

RHODESIAN STUDY CIRCLE

BAROTSELAND'S FIRST AIR MAILS

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## BAROTSELAND'S FIRST AIR MAILS

Lusaka - Mumbwa - Mankoya - Mongu (360 air miles)

Lusaka - (Nyimba) - Fort Jameson (322 air miles)

The opening days of 1939 saw the inauguration of two new regular weekly airmail services in Northern Rhodesia: services to which no advance publicity was given and which were kept so secretive in fact that the 'Northern Rhodesia Government Gazette' did not issue its customary Postal Notice. Neither the operating company nor the Post Office gave any official notice of the inception to the general public and, consequently, first flight covers on both services - especially to and from the intermediate points - are exceptionally scarce.

January 2nd and 3rd, 1939

Lusaka - Mumbwa - Mankoya - Mongu, and return

Mongu-Lealui, the capital of Barotseland and the headquarters of the Paramount Chief of the Barotseland tribe, is situated some 550 miles up the Zambesi River from Livingstone and the Victoria Falls. It is one of the most remote and desolate outposts of the British Empire, with a population of less than 50 Europeans, and is the centre for even more outlying administrative, trading and missionary posts such as Balovale, Nalolo, Limalunga and Chilokoloki, the combined population of which possibly amounts to another 30 or 40 Europeans. A mail paddle-canoe serves Nalolo and other small stations, and native runners carry Government mails to the inland centres.

from the time of the British occupation of Barotseland in 1899 until 1939, mails for Mongu were carried by native barges up-stream from Livingstone and the time taken in transit, depending on the state of the Zambesi, varied from two to six weeks; but mails were delayed on occasions when hippopotami capsized the craft.

With the advent of the air mail, letters can now (i.e. 1939) be delivered in Mongu in six and a half hours from Livingstone, via Lusaka, or in four from the latter town: It is doubtful whether there is any other inhabited part of the world where such a great saving of time in mail transportation has taken place in the twentieth century.

Mankoya (120 air miles east of Mongu, 240 west of Lusaka) - only a District Commissioner and possibly a couple of European traders reside in this outpost of the Empire. In the district, however, is an American Seventh Day Advent Mission, on the Luampa River, which with other stray settlements may possibly bring the whole European population of the Mankoya district up to a dozen. Mails to Mankoya are now delivered in about two and a half hours by air from Lusaka; formerly they had to travel up the Zambesi to Mongu and be despatched by native runner from there, a matter of many weeks, as no roads link this outpost with civilisation.

Mumbwa (90 air miles from Lusaka, 270 from Mongu)

European population, possibly 3. There is, however, a small gold mine - the Matala - in the district which employs 30 to 40 others, and isolated mission stations are to be found. Mumbwa is connected by a dry weather road with all the principal Northern Rhodesian towns lying eastwards, and consequently has for years been comparatively in close touch with the outer world. A weekly motor mail service to and from Lusaka still operates, but that, of course,

cannot cover the distance in the mere 55 minutes now taken by the airmail.

Rhodesian and Nyasaland Airways commenced their first service to these three places on Monday, January 2nd, 1939, when a de Havilland 89 plane piloted by Mr. H. R. Kirkman, left Lusaka at 11.00 a.m.

According to official advices received from the Postmaster-General of Northern Rhodesia, this aeroplane carried no less than 660 pounds of mail for Barotseland. Considering that about 90 per cent of first-class mail matter weighs less than half an ounce, a unit, approximately 160 letters franked at the ruling Empire Air Mail Scheme rates, must have been delivered to each of the 150 residents in Barotseland by the first air mail despatch from Lusaka (quod erat absurdum). Knowing that no publicity had been given to the inauguration of this service and assuming, rightly, therefore that the mail bags were not full of "souvenir envelopes", the writer queried the official Post Office figures and suggested that, possibly, a typographical error had occurred, in that "pounds" should have read "ounces". The official reply reads:-

"Mails conveyed by air from Lusaka to Fort Jameson and Mongu-Lealui, and vice versa, comprised all classes of correspondence and parcels."

The explanation, as has subsequently been ascertained, is that about 95 per cent of the "mail" despatched from Lusaka consisted of bundles of Bibles for the various Mission Stations, Government stationery supplies, and provisions for people residing in those isolated districts. Consignments of whisky naturally accounted for a certain amount of space, and possibly vied with the Bibles in the matter of actual weight.

The former essential commodity was sent in two-bottle cases at a postage rate of 4/- a box. The Bibles, on the other hand, probably received preferential treatment.

#### Lusaka - Mumbwa - Mankoya - Mongu (Mr. H. R. Kirkman, Pilot)

The first plane carrying mail for Barotseland left Lusaka, the capital of Northern Rhodesia, at 11.00 a.m. on January 2nd. Mumbwa was reached at noon, and Mankoya at 1.35 p.m., but as the plane was so heavily laden and the landing grounds at both those places were in none too good a condition on account of the rain, the pilot decided to fly straight through to his destination, Mongu, discharge 660 pounds of mail "freight" and deliver the remainder on his return flight next day. Mongu was reached before 3.00 p.m. on the 2nd, but covers addressed to the Poste Restante were not backstamped until the following day. Only seven covers (all posted in the Union of South Africa) appear to have caught the first airmail from Lusaka, and all others recorded are backstamped 9.1.39 (i.e. were carried by the second despatch).

#### Return Flight, January 3rd, 1939

The Post Office at Mongu had accumulated a fairly considerable amount of letters and parcels to be flown to Lusaka to connect with the Imperial Airways and other airmail services.

The same plane, again piloted by Mr. H. Kirkman, left Mongu at 6.00 a.m. and arrived back in Lusaka in under four hours, having made the first air mail landings at Mankoya and Mumbwa en route. These two distributing centres, as already mentioned, were omitted on the outward trip and therefore all covers - only 40 have been recorded so far - bear the arrival mark of January 3rd, whether emanating from Mongu the same morning or from Lusaka the previous day.

January 3rd and 4th, 1939

Lusaka - (Nyimba) - Fort Jameson

On March 9th, 1939, Rhodesian and Nyasaland Airways opened its first official airmail venture when Salisbury, Southern Rhodesia, was linked with Blantyre, Nyasaland. After four years of successful and regular operation the Company extended its service northwards to Fort Jameson, Northern Rhodesia, via Lilongwe (on May 23rd, 1938). No publicity whatever was given to this extension and consequently genuine first flight covers are rare. The 'Southern Rhodeisan Government Gazette' did, however, give notification of the service before its inauguration.

Simultaneously with the opening up of Barotseland by air, R.A.N.A. extended its regular Salisbury-Blantyre-Fort Jameson route another 322 miles to connect at Lusaka with the main Cape-to-Cairo trunk line - pioneered by the Royal Air Force, Sir Alan Cobham and Imperial Airways, and now used by the subsidiary Companies of the latter - Wilson Airways, R.A.N.A. and also by South African Airways.

A de havilland 89, piloted by Mr. A. H. Downing, left Lusaka at 1.00 p.m. on Tuesday, January 3rd and reached Fort Jameson with 372 pounds of mail (provisions and Bibles mainly) at 4.30 that afternoon. On the return flight, the next day, 160 pounds of mail was carried by the same pilot.

Lusaka - Fort Jameson

Covers addressed to the Poste Restante are backstamped at Fort Jameson  
3. Jan. '39 - 3 p.m.

Mails sent from Lusaka (but not to any other point) have been found with the despatch mark "Lusaka - 3 Jan. '38" (backstamped Fort Jameson 3 Jan. '39), but it is unnecessary to point out that these letters took one day and not one year in transit.

Note: The extraordinary thing is that Lusaka despatches of the 2nd January are correctly dated, and so one can't accuse the Post Office there of that universal habit of forgetfulness during the first week of a new year.

Return Flight - Fort Jameson - Lusaka

160 pounds of mail was carried as far as Lusaka, the bulk comprising Government printing matter. Of the letters carried, the majority were addressed to Europe or South Africa, via Lusaka, and no mail was sent to Barotseland. On the second despatch from Fort Jameson, however, two covers are known to have been flown to Mongu, and they are backstamped 10.1.39.

Nyimba was included in the R.A.N.A. timetable issued on January 1st, 1939, and this place, 175 miles east of Lusaka, was to have been a regular point of call. It was subsequently discovered that no Europeans reside there and no Post Office exists, and so R.A.N.A. planes have made no landings.

So far no covers from Great Britain to Barotseland by the first Lusaka-Mongu service have been discovered, and it is most improbable that any have been preserved.

Mails for Mongu which left Southampton on December 24th failed to connect as they should have done, with Imperial Airways R.A.N.A. flight owing to the late arrival of the flying-boat at Kisumu. The only Great Britain covers recorded are those which connected with the second flight from Lusaka to Mongu, which bear the backstamp "Lusaka 4.1.39. Mongu 9.1.39". Those letters took sixteen days in transit, instead of the scheduled seven, but a few years ago they would have taken

at least two or three months to have reached their destination.

The list which follows has been drawn up from data kindly supplied by the Postmaster-General of Northern Rhodesia, the Postmasters at the various centres mentioned and the R.A.N.A. pilots. From the information given, very few additional covers can exist.

LUSAKA - MUNBWA - MANKOYA - MONGU

Monday, January 2nd, 1939

	Total Weight Letters and Freight	Date of Backstamp January	Approx. No. of Covers Reported	Remarks
Lusaka - Mumbwa	19 lbs.	3rd	20	4 from the Union
- Mankoya	20 lbs.	3rd	20	5 from the Union
- Mongu	600 lbs.	3rd		7 from the Union
(ex Gt. Britain)	Nil			14 second flight
Lusaka - Mongu	Nil	9th	12	second flight
Mumbwa - Mankoya	Nil		x	plane did not land
Mumbwa - Mongu	Nil		x	" " "
Mankoya - Mongu	Nil		x	" "

Tuesday, January 3rd

Mongu - Mankoya	Nil	3rd	20	
- Mumbwa	7 lbs.	3rd	20	
- Lusaka	Nil	4th	20	
- Fort Jameson	Nil		x	
Mankoya- Mumbwa	Nil		x	
- Lusaka	36 ozs.	3rd	15	
Mumbwa - Lusaka	18 lbs.	3rd	14	

FORT JAMESON - (Nyimba) - LUSAKA

Tuesday, January 3rd

Lusaka - Fort Jameson	372 lbs	3rd	40	5 from the Union
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Wednesday, January 4th

Fort Jameson - Lusaka	160 lbs.	4th	36	
- Mumbwa	Nil		x	
- Mankoya	Nil		x	
? Mongu	Nil		x	

2nd Flight

None exists on list

Fort Jameson - Mankoya	Nil		x	
- Mumbwa		16th	4	These covers were mis-carried and placed in the Livingstone bag and are backstamped Livingstone 13th Lusaka 14th and Mumbwa 16th
- Mongu		10th	2	

x Denotes that none exists.      Denotes that covers may exist, but none known.

Note: It is quite possible that other, unrecorded, flown, covers do exist on certain stages of these services. The only quantities known to be accurate are those posted at Mankoya and Mumbwa and, on the second flight, from Fort Jameson to Mumbwa and Mongu (15, 14, 4 and 2 respectively).

In round figures, the following quantities were carried on the outward and return airmail services described:-

1st Lusaka - Barotseland	60
Barotseland - Lusaka	90
Total	<u>150</u>

1st Lusaka - Fort Jameson	50
Fort Jameson - Lusaka	40
Total	90

The pilots of both services - Messrs. Archie Downing and Ross Kirkman - authenticated all - or practically all - the known covers by signing them.

The present day management of Rhodesian and Nyasaland Airways, Ltd., appears to be following a "hush-hush" policy as regards the Company's operations, in contrast to that of propaganda and publicity advocated and actually tried by its predecessors. From the time of R.A.N.A.'s establishment until 1935, the Company's executive officers were anxious to advertise their progress by every known means. They went so far before 1935 as to issue commemorative envelopes to stimulate interest in aviation and to depict the progress being made by that Company, in particular, in opening up "Darkest Africa".

It is no exaggeration to say that those souvenir envelopes have made the name "R.A.N.A." known to a fairly wide circle of intellectual people abroad - from Australia to Zanzibar and from Alaska to Valparaiso. Airmail commemorative envelopes when postally used, are usually kept and they definitely have an increasing monetary value with the passage of time. Ordinary advertising - circulars and suchlike - to which the present management of R.A.N.A. is resorting is invariably relegated to the wastepaper basket, frequently unread.

Air France (France), Ala Littora (Italy), Deutsch Luft Hansa (Germany), K.L.M. (Holland) and S.A.B.E.N.A. (Belgium), to name some of Europe's leading airlines, are anxious to make their accomplishments known and through experience find that commemorative airmail covers, special postmarks and cachets serve a very large public. In the New World - Canada and the U.S.A. especially - the airlines and postal authorities go to extremes at times!

Imperial Airways issued the last of its souvenir covers to the public in December, 1934, when the airmail reached Brisbane, and since then the Company has done everything possible to impede philatelists from taking an interest in their, and their subsidiary Companies' development. The present secretive policy does nothing to make the name R.A.N.A. known abroad, and neither stimulates interest nor trust in air travel and transport amongst the large and expanding number of philatelists in every corner of the world.

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This article originally appeared in the March 1939 number of 'The Philatelic Chronicle' to which publication acknowledgement is made.

Further reading:

Baldwin, N. C. 'The Airmail History of the Rhodesias and Nyasaland, 1920 - 1955' (Published by Francis J. Field, Ltd., Sutton Coldfield. Reprinted from "The Aero Field".)