Wartime Trans-Atlantic Flights Can be Complicated

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It is hardly surprising that collectors get confused about the routes taken by airmail across the South Atlantic during World War 2. Take the illustrated cover as an example. Posted in Switzerland on May 14, 1943, it was addressed to a company in Rio de Janeiro and franked correctly at 1Fr.80c. made up from the UPU fee of 30c. and an air fee of 1Fr.50c. So far, so good, but how did it get to Buenos Aires and why did it take until the 17th of August to make the journey?

As Charles LaBlonde [1] tells us, the situation with mail out of Switzerland was ever-changing. Swiss authorities tried many things to find safe routes and, where possible, avoid German interception, but in May 1943 airmail from Switzerland was routinely intercepted in Berlin. Sure enough, this cover carries a Berlin OKW re-sealing label. From there the cover was probably carried by Lufthansa to Lisbon via Stuttgart, Barcelona and Madrid. The transit cancellation of Lisbon is dated 22 May 1943 and this is where it gets complicated.

Mail from Axis Europe (which included Switzerland) was
intended to be carried on the Pan American Airways South Atlantic flights through Bolama and Fisherman’s Lake, but the last winter flight on this route (Route 9) departed from Lisbon on the May 21, one day before the cover arrived. The Route 8 flights (LATI Substitute) clockwise around the Atlantic would carry it southward to Natal but here is a snag. The first flight on Route 8 in 1943 (8028) did not leave Lisbon until July 9, so what trans-Atlantic flight could have carried this cover, if indeed there was a flight in May/June 1943?

Fortunately we do have the Pan American flight information in original format on the web site of the West Africa Study Circle (www.wasc.org.uk) which reveals that between the end of the Route 9 flights and the re-start of the Route 8 “LATI Substitute” summer service, Pan American attempted two flights using the “old” direct return route from Lisbon to New York via Horta and Bermuda. Both these flights were delayed by weather conditions at Horta (the very problem that prompted Pan American to use the South Atlantic route via West Africa) and were presumably just a stop-gap measure. Be that as it may, the cover from Switzerland probably departed Lisbon on flight 11002 on June 4, 1943 but not arriving in New York until the June 10 due to being held up by sea conditions at Horta.

How do I know that the cover went through New York? Careful examination of the paper censor resealing label reveals a U.S. clear tape underneath with the examiner number 7093, i.e. New York. Why was it not censored/examined in Bermuda? Because under the terms of the “San Juan Agreement” [2] mail from Axis sources in Europe addressed to South America was passed through for examination at San Juan; that is why the cover was examined a second time by examiner 2907 in San Juan.

From New York the cover would have traveled by internal U.S. air services to Miami and then on a FAM-6 Pan American flight to San Juan to be off loaded for examination. It is impossible to tell what caused the 12-week transit, but covers examined at San Juan were often held for long periods while specialist censors did their work. Swiss mail seems to have been treated as Axis, not without some justification. The dated stamp on the cover of August 17, 1943 is assumed to be the date of receipt by the addressee. It took quite a journey and is a rare example of mail carried by unusual circumstances on one of the only two flights that used Route 11 from Lisbon to New York.

Now a touch of heresy from a British radical.

Until I analyzed the wartime route structure of Pan American Airways, most collectors would have described this Swiss cover as being “carried by FAM-18,” itself an ungrammatical statement since the cover was carried by an aircraft, not by a USPOD reference document. As a postal historian and a collector, when I hold a cover in my hand I want to know how it was carried from its origin to its destination, using the classic postal history definition of “routes and rates.” To say that this, and other covers that I will describe in the future, simply traveled “by FAM-18” is an inadequate explanation.

Trans-Atlantic airmail carried “by FAM-18” from Europe via Lisbon to the United States could have traveled by several different routes depending on the year of carriage and the seasons of the year. On a different dispatch date, my Swiss cover could have traveled from Lisbon to Foynes in Ireland then via Shediac and Botwood to New York. It may have traveled from Lisbon via Horta and Bermuda to New York. It could have traveled south to Bolama and West Africa to Brazil and the West Indies to Bermuda and New York. It may have traveled clockwise or counter-clockwise on one of the “LATI Substitute” flights. Correct identification of the route to a postal historian is of prime importance and cannot be described as simply “by FAM-18.”

So here is my heretical suggestion. Because we now have at our disposal the actual detailed flight information and we know the Pan American route structure, we could relegate the “FAM-18” description to a footnote and use instead the Pan American route and flight numbers when analyzing a cover’s track. By adopting this approach we can discover many rare and unusual circumstances that led to flight delays and/or diversions and also uncover some of the difficulties and dangers the Pan American crews experienced in flying around the Atlantic in wartime.

This Swiss cover illustrates my point perfectly. By using the route description and the flight information I am able to know that it was carried on a single flight of a single route. Surely that is of more interest and significance than saying it was carried “by FAM-18.” I am sure some will disagree, and some are simply not interested in this level of detail, but for the true postal historian this is a logical development based on our new access to actual flight records.

References

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