

Landplanes Shoulder the Transatlantic Mail: *French South Atlantic Airmail, 1934-1940*



The 1930's saw considerable advancement in aircraft capabilities, yet runways remained poor or nonexistent. Long-range flying boats, which needed no runways, thus became the aircraft of choice for scheduled transoceanic mail service. However, a landplane, the Farman 220 "Centaure," was drafted into service by Air France in mid-1935 and proved surprisingly reliable in carrying transatlantic mail.

To traverse the 3200 km distance between Dakar (Senegal) and Natal (Brazil), the French Air Ministry still favored 4-engine flying boats. Only when, in 1936, two crews (including the preeminent pilot Jean Mermoz) were lost in those flying boats, did the French authorities turn to the faster and more reliable Farman 2200 landplanes that would ultimately complete (without mishap) nearly eighty percent of the more than five hundred Air France crossings between 1934 and 1940.

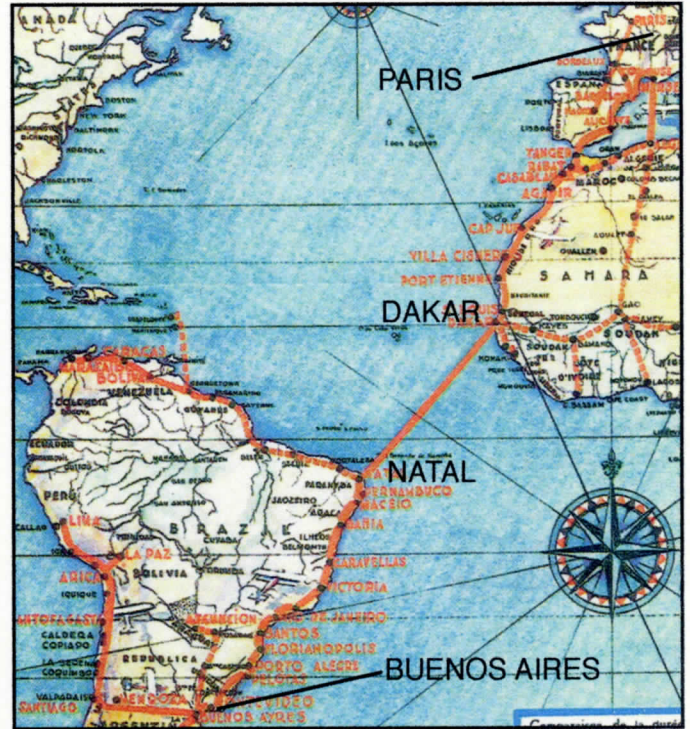
This exhibit dramatizes the remarkable saga of Air France's landplanes, precursors of our modern transoceanic aircraft. It features two rare 1934 covers carried by Jean Mermoz in the Couzinet 70 "Arc-en-ciel," the first landplane to cross the Atlantic on scheduled airmail flights. Another highlight is a 5-shilling stamp on a South Africa cover to Argentina flown through Marseilles and carried by Henri Guillaumet from Dakar to Natal on the second westward flight of the "Centaure."

- *The "Arc-en-ciel" Blazes the Trail*
- *Guillaumet First Flies the "Centaure"*
- *The Dependable "Centaure" and the New 2200s*
- *The Last Gasp of the Flying Boats*
- *All in with Landplanes*

Flights are designated according to the system employed by Pierre Labrousse, wherein 4A signifies the fourth transatlantic mail flight by the French in the direction Europe to South America, and 6R signifies the sixth airmail flight in the opposite direction. Labrousse, Pierre. *Répertoire des traversées aériennes de l'Atlantique sud par l'Aéropostale et Air France* (Libourne: the author, 1974). Unless otherwise noted, additional information about flights is drawn from: G. Collot and A. Cornu, *Ligne Mermoz, Histoire aérophilatélique: Latécoère, Aéropostale, Air France, 1918-1940* (Paris: Editions Bertrand Sinais, 1990).

The "Arc-en-Ciel" Blazes the Trail

- **March 1928:** With the Paris to Dakar and the Natal to Buenos Aires feeder routes now established, Aéropostale begins to carry mail on the long transatlantic leg between Dakar and Natal using swift boats called avisos. The time required for the entire Paris to Buenos Aires mail route is nine days.
- **January 1933:** Jean Mermoz flies the 3-engine Couzinet 70 "Arc-en-ciel" from Dakar to Natal with a full mail load and a crew of six. The successful return flight is delayed by poor runways, but the "Arc-en-ciel" demonstrates that landplanes can span the 3200 kilometer transatlantic leg.
- **May–October 1934:** "Arc-en-ciel" ("Rainbow") flies four round trips with the mail. The land-based aircraft proves dependable and cuts three to four days off the time required to traverse the South Atlantic by aviso. Inadequate runways remain a problem, but the viability of landplanes is clear.



Nice, France—Buenos Aires, Argentina

May 25, 1934

First scheduled crossing of the Couzinet 70 "Arc-en-ciel." Mermoz flew from Dakar to Natal in just over sixteen hours. Return delayed two months by rain and termite mounds on runway.



Perhaps unique surviving private letter posted in Nice and carried on flight 4A. Rate was 10 francs for up to 5 grams.

Cancelled in Nice at 4:30 pm May 25, the letter reached Marseilles by train at 11:30 pm. Flown to Dakar, it was loaded onto the "Arc-en-ciel" for the transatlantic flight on May 28.

Arrival cancel (below) reads midnight May 29 at Buenos Aires. Delivery on the 30th would yield remarkable five-day service from Nice.



100 % reproduction

The "Arc-en-ciel" Blazes the Trail

Montevideo, Uruguay — Southampton, England

July 28, 1934



Mermoz first attempted return flight 4R on June 30 but aborted due to bad weather after five hours. Franked at 62 centavos per 5 grams, letter was carried on successful July 31 flight, and transited Paris on August 2.

Flight 4R of the "Arc-en-ciel" left Natal on July 31 with lighter fuel load to facilitate takeoff. It landed at Cape Verde, off the African coast. Raymond Vanier prepared covers like the one at right to be flown from Cape Verde to Europe. Six are known, with special cachet, franked at 6.10 escudos.



Porto Praia, Cape Verde — Metz, France
July 31, 1934

Card at left, prepared by Air France for the event, was carried by Mermoz and Henri Guillaumet on 8R, the final "Arc-en-ciel" mail flight, 23/24 October, using the Cape Verde refueling stop. Franked at a 49-cent special rate, it reached Paris on the 25th (per Collot and Cornu), Vienna on the 26th, as triple receiving cancels indicate.

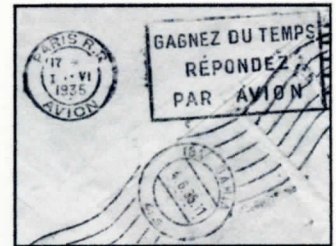
Buenos Aires, Argentina — Vienna, Austria
October 13, 1934

Guillaumet First Flies the "Centaure"

Cardiff (Wales), Great Britain—Bahia, Brazil

May 31, 1935

From January through May 1935, Air France relied on one Blériot 5190 flying boat to achieve monthly air service across the South Atlantic. Then the military offered a 4-engine bomber prototype, the Farman 220. Flown by Henri Guillaumet, this fast landplane, the "Centaure," paved the way toward weekly transatlantic mail service.



50% reproduction

Cory Brothers used perfins to frank this May 31 letter to their Bahia, Brazil office at the standard 5-gram rate of 3 shillings 6 pence. It passed through Paris on June 1.

Flight 16A, the first transatlantic flight of the "Centaure," crossed the Atlantic westward on June 3. The June 4 Bahia arrival backstamp confirms five-day service from Wales.



Flight 16R, the first return flight of the "Centaure" (Natal to Dakar) took place on June 11.

The letter at right was posted June 8, in Rio, at the quadruple rate of 16,800 reis.

Addressed to the Bell Telephone office in Antwerp, the letter undoubtedly arrived in five days, as the 4:15 a.m. June 13 transit backstamp applied at Le Bourget (Paris) suggests.



100% reproduction



Rio de Janeiro, Brazil—Antwerp, Belgium

June 8, 1935

Guillaumet First Flies the "Centaure"

Capetown, South Africa – Buenos Aires, Argentina

June 4, 1935

Six days after the June 11 arrival of the "Centaure" at Dakar on its first return flight from South America, the aircraft was ready for its second westward crossing, flight 17A. Air France maintained a schedule of bi-weekly crossings for the next six months, going weekly by December with the rotation of two flying boats and the "Centaure."



85% reproduction

Letter from Capetown franked at the 5 shillings per half ounce airmail rate (using Scott 31b) to Buenos Aires. Imperial Airways flight AN244 left Capetown on June 4. Letter reached Marseilles on June 13 (transit backstamp above right) and Dakar (via Air France service down coast of Africa) in time for flight 17A of the "Centaure," June 17. Arrived Natal on that date; flown down the coast to Buenos Aires, arriving on June 18.



The Brazilian airmail rate for a 5-gram letter was 4200 reis, as illustrated by this June 22 cover carried on return Flight 17R. The flight took place on June 24 with the same crew as the previous crossings of the "Centaure," with Henri Guillaumet as chief pilot (chef de bord). Mail arrived in Paris the 26th, as indicated below.



100% reproduction

Sao Paulo, Brazil – Paris, France

June 22, 1935

Guillaumet First Flies the "Centaure"

Vienna, Austria – Buenos Aires, Argentina

September 11, 1935

The third westward flight of the "Centaure" (flight 24A on September 16/17) made the Dakar-Natal crossing in 13.37 hours, a record that would stand for two years until the Farman 2200 "Ville de Dakar" entered service. The "Centaure" was truly a swift workhorse.



Cover above (24A) franked at 5-gram airmail rate of 4.40 schillings. Transited Paris from Vienna on September 13; arrived in Buenos Aires on the 18th.



100% reproduction



Cover at right, carried on the "Centaure's" return flight (24R) on September 23, bears the characteristic oval Natal cancellation. It is franked at the 8400 reis double rate. Reaching Paris in two days, the cover would likely have traveled by train up to La Madeleine, near the Belgian border.



100% reproduction

Natal, Brazil – La Madeleine (Nord), France

September 22, 1935

The Dependable "Centaure" and the New 2200s

Barcelona, Spain—Buenos Aires, Argentina

October 30, 1935

Autumn 1935 again found the "Centaure" in rotation with flying boats. Air France clearly intended to emphasize the latter, rather than landplanes, introducing two new Latécoère 301 flying boats. But with one lost in January, the "Centaure" actually saw renewed flight time.



100% reproduction

Letter above was flown by Jean Mermoz on flight 27A, his first crossing in the "Centaure." Franked at the 5-gram rate of 4.55 pesetas, it was forwarded to the town of Martinez from Buenos Aires.

Five-gram letter at right registered at 4 shillings 3 pence, and flown on 36A, Alexandre Pichodou's first "Centaure" crossing. He perished in December 1936 with Mermoz in the wreck of the "Croix du Sud."



100% reproduction



London, England—Montevideo, Uruguay

January 24, 1936

The Dependable "Centaure" and the New 2200s

Maranhao, Brazil—La Madeleine (Nord), France

March 23, 1936

Fernand Rouchon began serving as chief pilot of the "Centaure" with flight 41R in March 1936. Guillaumet would make one more round trip in the aircraft before being assigned to one of the new Latécoère 301 flying boats. Rouchon then flew the "Centaure's" final four round trips.

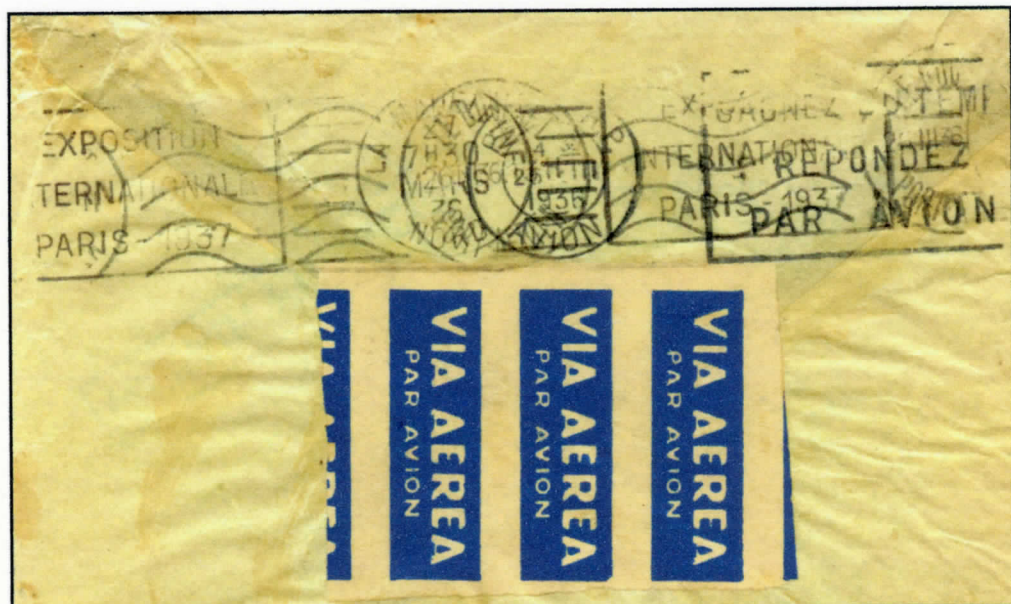
Cover flown on flight 41R, March 24/25. Rate: 3x3500 triple weight airmail + 700 surface = 11,200 reis. Actual franking: 11,800. Evidence of one stamp peeled off prior to cancellation suggests confusion about airmail rate.

Addressed to a textile plant established at La Madeleine after WWI by Schwob firm from eastern France.

Commercial mail of this sort was what Air France and Deutsche Lufthansa first competed to carry. Before the end of 1936, they cooperated with a pattern of flights staggered every three or four days to facilitate twice-weekly service.



Reverse of 41R cover shows March 26 Paris transit cancel. Cover reached its destination on March 27, thus achieving four-day service. Air France had realized weekly airmail service in January 1936. But the disappearance of Juan Ponce and his crew in a new Latécoère 301 flying boat on February 10, off the coast of Brazil, was an ill omen.



80% reproduction

The Dependable "Centaure" and the New 2200s

Porto Alegre, Brazil—Stuttgart, Germany

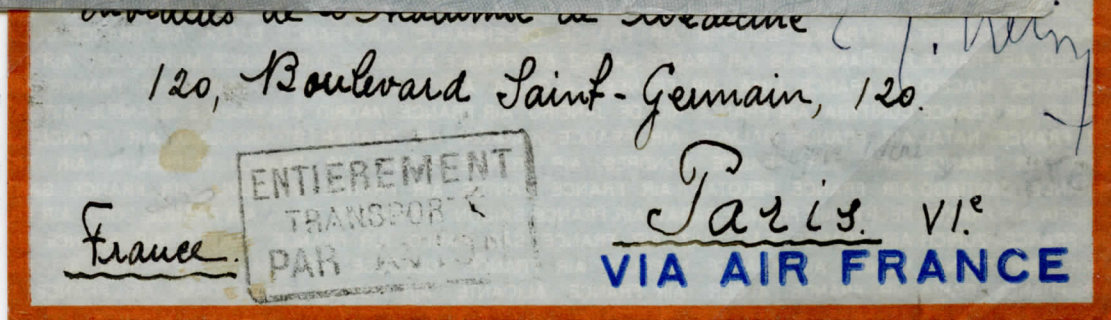
April 10, 1936

Flight 42R (April 14/15) marked Guillaumet's final crossing in "The Centaure." He would then be assigned to a new Latécoère 301 flying boat ("Ville de Santiago"). Alternate weekly flights of the two aircraft would continue through June, when the "Centaure" would be retired.

This 42R cover, franked at the 4,200 reis rate for 5 grams, has VIA AEREA printed in red, with "Air France" typed below. Without that typed designation, mail to Germany might typically have been carried by Deutsche Lufthansa.



The 42R cover at right, signed by radioman Jacques Néri, bears a three-line boxed cachet in French indicating that it was "transported entirely by air."



Rio de Janeiro, Brazil—Paris, France

April 11, 1936

This 42R cover is franked at 1.15 pesos, the Argentine airmail rate for 5 grams. It also bears the three-line boxed cachet applied at its Paris destination on April 16.



Buenos Aires, Argentina—Paris, France

April 11, 1936



100% reproduction

The Dependable "Centaure" and the New 2200s

Blumenau, Brazil—Breslau, Germany

June 27, 1936

Flight 50R (June 29) was the final crossing of "The Centaure," with Rouchon and Pichodou as co-pilots. The more powerful Farman 2200 landplane would ply the route between Dakar and Natal beginning in July. Rouchon flew the 2200 "Ville de Montevideo" on its second east-west crossing, flight 56A, leaving Dakar on August 5, after a delay of incoming mail as noted below.

This 50R cover, franked at the 4,200 reis rate for 5 grams, has "DEUTSCHE LUFTPOST" typed at the upper left. But the July 1 Paris transit cancel identifies it as having been carried by Air France, since the next Deutsche Lufthansa flight after its posting was not until July 3, and that mail went through Seville to Frankfurt.



100% reproduction

The 56A cover at right is franked at 4.55 pesetas, the Spanish airmail rate for 5 grams. Envelope is specially printed for South American mail and indicates bi-weekly service, a motto slightly outdated by that time.

The "Avion Atrasado" backstamp applied at Buenos Aires refers to a delay in Rouchon's 56A departure as a result of a crash involving the Paris to Toulouse mail.



70% reproduction

Barcelona, Spain—Buenos Aires, Argentina

July 20, 1936

The Dependable "Centaure" and the New 2200s

Milan, Italy – Buenos Aires, Argentina

September 18, 1936

The new Farman 2200 "Ville de Montevideo" was put into rotation with two Latécoère flying boats from July through November 1936. Flight 63A exemplifies this usage, with Guillaumet at the controls of the aircraft on a September 21/22 flight. A second Farman 2200, the "Ville de Mendoza," made its maiden transatlantic crossing (flight 65A) on October 5, with Pichodou as *chef de bord*.

This 63A cover, franked at 8.75 lire (1.25 + 7.50 for airmail of 5 grams), traveled by rail from Milan to Ventimiglia, the westernmost mail terminus in Italy, where it was canceled at 4 pm on September 19. From there, it traveled by rail through Nice to Marseilles and then was flown by Air France down to Dakar for the crossing, departing on September 21.



100% reproduction

Cover at right is franked at 5 gram airmail rate of 290 ore. Flown from Oslo on October 2, it transited Paris on the 3rd. Flown westward across the Atlantic on flight 65A on the "Ville de Mendoza," it arrived in Bahia on the 6th.



100% reproductions

Oslo, Norway – Bahia, Brazil

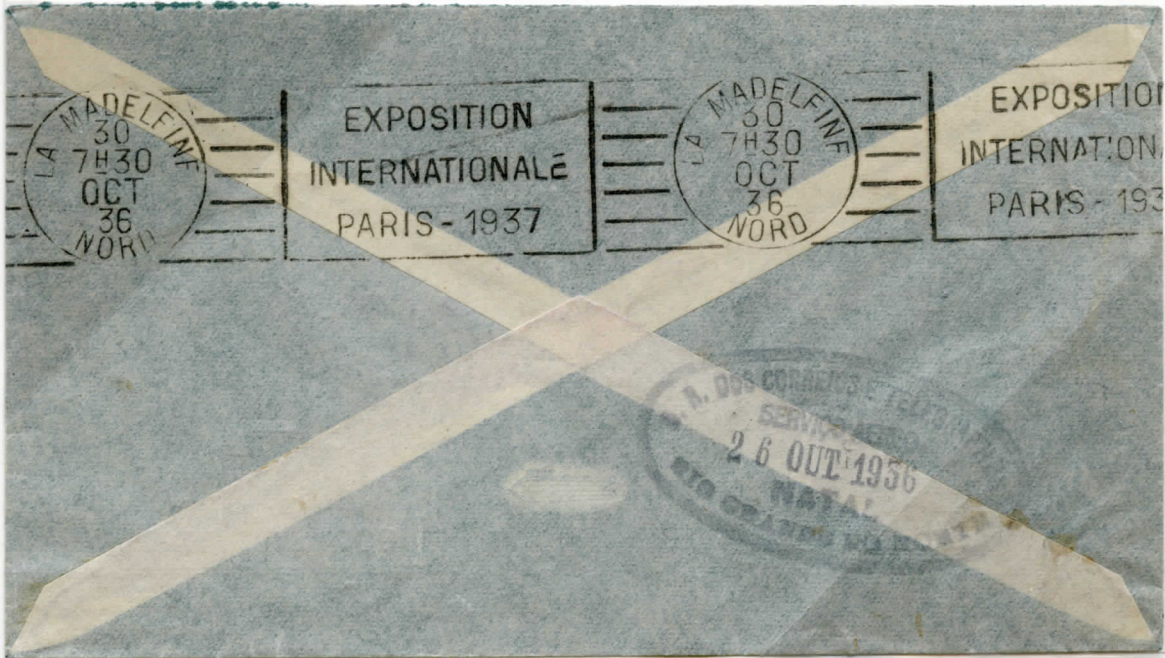
October 2, 1936

The Last Gasp of the Flying Boats

Parnahyba, Brazil—La Madeleine Nord, France

October 25, 1936

Flight 66R of the “Croix du Sud,” flown by Jean Mermoz, would be the prelude to his demise in that flying boat six weeks later. In the aftermath of that tragic loss, Air France restricted their use of such aircraft. Of the 102 crossings in 1937, only 16 were flown by flying boats—the venerable Blériot 5190 “Santos-Dumont” (8 crossings), and the Latécoère 301 “Ville de Rio” (also 8).



The 66R cover above bears the typical oval Natal transit cancel, applied on October 26. Receiving backstamp applied at La Madeleine Nord includes a slogan cancel for the Paris Expo of 1937. The Nazis feigned cultural cooperation for that expo, as they did in agreeing to fly the transatlantic mail cooperatively. In 1940, France paid the price for its naïveté.

Porto Alegre, Brazil—Leipzig, Germany

September 17, 1937



Cover at left flown on flight 112R, the final crossing of the last flying boat employed on the route by Air France, the “Ville de Rio.” Franking is 4,200 reis for 5 grams plus 1,400 registry fee, for a total of 5,600 reis. Flight was on September 21/22, transiting Paris (Le Bourget) the 23rd.



85% reproduction

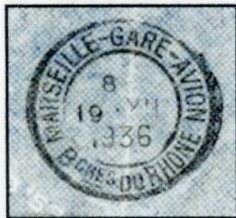
The Last Gasp of the Flying Boats

Riehen (Basel-Stadt), Switzerland – Viçosa, Brazil

December 17, 1936

Air France curtailed transatlantic flights for two weeks after Mermoz went down in the flying boat "Croix du Sud." There would be no further flying boat crossings for the next four months. The subsequent eight round trips in 1937 would constitute the last hurrah of the Air France flying boats.

The 75A cover at right, franked at the 1.90 franc 5-gram rate, transited Marseilles on 19 December 1936. This first Air France flight from Dakar to Natal following the loss of the "Croix du Sud" was piloted by Fernand Rouchon in the Farman 2200 "Ville de Mendoza," which would eventually complete 57 round trips, the most by any aircraft plying the South Atlantic for Air France.



100% reproduction

Rio de Janeiro, Brazil – Paris, France

December 26, 1936



Post card flown on 75R, "Ville de Mendoza's" return. Franked at 1500 reis, special Air France holiday rate, it depicts a flying boat workhorse, the Blériot 5190 "Santos-Dumont," retired after its four 1937 round trips.



50% reproduction

All in with Landplanes

Paris, France – Natal, Brazil

October 16, 1937

Hosting the world's fair "Exposition de 1937," French authorities prepared this round-the-world cover cancelled at the exposition center in Paris. The first leg highlighted service to South America, with a record trip of 12.5 hours from Dakar to Natal flown by Laurent Guerrero in the Farman 2200 "Ville de Dakar" on only its third transatlantic crossing.

This record flight 117A took place on October 18, as indicated by the oval receiving cancel applied at Natal. Required franking of 22.75 francs is exceeded by .25 to accommodate the commemorative stamp (3 francs) offering tribute to the fallen aviation hero Jean Mermoz. (22.75 = 1.75 francs for letter up to 20 grams + 2x10.50 francs for airmail up to 10 grams as established by rates established in August 1937.)

There was, reportedly, a plan to have the "Hindenburg" carry the mail on the transatlantic leg of this round-the-world flight from the world's fair, but that zeppelin went down in flames on May 6, 1937.

The cover folds out to reveal the other legs of the journey: Natal-New York (with a stop in Belem); New York-Hong Kong; and Hong Kong-Paris, with the receiving cancel of November 22 visible here to the right of the red Air France hippogriff.



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All in with Landplanes

Rio de Janeiro, Brazil—Jerusalem, Palestine

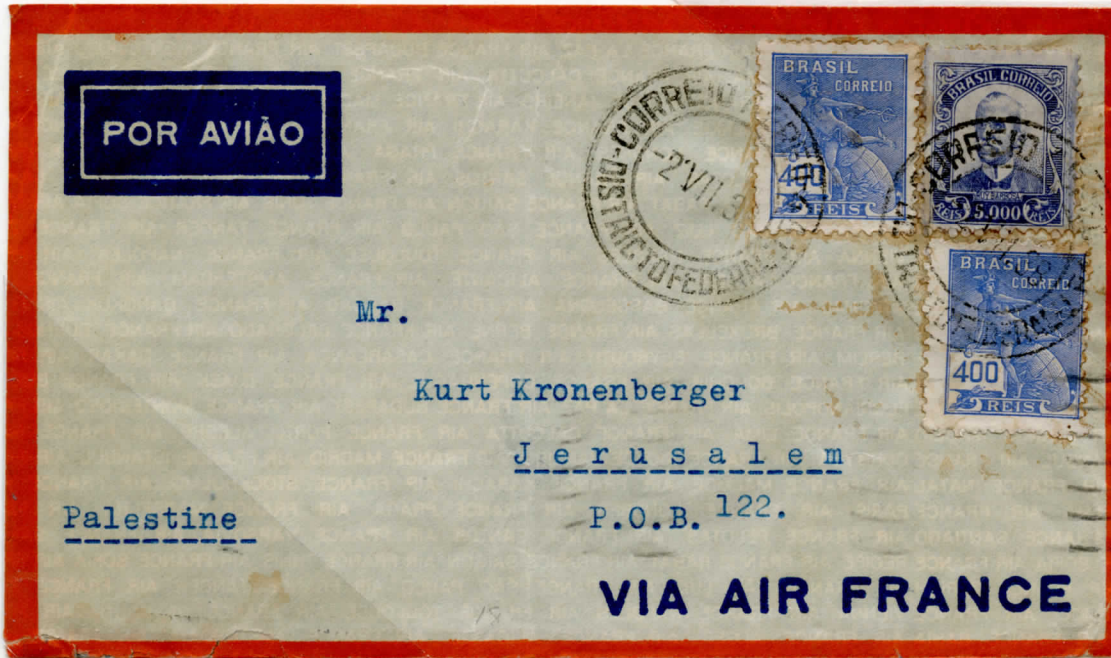
July 2, 1938

With the last of the flying boats having been retired in September 1937, the year 1938 could be dubbed "The Year of the Landplane." The fifty-two round trip mail crossings in 1938 were flown by five different Farman 2200 aircraft, two of them introduced during that year.



67% reproduction

Flight 153R was flown by Guillaumet in the "Ville de Montevideo," a workhorse the previous year which had been rested for the first six months of 1938. Addressed to Palestine, the cover passed by air through Marseilles (July 6) and Beirut (July 8), receiving a "Spend the Summer in Lebanon" slogan cancel in French. The 5800 reis franking is correct for a Group 6 cover of 5 grams as specified by the October 11, 1937, rate increase.



Villa Maria, Argentina—Vienna, Austria

January 27, 1939

Flight 183R marked Guillaumet's final transatlantic mail crossing. Of seventy-one crossings over the period from June 1935 to January 1939, fifty-one of his flights were in Farman landplanes. On November 27, 1940, it was in a four-engine Farman that he was shot down over the Mediterranean by an Italian fighter pilot.



85% reproduction



This January 27, 1939, cover posted in Villa Maria (500 kilometers northwest of Buenos Aires) bears a Buenos Aires transit backstamp of January 28, and Vienna arrival backstamp of February 2. Franking of 1.45 pesos is correct for a letter of up to 5 grams. The aircraft in which it was flown was the "Ville de Natal," one of the new Farman 2200's put into service in 1938.

All in with Landplanes

Las Palmas, Canary Islands – Sao Paulo, Brazil

April 24, 1940

After the German invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939. Deutsche Lufthansa ceased mail flights between South America and Europe. Air France flew through the end of June 1940. By then, France had fallen to the Germans and Italian fighter planes patrolled the Mediterranean.



75% reproduction

Posted in Canary Islands, April 24, and censored by the military (April 25), cover transited Sevilla (25th) and was flown to North Africa to rendezvous with the Air France network. Clément Rolland piloted flight 248A from Dakar to Natal on April 29 in the "Ville de Natal." On April 30, receiving backstamp was applied in Brazil at a regional mail center, with a red grid bearing that date applied to front. Franking of 6.20 pesetas is consistent with observed 5-gram covers from Sevilla to South America in the civil war era.

Valparaiso, Chile – London, England

June 7, 1940

Flight 253R took place on June 10, the very day Italy entered the war. Marcel Reine (later shot down by the Italians as co-pilot for Henri Guillaumet) carried out this flight in the "Ville de Mendoza." It would fall to him to make the final Air France transatlantic flight of the era three weeks later. These final 1940 flights capped off the remarkable record of the Farman 2200 landplanes crossing the South Atlantic for five years. Franking of 12.50 pesos is correct for a 5 gram letter. Santiago transit mark (below) tied by British censor tape.



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***Landplanes Shoulder the Transatlantic Mail:
French South Atlantic Airmail, 1934-1940***

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