

## This Day in History... June 8, 1959

# First and Only Delivery of US Missile Mail



The U.S. Navy Submarine Force insignia is a pin featuring a pair of dolphins flanking a sub with its bow planes rigged for diving.

The pin is gold plated for officers, silver plated for enlisted personnel. Training prepares submariners not only for day-to-day responsibilities such as navigation and depth control, but also for the most extreme situations, from floods and fires to fighting the enemy. Only after the ability to handle these difficult scenarios has been confirmed can a candidate finally wear the coveted "dolphins."

*The first and only missile mail was launched from a US Navy submarine.*

On June 8, 1959, the US Post Office Department launched its experimental missile mail in an attempt to find a faster method of mail delivery.

The idea of using rockets or missiles to deliver the mail stretches back hundreds of years. The first person to suggest such a form of mail delivery was German author Heinrich von Kleist. In October 1810, he wrote an article in his newspaper, the *Berliner Abendblätter*, proposing that fixed artillery batteries be used to fire shells filled with letters. He believed that a letter could be sent from Berlin to Breslau, about 180 miles, in half a day.

The idea was actually put into practice decades later in Tonga, but found that it was unreliable. The first rocket mail was launched in April 1931 with 102 pieces of mail between Schöckl and St. Radegund, Austria. That flight was successful and several others were staged through 1932.

The rocket mail craze spread to several other countries and was usually supported by stamp collectors. In India, Stephen Smith, secretary of the Indian Airmail Society, began launching mail rockets in September 1934. In the course of a decade he launched over 270 rockets, 80 of which contained mail. He had a number of victories, including the first rocket mail sent over a river and the first to carry a parcel. His accomplishments were honored in 1992 with an India postage stamp.

America began experimenting with rocket mail as well. The first US rocket mail test occurred in February 1936. Two rockets were launched from New York and landed 100 yards away. This success led to further experiments.

Then in 1959 the US Post Office Department was ready to launch the first missile mail. Working with the US Navy, they established a postal branch on the USS *Barbero* submarine. They then fitted the submarine with a Regulus cruise missile, whose nuclear warhead was replaced by two mail containers. The 3,000 letters it contained were largely commemorative covers from US Postmaster General Arthur E. Summerfield addressed to President Dwight Eisenhower, government officials, members of the Universal Union, and more. Before the submarine was launched, each cover received a "U S S BARBERO JUN 8 9.30AM 1959" cancellation.

That day, June 8, 1959, the US Post Office Department launched this missile mail from the submarine to the Naval Auxiliary Air Station in Mayport, Florida. The missile reached a top speed of about 600 miles per hour, traveling to its destination 100 miles away in about 22 minutes.

After witnessing the missile's arrival at Mayport, Summerfield said that, "This peacetime employment of a guided missile for the important and practical purpose of carrying mail, is the first known official use of missiles by any Post Office Department of any nation." He said it was "of historic significance to the peoples of the entire world" and predicted that "before man reaches the moon, mail will be delivered within hours from New York to California, to Britain, to India or Australia by guided missiles. We stand on the threshold of rocket mail."

Despite Summerfield's excitement, few others saw missile mail as a practical means of delivery. The Department of Defense believed the experiment proved the accuracy of US missile capabilities. And many believed the cost of missile mail was too high to be practical.



*One of the stamps used on the US missile mail covers*

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