

MALTA AIR MAIL SERVICE

— by CARMEL G. BONA VIA —

Progress in any form of transport, by land, sea or air, is always reflected in new ways of mail conveyance from one country to another. The very nature of the mail demands two great factors: security in conveyance and speed in delivery. These two features were kept in mind by all postal authorities before a new route was chosen to carry any mails.

Malta has a long tradition of well organised postal services, both local and to the neighbouring continents. For long centuries, the sea which isolated this archipelago, had afforded an excellent connection with the surrounding shores for the transmission of our mails. The introduction of airplane opened a new era in the conveyance of mail.

FIRST AIR MAIL

The air mail service was introduced here on April 1st, 1928. At that time, Malta had no airports. Only a British Service seaplane base at Kalafrana was in operation. The Services might have carried some of their mail by their seaplanes but civil mail had to be carried by sea to the nearest port, normally Syracuse, and then by train to the first airport.

The first air mail was launched to the East: Iraq, Persia, North East Arabia and North West India. The mail was only despatched every alternate week and linked to the Egypt-Iraq mail service run by the Postal Authorities of Great Britain through the Imperial Airways. The time gained over mail sent all the way by ordinary sea service, varied from 16 days for letters to Bagdad to 2 days for those to Karachi.

This service was not restricted to letters only, but any postal article was accepted to be sent by air mail. A pre-payment of 6d for every ounce extra to ordinary postage was charged on each item.

AIR MAIL STAMP

This air mail fee, at first, had to be paid only by a special stamp issued for the purpose. The King George V 6d. violet and red stamp issued in 1926, was overprinted "Air Mail". It was put on sale on the inauguration of the service. This was the only Air Mail stamp issued in Malta until March 30th, 1974, when the new air mail definitive was released.

All mail to be conveyed by air had to bear the words "BY AIR MAIL" clearly written or printed. A special blue label with this caption was made available free from all Post Offices. Similar labels were already in use in Great Britain. After the Universal Postal Union Congress held in London in the following year, 1929, this label was universally adopted.

EXTENSION OF AIR MAIL SERVICE

As air routes were extended to the other parts of the British Empire, the Malta air mail was linked up to services serving various countries.

Malta mail could thus join other mails to their final destinations.

Such a quick service was very much appreciated by the commercial community and the relatives of emigrants.

Australia had an internal air service towards the late 20's. In fact in 1929 it was possible to link Malta air mail to this service at Perth and Fremantle, thus saving from four to one day on ordinary mails.

Later the Imperial Airways extended their routes to Africa. The Malta Post Office made arrangements to link our air mail to Soudan, Belgian Congo, Kenya, Uganda and Tanganyika via Egypt through Brindisi. In fact, for many years, all our air mail from Malta had to be conveyed to Brindisi by ordinary service and from there it joined the various air services operating from this airport.

DIRECT FLIGHTS

It was only in 1931 that direct flights from Malta were possible. The Società Anonima Navigazione Aerea of Genoa included Malta in its tri-weekly air service between Rome and Tripoli. This stop at Malta afforded an excellent chance to the Post Office to give a direct air conveyance to mail. In less than nine hours air mail from Malta could reach Genoa. From there mail was either conveyed by train or continued its second lap of an air journey to its final destination.

During the same year, the London Egypt air service was extended to Mwanza. Arrangements were made with the General Post Office in London so that air mail from Malta to various African countries would be picked up at Brindisi.

At this time the air mail charges in addition to normal postage, varied from 2d per half an ounce for letters to Athens to 1s 6d for South Africa. Later, when the air mail service was extended to Australia and New Zealand the rate was 2s 3d for every half ounce.

GRAF ZEPPELIN MAIL

In the early thirties, the airship offered the only hope of long distance flying. After various flights, it was thought safe enough to carry mail. Air mail was scheduled to be flown by the Graf Zeppelin from Friedrichshafen (Germany) to South America.

This service afforded a chance for air mail from Malta to be despatched to various South American countries via Rome. The postage for air mail by the Graf Zeppelin air service was 2s 4d every 5 grammes to Brazil and 2s 9d for the other five South American countries, in addition to ordinary postage.

The Italian airline "Ali Littoria", in 1939, included Malta in its flight: Malta — Catania — Palermo — Naples — Rome. Thus our air mail could

make all its journey by air and the old system of conveying the mail to Brindisi was scrapped.

Unfortunately this improved air service came to an abrupt end at the outbreak of the Second World War. For almost five years, the air mail service was very much curtailed. Make shift arrangements had to be improvised for urgent correspondence, mainly with the families of foreign troops engaged in the defence of the Islands. Nevertheless, a prisoner-of-war mail service was also organised through the good services of the International Red Cross.

POST-WAR PERIOD

During the Second World War great improvements were made in air transport. These facilities provided a better and quicker air mail service as soon as communications between the different countries slowly returned to normal.

Luqa Airport soon became the official office for all air mail despatches and receipts. On April 1st 1958, a Branch Post Office was opened for the convenience of passengers and for special postal facilities. Luqa Airport Post Office, as its counterpart in other foreign airports, affords "late" postings of air mail up to about 50 minutes before each flight. Up to one kilogramme of mail may be added to all mail despatched from the General Post Office in Valletta. This "late" air mail posting is very important mostly to merchants and businessmen.

Normally all our air mail is now channelled through the direct flights to London, Rome, Catania and Tripoli. Mail addressed to countries beyond these cities, is linked to other flights for its final destination.

AIR MALTA

With the setting up of AIR MALTA, our air mail will now be carried by our own airline. Air Malta has direct flights to London, Manchester, Birmingham, Paris, Rome, Frankfurt and Tripoli. These non stop flights will surely accelerate our air mail service to most countries.

For the inauguration of this service, a set of seven airmail stamps, the first ever to be issued by Malta, was released on March 30th 1974.

The stamps, on originals by Chev. Emvin V. Cremona, have two designs: one showing the Air Malta Boeing 720B on a typical Maltese skyline and another showing an allegory of flight. These stamps have been printed by Messrs Printex Ltd. of Qormi, Malta.

AIR MALTA FIRST FLIGHTS

Covers posted at the Philatelic Bureau, General Post Office, Valletta, to be carried by Air Malta's aircraft on the respective first flight were

franked with a special hand postmark which indicated the date of the first flight and the place of destination.

The number of these covers was as follows:—

1st April, 1974	1037	Malta/London
1st April, 1974	998	Malta/Rome
3rd April, 1974	986	Malta/Tripoli
3rd April, 1974	986	Malta/Birmingham
5th April, 1974	993	Malta/Frankfurt
6th April, 1974	1028	Malta/Paris
7th April, 1974	968	Malta/Manchester