

This Day in History... November 7, 1921

Marines Ordered to Guard Mail

On November 7, 1921, President Warren G. Harding ordered 2,200 Marines to guard the mail in the wake of a series of daring mail robberies.

In the early 1900s, mail robbery was a common problem in the US. It was a profitable enterprise for thieves, as banks and other financial institutions often shipped large amounts of money and negotiable bonds by registered mail. Between 1919 and 1921 alone, robbers stole about \$6 million worth of mail.

Perhaps the worst robbery occurred in New York City when robbers stole five sacks of mail, carrying about \$2.4 million in cash and securities in a single heist. The situation was so dire that by early November 1921, the postmaster general wrote a letter to President Harding to request that the Marines come and guard the mail.

Harding agreed and on November 7, 1921 (the same day as another robbery occurred in Paxton, Illinois) wrote a letter to the US Navy secretary ordering him to assign as many Marines as necessary to guard the mail. He complied and within a few days, 2,200 Marines and 53 officers were scattered across the country to guard the mail. They generally worked in small detachments of two or three men.



This stamp was issued just one month after Harding's death in 1923.

The Marines had strict orders: "You must, when on guard duty, keep your weapons in hand and, if attacked, shoot and shoot to kill. There is no compromise in this battle with bandits. If two Marines guarding a mail car, for example, are suddenly covered by a robber, neither must hold up his hands, but both must begin shooting at once. One may be killed, but the other will get the robbers and save the mail. When our Marine Corps men go as guards over the mail, that mail must be delivered or there must be a dead Marine at the post of duty."

The Marines remained on duty until March 15, 1922. During that time, there wasn't a single attempted mail robbery. For about another year, there were no more major attempts. This was until robbers took \$2.4 million from a St. Louis mail messenger in April 1923. The robberies then began to increase in frequency once again, culminating in the murder of a mail truck driver in Elizabeth, New Jersey, on October 14, 1926.



Stamp from the Presidential Series

The postmaster general then requested President Calvin Coolidge send in the Marines again, which he did on October 20, 1926. Soon, 2,500 enlisted men and officers were again spread across the country to protect the mail. However, by this point the robbers had stronger firepower – automatic rifles and machine guns, so the Marines were armed with Thompson submachine guns.

There was only one known incident of an attempted mail robbery during this time, on October 26, though the Marine fired his gun scaring off the would-be thief. Much like the last time, the Marine presence brought an end to the rash of mail robberies. In February 1927, the Marines were replaced by a new security force of the Postal Service.



From the popular Transportation Series.



Issued for the 50th anniversary of the Marine Corps Reserve.

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