



News from the American Philatelic Center

Home of the

American Philatelic Society and American Philatelic Research Library

Contact: Fred Baumann

American Philatelic Center • 100 Match Factory Place
814-933-3803 ext. 239

e-mail: fred@stamps.org

Bellefonte, PA 16823
814-933-6128 (Fax)

For Immediate Release

2/11/2008/1586

Jack Knight Desk Arrives at APC



Jack Knight's desk occupies a cozy corner in the World Air Mail Research Center of the American Philatelic Center in Bellefonte, Pennsylvania.

A drop-front secretary desk owned by pioneer air mail pilot James H. "Jack" Knight has taken its place of honor in the World Air Mail Research Center at the American Philatelic Center in Bellefonte, Pennsylvania. Knight's desk is on loan to the American Air Mail Society from John Cress, a pioneer air mail collector, who purchased it from the flyer's mother and has had it in his home ever since.

Like so many of those who flew the early air mails, Knight joined the U.S. Army Air Service during World War I. In 1919, he joined the fledgling U.S. Air Mail Service, which paid well for an extremely hazardous job.

In a career of many noteworthy accomplishments, the one for which Knight is best remembered is the flight he made in 1921 on Washington's Birthday (February 22), at a time he was regularly flying the mail in the air mail service's Western division, from Omaha to North Platte, Nebraska, and Cheyenne, Wyoming.

In a bid to popularize air mail, Second Assistant Postmaster General Otto Praeger had announced that the first day-night transcontinental mail service would begin on that date. A great deal hung on the success of the flight, given that air mail was distinctly out of political favor with the incoming Harding administration.

To offer this service between New York and San Francisco, two planes were to fly east while two planes flew west. These converted WWI biplanes had no radios or navigational aids, relying on bonfires in buckets of gasoline set on the ground to serve as signposts to light their way. Every 200 to 300 miles, the planes would land, refuel and change pilots before continuing.

The two westbound pilots were plagued by fog and snow. One made it as far west as DuBois, Pennsylvania. The other made it through Cleveland to Chicago, but the relay pilot, forced back by heavy snow, was unable to reach Omaha.

That meant it was up to the eastbound pilots to complete the trip, lest the much publicized new service end its first day in abject failure. The two planes eastbound from San Francisco made it to Elko, Nevada, without incident. Taking off for Salt Lake City, however, one stalled on takeoff at 500 feet and crashed, killing pilot William Lewis. The only remaining air mail plane from the transcontinental flight continued on to North Platte, where its mail was combined with that from the crash, which had been salvaged and flown on without delay by another pilot.

Knight, his nose bandaged and nursing bruises from a mountain crash near Laramie just a week earlier, had already flown his normal route starting from Omaha via North Platte to Cheyenne, then back to North Platte — about 700 miles, in all. Carrying the mail to Omaha was now up to him, a task complicated by a three-hour delay while mechanics patched up a broken tail skid and a balky engine on his DeHavilland DH-4B biplane.

Already having put in a long day of flying, Knight took off at 11 p.m., navigating the nearly 300 miles to Omaha by the occasional reflections of moonlight off the Platte River and four bonfires ignited on the ground, and landed at 1 a.m. to meet the relief pilot

who would take the mail the last 460 miles to Chicago. But the relief pilots from Chicago were still in Chicago, pinned down by heavy snow across Iowa and Illinois.

A period account, recounted by Scott M. Fisher, tells us what happened next:

“Bill Votaw, the airfield manager, gave Jack the bad news and advised him to get some rest.

“Knight told him: ‘Bill, it seems a shame to have to quit this flight when we’ve gotten the mail halfway. Let me get warmed up here a few minutes and I’ll take ‘er on through to Chicago.’

“Votaw said: ‘Jack, don’t kid me. You’ve never flown the Omaha-Chicago route. Even in daylight you’d never make it in this kind of weather.’

“Knight replied: ‘If people will keep lighting bonfires, I can make it. All I need is some of your good coffee and I’ll give it a go. How about a map?’

“A Rand McNally highway wall map was all Votaw could find.

“Knight ripped off the part that showed Omaha to Chicago and took it with him to study while he got something to eat at a diner across the road. Later, he said: ‘The situation, then, was that if I did not myself carry the mail on to Chicago the whole test would fall down. The pouches would have to be sent as far as Chicago, by rail, and that certainly would have justified the criticism that continuous airmail service across the country was not practical. So I pleaded for the opportunity to go on. There’s not a pilot in the airmail service who would not have done the same. Any of the fellows would have insisted on going ahead if they had been in my shoes.’ ”

During a break in the snow, he took off into the black Nebraska sky around 2 a.m. Knight told Votaw: ‘Leave your lights on for one hour. If I get lost, I’ll come back. Spread the word that I’m coming, Bill, and wire my wife.’ ”

Though low on fuel, heavy snow made it impossible to land in Des Moines, so Knight switched over to his auxiliary fuel supply and pressed on to Iowa City, where he landed with nearly dry tanks. While the biplane took on fuel, Knight grabbed a ham sandwich and a cup of coffee, then climbed back in the cockpit for the final 200 mile leg to the Windy City.

As Knight himself told it, “The smoke of Chicago mixing with the gray clouds of the early morning is the finest sight I have ever seen. For, as I raced towards the city at better than 100 miles an hour, that smoke of Chicago appeared as a signal that breakfast and bed were waiting for me. I had flown 1,500 miles since Tuesday noon, without a wink of sleep.”

With just drops of fuel remaining, Knight touched down at 8:40 a.m. The West Coast mail had made it, and would be relayed on without delay to New York City. As Fisher notes, “He had helped save the air mail service and was a hero from that day on.”

In 1945, Knight died at home in Michigan of malaria he caught while in South America as chief of flight operations with the Defense Supply Corps, training pilots to fly native rubber out of the jungle as part of the war effort. A hometown newspaper account of his colorful career noted that his passing “at the comparatively early age of 53 was lamented as untimely ... yet it must be said that only the best of good fortune in addition to a genius for airmanship kept him alive to that age.” At the time of his death — out of the 22 original Air Mail Service pilots — Knight was one of only four still alive.

Knight’s name lives on in publications like the American Air Mail Society’s *Jack Knight Air Log*, which has been published since 1943-44, and the Chicago chapter of the AAMS has been designated the Jack Knight Air Mail Society since 1941, when Knight himself was a featured speaker at a meeting.

The World Air Mail Research Center that is the new home to Knight’s desk is a meeting room that is part of the Educational Facility at the American Philatelic Center, generously endowed by the American Air Mail Society. At its center is a magnificent rosewood table and 14 chairs, each with a brass plate honoring a president of the American Air Mail Society. The room is festooned with air mail art and memorabilia, including the Aerophilatelic Hall of Fame, a 3- by 4-foot brass and wood plaque saluting those who have made a significant contribution to the development and advancement of collecting air mail stamps and covers.

The photograph of Jack Knight is from the Daniel Hines Air Mail Archive of the American Philatelic Research Library, currently being processed and organized funded by a grant from the Pennsylvania Historic and Museum Commission. The stamp is shown courtesy the American Philatelic Society Reference Collection, created and sustained through the generosity of APS members.

If you are considering making a donation of philatelic material to the American Philatelic Society or American Philatelic Research Library, please contact Ken Martin at 814-933-3817 or kpmartin@stamps.org



Air mail pioneer Jack Knight (above), in a photo from the Daniel Hines Air Mail Archive of the American Philatelic Research Library. Knight’s famous 1921 flight from Cheyenne, Wyoming, to Chicago took place in a DeHavilland DH-4 biplane of the type seen on the 1923 24-cent air mail stamp (below).

