

The Pan American Air Mail Test of 1946

by Jan Verster

I first learned of these covers in an article by Roy Lingen [2]. What particularly interested me was that these flights included Willemstad, Curaçao, and Paramaribo, Surinam.

On October 1, 1946, the domestic airmail rate in the United States was lowered to a uniform 5 cents per half ounce (about 15 grams). The previous rate had varied from 8 cents and up. This was a substantial reduction, particularly for Hawaii, where the previous rate to the mainland was 15 cents. Rates were also lowered to Canada, Mexico, and some islands in the Caribbean. This caused a substantial increase in the amount of airmail sent. In the 30 busiest airmail field offices, the amount of mail handled in the first 15 days of October was up over 26% compared with the last 15 days of September, and up more than 40% in some places. Revenues from mail transport had been a significant factor in the development of airlines, but now rates could be lowered. Part of the reason the rates could be lowered, was that the airlines would only be paid 45 cents per ton mile, as opposed to 60 cents per ton mile previously.

Then, on October 8, it was announced that, effective November 1, rates to the rest of the world would also be lowered and simplified. In particular, the rate per half ounce was to be 10 cents to South America (down from 15 to 20 cents); 15 cents to Europe and North Africa (down from 30 cents), and 25 cents to the rest of Africa, Asia and the far East (down from as much as 70 cents). The previous rate to Curaçao and Surinam had been 15 cents per half ounce.

Air-Mail Offer by Pan American

WASHINGTON, Oct. 22 (U.P.)—Pan American Airways invited the public today to try out the new air mail rate of 10 cents a half-ounce to Latin America on Nov. 1 to see how fast their letters travel. Persons who address a letter with a 10-cent stamp to "Pan American World Airways System, Airmail Test," in a capital city in South America, Central America or the West Indies will have the letter returned to them, stamped with the date of receipt. Pan American will pay the return postage and mail it back through regular air mail channels. Letters are to be mailed on Nov. 1 only.

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Fig. 1 Reduced rate (10 cent) Pan Am cover mailed November 1, 1946, from Dayton, Ohio to Paramaribo, Surinam.



Fig. 2 Reverse side of fig. 1

On October 23, Pan American Airways invited the public to try out the new rate to Latin America to see how fast their letters traveled. The letter had to have 10 cents postage and had to be addressed to "Pan American World Airways System, Airmail Test" in a capitol city in South America, Central America, or the West Indies. The letter would be backstamped with the date of receipt, have return postage applied (paid for by Pan American) and sent back by regular airmail. This offer was only for letters mailed on November 1, 1946.

Figure 1 shows a cover mailed from Dayton, Ohio to Paramaribo. The back, Figure 2, shows it arrived there November 5 (both post office and P.A.A. handstamps). The Pan Am office in Paramaribo applied a 25 cent Queen Wilhelmina stamp (NVPH 233), a manuscript "Return to Sender" in red, and it was mailed back to the sender on the same day.

Fig. 3 Reduced rate cover mailed in 1946 from Seattle to Curaçao, Netherlands West Indies

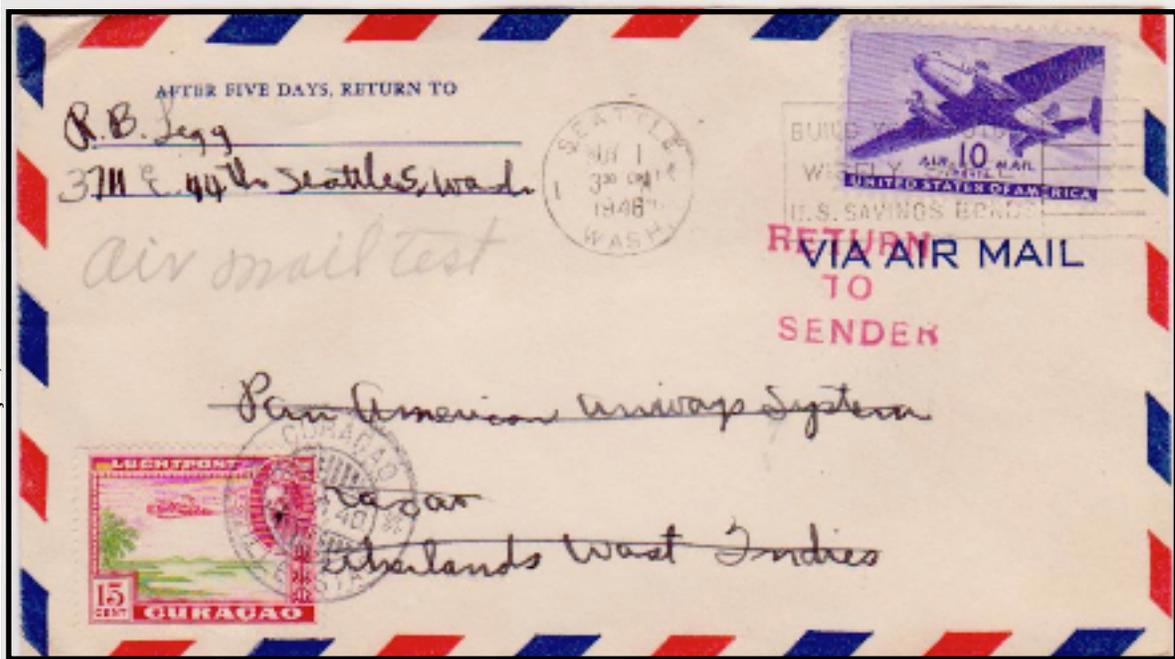


Figure 3 shows a cover mailed (also on November 1, 1946) from Seattle to Curaçao, Netherlands West Indies. ("Airmail Test" was missing from the original address, but was added later by hand).



Fig. 4 Reverse of fig. 3

Figure 4 shows on the back that the letter (Fig. 3) was received November 4 in Curaçao. S.E.L. Maduro & Sons marked the letter as agents for Pan American. A 15 cent Curaçao air mail stamp (NVPH LP27) was attached to the front, as well as a "Return to Sender" marker in red. The letter was mailed back to Seattle on November 5. Fifteen cents was the current airmail rate for letters of the first weight class (I am not sure what the weight limits were). On January 1, 1947, this rate was dropped to 12 1/2 cents for letters from 0 to 10 grams, but in 1943, the rate was for letters from 0 to 5 grams.

These letters apparently traveled via Miami, then Kingston, Jamaica, and then on to Curaçao.

How fast did the letters travel? Note that November 1, 1946 was a Friday, so this test took place over a weekend. Most examples I have seen (admittedly not a lot) to Willemstad arrived on November 4 (3 days). Most examples to Paramaribo arrived on November 5 (4 days), probably early in the day as it was possible to get them processed and back in the mail the same day. I have not seen any with arrival marks when returned to the sender, so you usually can't tell how long they took to get back.

Figure 5, though, shows a cover from Lynbrook, New York, that arrived in Paramaribo November 2 (one day later). and was received at the Pan American office November 4. How did it get there the following day? The sender posted the letter at 12:30 a.m.(!) on November 1. It also has a manuscript arrival 11/9/46 8:45 a.m. This implies a round trip of 8 days, 8 hours, and 15 minutes.

On the internet, I have seen a similar cover to Willemstad which arrived November 2, but I don't personally have a copy to show you.

Three days to Curaçao seems at first like a lot as we can fly there today in less than a day, but remember that planes were slower then (only about 200 miles/hour). I doubt that today mail is any faster. I would be interested in any data on how fast surface mail was in 1946 as a comparison.

According to [2], there were a total of 28 cities that officially took part in this test. There you can see an example of one to each city. These covers are not particularly scarce, but it would take a bit of searching to get them all.

I would like to thank Rinus Dekker and Hans Kremer for their help in unearthing some of the facts in this article.

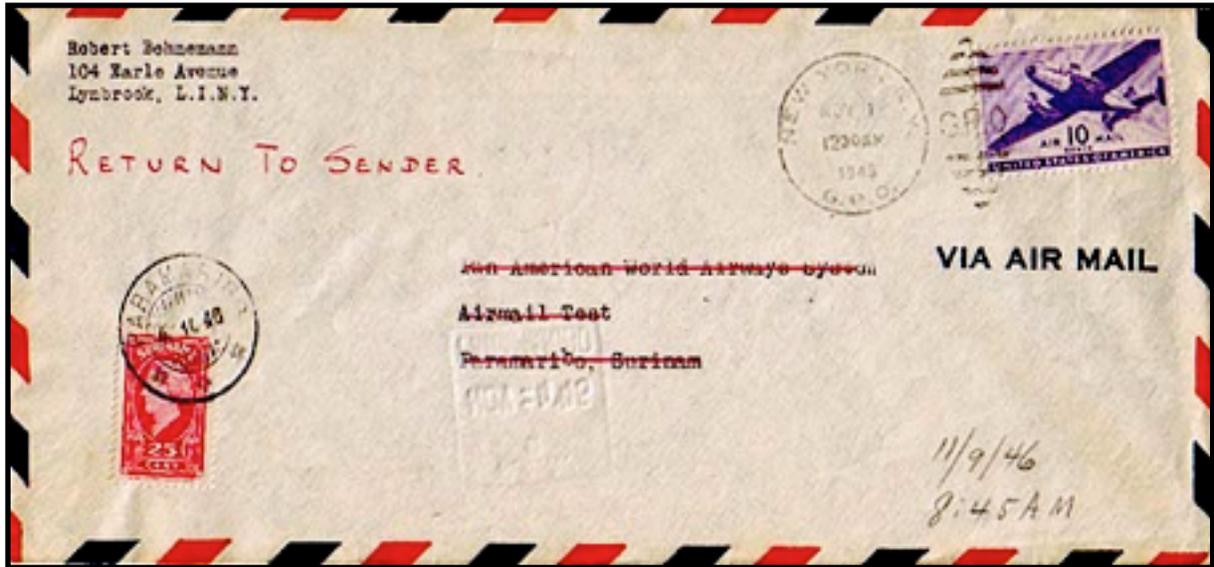


Fig. 5 Cover from Lynbrook, New York, that arrived in Paramaribo in only three days.

References

1. New York Times, various articles, October and November 1946.
2. http://www.stamporama.com/articles/display_article.php?id=RA.Jt6A289BgE
Pan Am Air System Test of 1946, by Roy Lingon

Appendix: The 28 cities taking part in the Air Mail test were:

Caribbean

St. John's, Antigua; Willemstad, Curaçao, Netherlands Antilles; Ciudad Trujillo, Dominican Republic; Pointe a Pitre, Guadeloupe; Port au Prince, Haiti; Kingston, Jamaica; Fort de France, Martinique; Castries, St. Lucia, British West Indies; Port of Spain, Trinidad.

Central America

San Jose, Costa Rica; Guatemala City, Guatemala; Tegucigalpa, Honduras; Managua, Nicaragua; Panama City, Panama; San Salvador, El Salvador.

South America

Buenos Aires, Argentina; La Paz, Bolivia; Rio de Janeiro, Brazil; Georgetown, British Guiana; Santiago, Chile; Bogota, Colombia; Quito, Ecuador; Cayenne, French Guiana; Asuncion, Paraguay; Lima, Peru; Paramaribo, Suriname; Montevideo, Uruguay; Caracas, Venezuela