

2011 marks the centenary of two of the world's most important pioneer airmail flights. The first official Aerial Post flight took place during the United Provinces Exhibition at 5.30 p.m. on Saturday 18 February 1911. Less than seven months later the first United Kingdom Aerial Post from London to Windsor on Saturday 9 September 1911 was flown by the intrepid English pioneer aviator Gustav Hamel. In this special report, Peter Jennings FRPSL, FRGS, reviews the first of these historic flights.



Centenary of the World's First Official Aerial Post

Aviation and philatelic history made at Allahabad, India, on 18 February 1911



'Registered No. 109' cover addressed to Fyzabad, flown from Allahabad to Naini Junction on 18 February 1911. The two rupees King Edward VII stamp is cancelled with the special cachet in magenta

Reverse of cover backstamped: 'Allahabad 18 FE. 11' and 'Fyzabad, Reg. 20 FEB. 11'

postcards. The inscription at the top of type I is: 'FIRST "AERIAL POST," FEBRUARY 18, '11.' And on type II: 'FIRST "AERIAL POST," ALLAHABAD, FEBRUARY 18, 1911.'

The entry in the 1934 Field catalogue states: 'Special large card depicting the pilot and machine signed (aviator). Only 40 were carried and probably not more than 12 exist today. All the large cards with a genuine cachet and postmarked, "ALLAHABAD 18 FE. 11" will have been flown.' Jeffrey's researches have so far identified 60 cards, so these large cards are less rare than Field thought.

Jeffrey Brown, who has recently retired as Membership Secretary of the India Study Circle for Philately, of which I am proud to be a member, told *GSM*: 'The importance of this flight cannot be overstated. Captain Windham had the foresight to recognise that speedy communication across large distances would be a boon to both individuals and governments. Airmail was the basis of this communication throughout the 20th Century. His post of 6500 letters has turned into millions of letters per day across the globe.'

The 23-year-old French pioneer aviator Monsieur Henri Péquet (1888-1974) took off from grounds of the United Provinces Exhibition at Allahabad in a British built Humber Sommer biplane. He flew across the Jumna River in the direction of Naini Junction, about five miles away, where 13 minutes later he handed one sack of mail to an official from the Indian Post Office.

Péquet returned immediately to land again on the exhibition grounds, having completed the whole journey in 27 minutes.

The world's first official aerial post consisted of approximately 6500 letters and postcards including a number of large postcards that depicted the pilot and flying machine. The flight, witnessed by more than a million people, including the Governor, Sir John Hewitt, was in aid of the Oxford and Cambridge Hostel and Holy Trinity Church in Allahabad.

In Great Britain *The Times* newspaper carried a report on 13 March 1911 under the headline: 'An Indian Aerial Post'. This historic aerial mail was and still is news today.

The United Provinces Exhibition of 1910-1911 was held in the central part of northern



India, in Allahabad, the capital of the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh. The Exhibition opened on 1 December 1910 and closed on 28 February 1911.

Signed special post cards

At quite short notice, the organising committee announced in *The Pioneer Mail* and *Indian Weekly News* on 17 February 1911 that special postcards would be available bearing a picture of the biplane in which the mail was to be carried. These cards were signed by Henri Péquet, and cancelled with the special postmark. No messages were included.

My fellow aero-philatelist Jeffrey Brown, who has produced an excellent book and CD, *Indian Air Mails*, has done a considerable amount of original research into the number and provenance of the two types of large-sized

Captain Windham

The world's first official aerial post was initiated by Captain Windham, who took two aviators and eight planes to the United Provinces Exhibition at Allahabad at the request of the Government of the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh.

Henri Péquet continued in aviation, becoming a test pilot and, in 1934, was the chief pilot of the Aero-Club at Vichy. He died in France in March 1974, aged 86.

Captain Windham returned to England where he organised the First UK Aerial Post, London-Windsor, during September 1911 in celebration of the Coronation of King George V. He was knighted in 1923 and died on 5 July 1942, aged 74.

Absorbing experience

In his absorbing book *My Fifty Years In Flying*, Harry Harper, 'the World's First Air Reporter'—with the *Daily Mail* (published by Associated Newspapers in 1956) wrote in chapter 12, *The First Air-Mail Trials*: 'Actually the story of the development of the flying mail is one of the most fascinating in the whole history of the air. And one of the greatest authorities on the subject, and more



UP Exhibition Camp registration handstamp on registered cover addressed to Jubbulpore. One anna postage and eight annas registration fee, King Edward VII stamps cancelled with the special cachet in magenta
 Right: Reverse of cover backstamped: 'Allahabad Reg 18 FE. 11' and 'Jubbulpore Reg 20 FE. 11'



particularly on the very earliest experiments in carrying letters by air, was my friend the late Sir Walter Windham.'

Harry Harper added: 'To listen to Sir Walter talking about man's very first experiments in carrying letters by air, as I had an opportunity of doing more than once, was an absorbing experience. I remember that when on his return from India in 1911 Sir Walter Windham told me of his intention to try and induce our postal authorities in this country to sanction officially a mail-carrying trial by aeroplane.'

Much has been written about the world's first aerial mail during the past 100 years, but the most vivid is an account given by Henri Péquet during an interview with a French magazine. Extracts are reproduced in the magnificent book *Indian Airmails, Development And Operations (1911-1942)* by Pradip Jain, the doyen of Indian aero-philatelists (re-edited by this correspondent for the benefit of the reader).

Péquet interviewed

Asked when he first became involved in aviation, Henri Péquet replied: 'In 1908 I began as a mechanic at Gabriel Voisin and in that capacity I accompanied Sanchez Besa at the meeting in Berlin the following year.'

As a pilot? 'On 30 October 1909 I took a plane and let myself go. A few days later I had a fire on board. I think I was the first pilot to whom this ever happened. During 1910 I participated at the meeting in Buenos Aires, and then I became an instructor at Rheims in France.'

And your pilot's licence number? 'I got number 88 during 1910 flying a Voisin.' (It is dated 10 June 1910).

How did you come to fly in India? 'I had signed a contract with Humber of Coventry to make demonstration flights at the meeting and exhibition organised at Allahabad. I went to India with another pilot, an Englishman named Davies.'

What sort of plane was used for the first airmail flight? 'It was a Sommer with a rotary Gnome

engine of 50 horsepower, a two-seater bi-plane.'

What instruments did you have on board? 'Before us was just space. I had a watch on my wrist and an altimeter on my left knee. We had to listen to the revolutions on the oil gauge and decide when we thought it correct to take off.'

What was your mission? 'My mission on 18 February 1911 was to fly to the fortress at Naini which was about 5 miles from Allahabad, and carry a sack of mail of 30 lbs containing 6000 letters and cards, some of which were addressed to the King of England and many famous personalities of the day.'

Was a special cachet used? 'Yes certainly. The organisers gave great importance to the fact that the cachet bore the words: First Aerial Post. (Henri Péquet revealed that he sent a cover to himself but that it was stolen from him).

Asked about the flight, the aviator said that it lasted 27 minutes and that he flew at a height of 120 to 150 feet at a speed of 60 miles per hour and 50 miles per hour on landing. He said: 'The ground was flat. I followed the road in the middle of the forest. I remember seeing buffaloes. Before landing I flew over the Ganges and I was not quite sure that I would make it. But it was not the unexpected bath but the crocodiles that I feared!'

Was there a crowd when you arrived? 'No, only a Post Office employee to whom I delivered my sack of mail!'

Some of the best accounts read by this correspondent, an Affiliate of the Royal Aeronautical Society, appeared in the *Aero Field*, published by Francis J Field; a distinguished and knowledgeable aero-philatelic dealer who wrote the Introduction to my book *Aerogrammes*, published in 1973.

Exhibition site

The site selected was open land, partly used as a military farm, to the west of the Fort on the wide plain on the banks of the river and within sight of the confluence of the blue river Jumna and the muddy-brown

'I flew over the Ganges and I was not quite sure that I would make it'

The large postcard, type II, signed by the pilot, Henri Péquet





The large postcard, type II, addressed to The Palace, Bhopal, flown from Allahabad to Naini Junction on 18 February 1911. Signed by the pilot, Henri Péquet. The half anna King Edward VII stamp is cancelled with the special cachet in magenta. Also postmarked 'Allahabad 18 FE. 11' and 'Bhopal 20 FE. 11'

Ganges. The whole area covered 120 acres. On entering, immediately to the right, was a domed building occupied by the Post and Telegraph Offices, which also contained relevant exhibits. Another Post and Telegraph Office was also provided for the use of the camps, in tents outside the Exhibition ground, halfway down the Exhibition road.

Anglo-French team

In 1910, Captain Walter George Windham RN (later to be Sir Walter Windham), one of the most influential pioneers of aviation, was invited to bring some flying machines from England to take part in the Allahabad events. He accepted the invitation, gave up his motor business, and booked a sea passage to India for late 1910.

The Anglo-French team led by Captain Windham included two pilots and two mechanics. The pilots were Péquet and Davies. In the hold of the SS *Persia* were two disassembled Roger Sommer biplanes and six Blériot monoplanes. The ship docked at Bombay and the team, together with the dismantled airplanes, travelled by train to Allahabad where they arrived on 5 December 1910. A few days later the aircraft were reassembled and operating from a polo field adjacent to the exhibition grounds.

The Humber Motor Company of Coventry, England, had begun to manufacture aeroplanes during 1910 and had been invited to exhibit its products at the Exhibition being held in Allahabad. Humber had built the Blériot planes under license from the French aircraft designer; and the Roger Sommer aircraft from the design of an exhibition pilot of the same name whose plane was a modification of an earlier Henri Farman design.

The two aviators were contracted to fly 30 hours each during the three months of the Exhibition, spending time on daily flights, normally starting at 4.00 p.m. Keith Davies was the first person to fly an aeroplane in India; he assembled one of the monoplanes and made a flight of 200 yards on 25 November 1910. Three days later Péquet followed by flying for about ten minutes at a height of 300 feet.



Reverse of cover backstamped: 'Allahabad 18 FE. 11' and 'Allahabad 8.30 AM 19 FE. 11'

The airmail

The idea for an airmail arose in an informal way. The Revd W Holland, who was Chaplain of the Holy Trinity Church in Allahabad, was also Warden of a hostel for Indian students. He asked Captain Windham if he could help to raise funds for the new hostel which was then being built. It occurred to Windham (ever ready to boost the cause of aviation) that this could be done by arranging an aerial post.

Captain Windham approached the Postmaster General of the United Provinces, Mr Geoffrey Rothe Clarke, and he (with the approval of the Director General of the Post Office in India) soon gave permission. Windham appointed the Chaplain as postmaster of the mail.

People wishing to have items flown were asked to send them addressed and stamped at the appropriate postage rate, to the Chaplain of the Holy Trinity Church before 16 February 1911. The Post Office would not sanction a charge over and above the normal postage rate, but a nominal sum of six annas (or sixpence) was asked for as a donation to the new church hostel buildings. If postage stamps were sent, eight annas was requested. Only letters or cards under one ounce in weight were accepted. Special rates were available for those wishing to send large consignments of mail, such as clubs and regiments.

Special cachet

A special postmark was also authorised. Windham drew an outline representing a biplane in flight over the mountains of Asia. The die for this was cast at the postal workshops at Aligarh. The postmark, 4cm in diameter, was applied in a magenta colour on public mail, but in black on privileged items.

The day before the flight a small staff from the Indian Postal Department worked at the hostel, which had been turned into a small post office, sorting and preparing the mail, starting at 9.00 a.m. and not finishing until midnight.

Cover addressed to the Manager of the Allahabad Bank Limited, flown from Allahabad to Naini Junction on 18 February 1911. The half anna King Edward VII stamp is cancelled with the special cachet in magenta





Large postcard, type I, addressed to Glasgow, flown from Allahabad to Naini Junction on 18 February 1911. Signed by the pilot, Henri Péquet
Courtesy of Jeffrey Brown



The United Provinces Exhibition Camp cachet—Jeffrey Brown points out that an article in *India's Stamp Journal* of May 1941 states: 'This cachet is extremely rare and we have not seen more than half a dozen examples of this postmark which leads us to believe that it must have been used extremely sparingly'



United Provinces Exhibition Camp registration handstamp



The Exhibition delivery mark. This cachet is very rare as it was only used on mail addressed to the Exhibition Camp.

All items from the Peter Jennings FRPSL, FRGS collection of Pioneer Air Mails 1902–1934, except where acknowledged

G.S.M. February 2011

The flight

The mail flight was originally fixed for Monday 20 February 1911, taking off at 4.30 p.m. In the event, Péquet flew it on Saturday 18 February 1911. The take-off was watched by the Lieutenant-Governor, Sir John Hewitt and Lady Hewitt, together with government staff and a large crowd.

One of the Humber Sommer biplanes was chosen for the flight because it carried a heavier payload and because the underpowered Blériot monoplanes had not performed well in the heavy, humid Indian climate.

Naini had been selected as the place to receive the mail, as it was the nearest point on the main railway line from Calcutta to Bombay. A site enabling the plane to descend and take off safely had been cleared at Naini by convicts from the nearby central jail.

Registered mail

A total of 931 pieces of mail was registered for the flight. The majority carry the cachet 'R/ALLAHABAD' stamped in black. This may well include mail registered at the Exhibition Post Office. Some items were registered at the Exhibition Camp Post Office, and these bear the registration cachet in black.

Historic achievement

The Indian Post Office issued a set of three special commemorative postage stamps to mark the Golden Jubilee of the First Official Airmail Flight Allahabad–Naini on 18 February 1961 (434/6). This was followed by a set of two stamps to commemorate the 75th Anniversary of this historic flight on 18 February 1986 (1185/86).

Stamp collectors, aero-philatelists and non-collectors throughout the world are now looking forward to the special stamps to be issued by the Indian Post Office on Friday 18 February 2011 to celebrate the Centenary of this epoch-making flight in India.



Indian stamps issued to mark the 50th and 75th anniversaries of the first official airmail flight from Allahabad to Naini



Postscript: India will celebrate the Centenary of the world's first official Airmail, Allahabad to Naini on 18 February 1911, by declaring 2011 as 'Civil Aviation Centenary Year', the Government of India Ministry of Civil Aviation announced in New Delhi on 4 January 2011.

The 'Civil Aviation Centenary Year' will start on Saturday 18 February 2011 and end on the same date a year later in February 2012.

An official press release said that during the past 100 years India had become the ninth largest civil aviation market in the world and is now poised to become one of the three largest markets in the world by the year 2020.

A high level committee has been set up by the Ministry of Civil Aviation to mastermind a series of 'Civil Aviation Centenary Year' activities throughout India including the release of a special postage stamp by the President of India.