

This Day in History... May 20, 1939

Trans-Atlantic Airmail Service

On May 20, 1939, the US Post Office inaugurated its official trans-Atlantic airmail service to Europe.

The flight wasn't the first to carry mail from the US to Europe. As early as 1919, individual pilots had carried mail across the Atlantic. And in the early 1930s, German and French airlines started airmail service across the South Atlantic between West Africa and Brazil.

It was Pan American Airways' president Juan Trippe who pushed for this new regular trans-Atlantic airmail service. In 1935, he had created the trans-Pacific mail and passenger service aboard the *China Clipper*, a Martin M-130 seaplane. By January 29, 1939, the first Boeing 314 arrived at Pan American to prepare for its journey.

The Boeing 314 weighed 42 tons and was one-and-a-half times the size of the *China Clipper*, able to carry twice the weight. The plane included three lounges for passengers, a dining room, and 35 sleeping areas. The cost to fly as a passenger on the trip was \$375 one-way or \$675 round trip.

The first two Boeing 314s were sent to Pan American's Pacific fleet. The third plane went to San Francisco, where it was displayed at the Golden Gate Exhibition, before being transported east. On March 3, First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt christened the plane the *Yankee Clipper* with a bottle that had water from the seven seas.



This stamp was issued for the first China Clipper flights in 1935.

After several weeks of preparation, the first trans-Atlantic flight aboard the *Yankee Clipper* began on May 20, 1939, coinciding with the 12th anniversary of Charles Lindbergh's solo flight to Europe. The *Yankee Clipper* was loaded with 1,800 pounds of mail and took off from Manhasset Bay, Long Island around noon. The *Clipper* passed over the New York World's Fair – just 500 feet above fairgoers – before heading out to the Atlantic. The *Yankee Clipper* made stops in the Azores and Lisbon, Portugal, before arriving at Marseilles, France after 26-and-a-half hours.

A month later, the *Dixie Clipper* (also a Boeing 314) took the first passengers on the trans-Atlantic journey on June 28. Throughout the summer, the Boeing 314s made two weekly round trips between New York and London and Marseilles. Many of the trips east carried socialites and dressmakers, while the western trips carried fall designs from Paris fashion houses. These also included the first wave of immigrants to America to travel by air, including rich refugees from the Third Reich. Just days before the start of World War II, the *Yankee Clipper* was painted with US flags to show its neutrality.

During the war, passenger service aboard the Clippers slowed and they were eventually pressed into military service, bringing men and equipment to Europe and the Pacific. By war's end, the Clippers were obsolete and retired.



This stamp was issued four days earlier specifically for this flight.



First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt christened the Yankee Clipper in April 1939.

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