

Aéropostale 1930 / Air France 1934: The Groundbreaking South Atlantic Flights

Purpose of Exhibit: Show the postal history aspect of the role played by the Aéropostale and Air France aircrafts in 1930 and 1934 namely the *Comte de la Vaulx*, *Croix du Sud*, *Arc-en-ciel* and *Santos Dumont*. These four were the first aircrafts capable of flying mail across the South Atlantic at a time when the Germans used the zeppelin and the catapult service.

Presentation: Strictly commercial and personal letter mail carried on the **first** flights of these four aircrafts with emphasis on routes, rates and mail handling. No philatelic mail is included.



Example of commercial cover from Bois-de-Breux (5/5/1930) to Buenos Aires (14/5) flown on the historic *Comte de la Vaulx* transatlantic flight. Postage Bfr 12.50 airmail per 5g, Bfr 1.75 surface rate. **The only commercial example from Belgium known to the exhibitor, an original discovery.**

Postal History: In 1928 CGA (Aéropostale) established a regular airmail route between Europe and South America. But in reality it was an air-sea-air route as the South Atlantic crossing was achieved by fast mailboats. In 1930, the famous French aviator Jean Mermoz and his crew made the first scheduled commercial transatlantic crossing flying the *Comte de la Vaulx* between Dakar and Natal. This was an experiment not to be repeated in the next four years as the seaplane sunk on the return trip to Dakar. In 1934 Air France, the successor of Aéropostale since 1933, started making infrequent use of the other three aircrafts that laid the foundations of the regular airmail service in 1936.

Coverage: Commercial and personal mail carried on the pioneering 1930 *Comte de la Vaulx* return flights, and the 1934 **first** flights by the other three aircrafts (listed as **1a 1r, 3a 3r, 4a 4r, 9a 9r** in the Labrousse study – see bibliography). Details of the flights and the crews are given and the importance of each of these flights is highlighted. Rates are explained for each cover.

Importance and difficulty of acquisition: This is sheer aerpostal history, these 1930 / 1934 flights are the first scheduled completely by air services performed by aircrafts across the South Atlantic. These flights gave birth to great legends in aerpostal history: Mermoz, Guillaumet, etc. As these covers do not bear any special handstamps, locating them in the market is a demanding task and can only be done by examining the dates on despatch and arrival postmarks. Most covers are foreign contract mail (i.e. other than French or Argentinian) not previously recorded.

Study and Bibliography: The subject has been exhausted by the first reference given below, the only research a student can do is unearthing previously unknown commercial material of these flights.

1. Collot, Gerard, et Alain Cornu. *Ligne Mermoz: Histoire aérophilatélique, Latécoère, Aéropostale, Air France, 1918-1940*. Editions Bertrand Sinais, 1990.
2. Labrousse, Pierre. *Répertoire des Traversées Aériennes de l'Atlantique Sud par l'Aéropostale et Air-France, 1930-1940*. Libourne: Labrousse, 1974.
3. Proud, Edward B. *Intercontinental Airmails, Vol.1: Transatlantic and Pacific*. East Sussex, England: Proud Publications, 2008

Aéropostale 1930: *Comte de la Vaulx* Outward Flight

The first flight to carry official air mail across the South Atlantic left St. Louis, Senegal on May 12, 1930. Jean Mermoz and his crew (co-pilot Jean Dabry and radioman Léopold Gimié) took 21 hours to traverse the 3200 km to Natal, Brazil in a single-engine floatplane, the *Latécoère 28*, with 125 kg of mail. **This flight represented the first time a payload of commercial mail had been flown over such a distance of ocean.**



Jean Mermoz



ITALY – CHILE (1A): Milan (5/5) to Santiago (15/5) via Marseilles (10/5) commercial cover, flown on the *Comte-de-la-Vaulx* transatlantic flight by Jean Mermoz. The Buenos Aires to Chile section was flown by another great French aviator, Henri Guillaumet. **Postage:** Lire 9.00 airmail per 5g, Lire 1.25 surface rate.

One of only two covers from Italy known to the exhibitor.

Aéropostale 1930: *Comte de la Vaulx* Outward Flight



SCOTLAND (GB) – ARGENTINA (1A): Glasgow (8/5) to Buenos Aires (14/5) commercial cover, flown on the *Comte-de-la-Vaulx* transatlantic flight. **Postage:** £1 9s 2d airmail (4s 2d per ½ oz), 7d surface rate (quadruple), a total of £1 9s 9d for a large 3 ½ oz letter. Stamps perfined MW / &Co, identified to the Mirrlees Watson Co Ltd.

The only commercial example from Great Britain known to the exhibitor and the heaviest cover and highest franking from any country flown on this flight.



Aéropostale 1930: Comte de la Vaulx Aborted Return Flight

The return flight from Natal to Dakar was scheduled on June 8 and would contain 145 kg of mail from all over South America. By June 12, Mermoz had failed to take off 32 times, so the mail was loaded onto a ship for the transatlantic passage. The mail reached Paris on June 18. **Despite the wording of the special cachet "PRIMER CORREO TOTALMENTE AEREO...", this mail was never flown over the Atlantic.**



ARGENTINA – FRANCE – GB: Buenos Aires (6/6) to Paris, readdressed to London and finally to Surrey, commercial cover to be flown on the return Comte-de-la-Vaulx flight. Never flown. **Postage:** 72c airmail (4 x 18c per 1g), 12c surface rate.

ARGENTINA – FRANCE:

Buenos Aires (6/6) to Paris(18/6) registered commercial cover intended to be flown on the return Comte-de-la-Vaulx flight. Never flown, aviso was used instead.

Postage: 1.26 pesos airmail (7 x 18c per 1g), 12c surface rate, 12c registration fee.



Aéropostale 1930: *Comte de la Vaulx* Interrupted Return Flight

One month later, on July 8, Mermoz managed to get the aircraft out of the water on the 53rd attempt. After 14 hours of flight the engine developed an oil leak. The crew was able to radio the ship Phocée and land next to it. All crew and mail were taken aboard for the last 900 km to the African coast. Sadly, during an attempt to tow the plane it flipped over and sank, never to be retrieved. No special markings were applied to this mail.



ARGENTINA – GERMANY (1R): Buenos Aires (4/7) to Schramberg via Paris (18/7) and Cologne commercial cover flown on the interrupted *Comte-de-la-Vaulx* return flight.
Postage: 5.40 pesos airmail (30 x 18c per 1g), 19c second weight surface rate, 4c special additional fee to Germany.

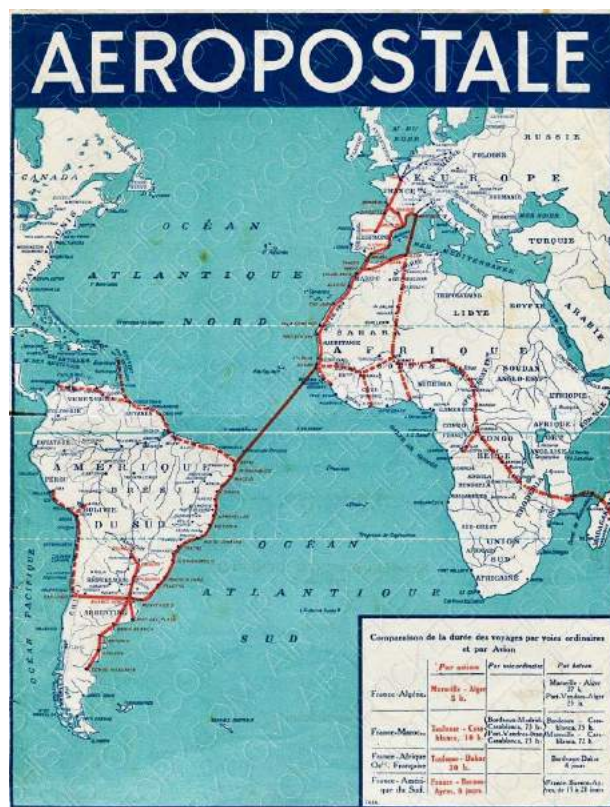
Commercial examples of this interrupted flight are not often seen, and this is the heaviest such cover known to the exhibitor.

From *Aéropostale* to Air France (August 1933)

The financial crisis in the early 1930s and the political determination of Pierre Cot, Minister of Aviation, resulted in the first major restructuring of the French air transport industry in 1933. In 1933, Air Orient, Air Union, the Société Générale de Transport Aérien and the C.I.D.N.A., started up a joint airline named Société Centrale pour l'Exploitation de Lignes Aériennes (S.C.E.L.A.).

The airline was named Air France, in August 1933, following the takeover of the assets of the bankrupt *Aéropostale*. Air France was officially inaugurated at the Paris-Le Bourget Airport on 7 October 1933.

- Right: **AÉROPOSTALE** brochure (reduced reproduction) showing the company's network in late 1932.
- Bottom: The **earliest AIR FRANCE** evidence we have in aerophilatelic terms is this 16/9/1933 cover from Brazil to GB.



BRAZIL – Great Britain: Rio de Janeiro (16/9/33) to London commercial letter, the transatlantic crossing was by fast boat. **Postage:** 4\$200 per 5g. *The printed envelope reads AÉROPOSTALE but now marked with boxed VIA “AIR FRANCE” and the Rio De Janeiro pictorial backstamp also incorporates the name of the new airline.*

Air France 1934: Croix du Sud First Outward Flight

Croix du Sud, a handsome 4-engine flying boat of the Latécoère 300 type, preformed three round flights in 1934, the first in January between Saint Louis and Natal with a crew of four (Bonnot, Gauthier, Emont, Duruthy). On 7/12/1936 the aircraft was performing its 25th cross Atlantic flight from France to South America. This was the last trip of this aircraft and neither the Latécoère 300 nor the crew (Mermoz, Pichodou, Cruveilhaier, Lavidalie, Ezan) were ever recovered. Presented here are four examples of elusive foreign contract mail of first outward flight (3-4/12/1934).



GREAT BRITAIN – ARGENTINA (3A):
Barking (27/12/33) to Buenos Aires (6/1/34) via Paris and Toulouse (30/12/33) commercial letter flown on the first transatlantic crossing of the *Croix du Sud*.

Postage: 4 shillings combined airmail rate per ½ oz.

GERMANY – BRAZIL (3A):
Moers (29/12/33) to Porto Alegre (6/1/34) via Paris (30/12/33) personal letter flown on the first transatlantic crossing of the *Croix du Sud*.

Postage: RM 1.30 airmail per 5g, RM 0.25 surface rate.



Air France 1934: *Croix du Sud* First Outward Flight

BELGIUM – ARGENTINA (3A):

Brussels
(27/12/33) to
Buenos Aires
(6/1/34)
commercial letter
flown on the first
transatlantic
crossing of the
Croix du Sud.

Postage: Bfr
25.00 (2 x Bfr
12.50 airmail per
5g), Bfr 1.75
surface rate.



ITALY – ARGENTINA (3A):

Lecco (23/12/33)
to Buenos Aires
(6/1/34) via
Marseilles
(24/12/33)
commercial letter
flown on the first
transatlantic
crossing of the
Croix du Sud.

Postage: Lire 8.25
airmail per 5g,
Lire 1.25 surface
rate.

Air France 1934: *Croix du Sud* First Return Flight

The first return trip of the Croix du Sud between Dakar and Saint Louis took place in 30-31/1/1934. The crew was the same as on the outward trip.



ARGENTINA – POLAND (3R):

Buenos Aires (27/1) to Bielsko (7/2) registered commercial letter flown on the first return transatlantic flight of the *Croix du Sud*.

Postage: 2 pesos airmail (2 x 1 peso per 5g), 15c surface rate, 20c registration fee.

Uncommon destination.



BRAZIL – GERMANY (3R): Rio de Janeiro (27/1) to Berlin (6/2), personal letter flown on the first return transatlantic flight of the *Croix du Sud*. **Postage:** 4\$200 per 5g (combined surface and airmail rates).

The sender, Peter Riedel, was a commercial pilot for Deutsche Luftansa. Perhaps he sent this letter to an executive of the DLH to monitor the speed of the service offered by the competitors.

Air France 1934: *Croix du Sud* First Return Flight



ARGENTINA – ITALY (3R):

Buenos Aires (27/1) to Milan (5/2), commercial letter flown on the first return transatlantic flight of the *Croix du Sud*.

Postage: 1 peso airmail per 5g, 15c surface rate.

ARGENTINA – CZECHO-SLOVAKIA (3R):

Buenos Aires (27/1) to Gablonz (6/2), now Jablonec nad Nisou in the Czech Republic, commercial letter flown on the first return transatlantic flight of the *Croix du Sud*.

Postage: 1 peso airmail per 5g, 15c surface rate.

Unusual destination.



Air France 1934: *Arc-en-Ciel* First Outward Flight

The Couzinet Arc-en-Ciel, a three-engine, land-based aircraft departed from St. Louis on May 28, with Jean Mermoz and his crew (Dabry, Gimié and Collenot). The flying time to Brazil was an excellent 16 hours, 10 minutes, this being the first commercial transatlantic flight made by an airplane. Sadly, despite its excellent design and air capabilities, it only preformed three round flights (all three in 1934), as the air ministry at that time favoured the use of seaplanes. **Commercial or private letters from this first outward flight are only very seldom seen, an example from France is shown here:**



FRANCE – ARGENTINA (4A): Turcoing (25/5) to Buenos Aires (29/5) via Paris(26/5) commercial cover flown on the first scheduled commercial trasatlantic flight of *Arc-en-Ciel*. **Postage:** (the low value stamps perfined S & C of SEGARD & Cie) Fr 17.00 airmail (2 x Fr 8.50 per 5g), Fr 1.50 surface rate.

Only a handful of commercial items are recorded from this first flight, which was the first commercial transatlantic flight of a land-based airplane.

Air France 1934: *Arc-en-Ciel* First Return Flight

The return trip of the Arc-en-Ciel took place on May 31 with the same crew as the outward trip. It was unique in that it followed the Natal – Porto Praia – Villa Cisneros route.



BRAZIL – GERMANY (4R):
Porto Alegre (28/7) to Oeslau via Paris (2/8) commercial letter flown on the first return transatlantic flight of the *Arc-en-Ciel*.

Postage: 4\$200 per 5g (combined surface and airmail rates).

- *Nuremberg flight confirmation cachet.*

BRAZIL – GERMANY (4R):
Rio Grande do Sul (28/7) to Hambourg (2/8) via Paris (2/8) commercial letter flown on the first return transatlantic flight of the *Arc-en-Ciel*.

Postage: 4\$200 per 5g (combined surface and airmail rates).

- *Berlin flight confirmation cachet.*



Air France 1934: *Arc-en-Ciel* First Return Flight

A Graf Zeppelin Passenger's Postcard Flown by Jean Mermoz's Arc-en-Ciel!

The message reads: "Kind regards from far away south of the equator (25 °C). It was a gorgeous 4-day trip with the Zeppelin. In 8 days I will travel from Rio (2 million inhabitants), presumed to be the most scenic city on the planet, further south to Argentina (Buenos Aires)."

The sender was a passenger aboard the G381 flight of the Graf Zeppelin from Europe to South America. He wrote and posted the postcard on 28 July, three days after the Graf had reached Rio, to his wife(?) back home. The next airmail service to Europe? An Air France service, the first return flight of the *Arc-en-Ciel*.

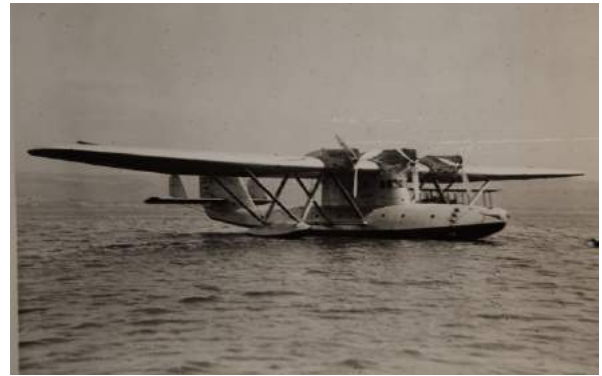


BRAZIL – GERMANY (4R): Rio de Janeiro (28/7) to Berlin (2/8) flown to Europe on the first return transatlantic flight of the *Arc-en-Ciel*. **Postage:** 4\$200 per 5g.

Sheer aerpostal history combining elements of both German and French services.

Air France 1934: Santos Dumont First Outward Flight

The Blériot 5190 Santos Dumont, a 4-engine flying boat carried out the final two airmail round trips in 1934, the first being in November with a crew of Bossoutrot, Givon, Comet, Neri and Legendre. The "Santos-Dumont" was a real workhorse, completing 11 of the 22 Air France round trips across the South Atlantic in 1935. The importance of the first flight of Santos Dumont must not be underestimated: it was the first aircraft that offered the most in establishing a regular 100% airmail service.



FRANCE – ARGENTINA (9A): Paris (24/11) to Buenos Aires (29/11) personal letter flown on the first trasatlantic flight of Santos Dumont. **Postage:** Fr 17.00 airmail (2 x Fr 8.50 per 5g), Fr 1.50 surface rate. *Special flight confirmation cachet AIR FRANCE / TRANSPORTADA TOTALMENTE / POR AVION* applied on arrival.

Air France 1934: Santos Dumont First Outward Flight

SPAIN –
ARGENTINA
(9A):

Seville (20/11) to
Buenos Aires
personal letter
flown on the first
trasatlantic flight of
Santos Dumont.

Postage: 4.25
pesetas airmail per
5g, 0.30 pesetas
surface rate.



Air France 1934: Santos Dumont First Return Flight

The return trip of Santos Dumont took place on 3-4/12/1934 with the same crew as the outward trip.



BRAZIL –
GERMANY (9R):
Rio (1/12) -
Nuremberg
commercial letter
of the first return
transatlantic flight
of *Santos Dumont*.
Postage: 4\$200 (5g)

**ENTIEREMENT
TRANSPORTE
PAR AVION**
cachet applied in
Rio.

Epilogue: Farewell to 1934

The year 1934 saw very few transatlantic flights made by the Air France aircrafts. The vast majority of transatlantic crossings were effected by Avisos. The three Arc-en-Ciel return flights are most important, but were never to be repeated as the hydroplanes were preferred over land-based aircrafts for the transatlantic crossings. The third (and last) Arc-en-Ciel flight was made in 23-24/10/1934.

ARGENTINA – GB (8R)

Buenos Aires
(20/10) to
London,
commercial letter
flown on the last
return
transatlantic flight
of the *Arc-en-
Ciel*, piloted by
Mermoz as chief
pilot and
Guillaumet as
second. **Postage:**
1 peso airmail per
5g, 15c surface
rate.



The last 1934 transatlantic flight was the return flight of Santos Dumont of 18-19/12 which was a fitting finale to 1934 as half of the flights in 1935 were effected by Santos Dumont with Bossoutrot and Givon as pilots.

BRAZIL – GB (10R)

Bahia (15/12) to
Birmingham
commercial letter
flown on the last
1934 return
transatlantic flight of
Air France by
Santos Dumont.
Postage: 4\$200 / 5g.



“Transportada inteiramente / per via aerea. Air France” applied in Bahia, one of the most elusive Air France instructional cachets.