red Bank, NJ arrival postmark from the sender, Sidney C. Stout, who is also the final addressee. And this is almost half a year after the cover arrived at Frankfurt. But why was the cover held at Frankfurt for so many months?

The addressee at Frankfurt was airship captain Max Pruss, he was the commander of the 1st North America Flight of the Hindenburg. This was the first time he was commanding a North America

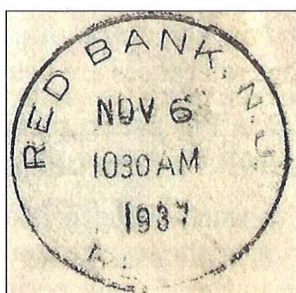


*The crash of the
Hindenburg, Lakehurst,
N.J., 6th May, 1937*

flight. He was actually flying the airship when it crashed at Lakehurst. Pruss was severely injured and was transferred to the special burns center of the Columbia Presbyterian Hospital in New York and stayed in hospital for the next four months.

Pruss was never questioned and never testified before the US Commerce Department's Board of Inquiry hearings. He returned back to Germany for the first time after the crash in October 1937.

He was the last victim of the crash to return back home. Dr. Hugo Eckener, president of the Zeppelin company, indirectly blamed Pruss for the crash, and in his opinion Pruss over-steered the airship.



RED BANK N.J.
NOV 6 1937, 1030 AM

Home at last

After his return to Germany in October 1937, Pruss found this cover waiting for him, and finally forwarded the cover in late October to the sender in the U.S. Since the airship was not flying any more, the cover was sent by surface transporta-

tion. Pruss' injuries and his long treatment in hospital were the reasons why the last leg took almost six months.

After arrival in the US, the cover was finally postmarked Red Bank N.J., NOV 6 1937, 10.30 AM, and a long round the world flight finally came to an end.

A historic and enigmatic cover

I discussed this cover with Dieter Leder, an authority on Zeppelin mail, and he writes,

"I have documented over 10,000 Zeppelin covers, and according to my files, this is the only documented cover from India with a connection to the first Round the World air-mail attempt, the LZ-129 Hindenburg crash at Lakehurst, and is also a piece of history with connections to bridging the Pacific and the coronation of King Georg VI and Queen Elizabeth".

Bibliography:

- Zeppelin Specialized Catalogue 2003 - Michel;
- Special Airship Mail & Postcard Catalogue 2005 - Frost;
- Intercontinental Airmails – Vols. 1 & 2 by Edward B. Proud;
- www.aerodacious.com;
- Aircraft Movements on Imperial Airways' Eastern Route Vol. 2 by Peter Wingent;
- India Air Mail Postage Rates until 1956 by Jeffrey Brown
- Correspondence with Dieter Leder.



Reverse of our cover where several of the postmarks were applied.