

## Yesterday's Wings

# The Start of Commercial Air Mail

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■ World War I brought the airplane to the point in its development where it could carry practical payloads with a reasonable degree of reliability. A rosy era of commercial aviation was predicted for the years immediately following the armistice.

In Europe, the prediction generally came true. While there was virtually no private aviation, a number of airlines appeared and flourished in that region of high-density population and short routes. In the United States, many individuals and corporations also started airlines. Whether they were well-financed and managed or merely shoestring operations, all failed within a few short months or years and all for the same reason.

The great American distances and the lack of suitable airports were only contributing factors—the main reason was that the lines couldn't profit by carrying passengers alone. The Post Office Department itself was carrying all the domestic airmail and held a tight monopoly on the routes, the airfields, and such airway aids as there were.

Such a state of affairs couldn't be



The prototype Swallow mailplane was essentially the 90-hp three-seater with slightly longer wings and a 160-hp Curtiss C-6 engine. After initial tests, the radiator was relocated from the center section to the belly, and a fuel tank was added to the center section. The use of straight-axle landing gear, after the divided-axle type on the 90-hp model, seems a step backward.



The water-cooled Curtiss engine was unsuitable for Varney's desert operation, and the fleet was grounded while new 200-hp Wright J-4, air-cooled, radial engines were installed. Pilot Franklin Rose, whose name appears on the side of No. 4, later became a fixed-base operator at Alameda, Calif.

### 1926 Swallow Mailplane

#### Specifications and Performance

Span (upper)	36 ft
Span (lower)	34 ft
Length	24 ft
Wing area	350 sq ft
Powerplant	Curtiss C-6, 160 hp
Empty weight	1,500 lb
Useful load	1,200 lb
Gross weight	2,700 lb
Range (full throttle)	5 hours

allowed to continue, and a number of government committees were appointed to formulate legislation and later regulations covering a workable and stable air transportation system. One result was to separate government and civil operations, including the transfer of the Post Office mail operations to private contractors. Generally known as the Kelly Act, after Rep. Clyde Kelly of Pennsylvania, the enabling legislation planned for the transfer to start on a small scale, with Contract Air Mail Routes (CAMs) feeding into the main New York-San Francisco route that the Post Office retained until mid-1927.

Several contractors were ready to go early in 1926. The first to carry mail was the Ford Motor Co. On Feb. 1, 1926, it merely added mail sacks to the cargo it was already carrying on its private airline routes from Chicago to Detroit, since April 1925 and from Detroit to Cleveland, since July 1925. These became CAM Routes 6 and 7, respectively. The second CAM operator, who will get most of the publicity on the 50th anniversary this April, was Varney Air Lines.

The Varney operation was unique in several ways. First, Walter T. Varney, a San Francisco flying school and charter operator, wanted to get into the airmail business when it opened up. Since location wasn't important, he bid low on a route that he figured no one else wanted—CAM-5 from Elko, Nev., to Pasco, Wash., via Boise, Idaho.

Varney's choice of equipment was also unique by the standards of the three other original operators. Pioneer Ford used Ford-Stout cabin monoplanes. The

number three operator, Robertson (St. Louis—Chicago, CAM-2, April 15), used the same de Havilland DH-4 biplanes that the Post Office had been using; and number four, Western Air Express (Los Angeles—Salt Lake City, CAM-4, April 17), operated Douglas M-2 biplanes also used by the Post Office. All the planes were powered by the wartime 400-hp Liberty engine and were too expensive to operate on Varney's low-volume route, where the pay was eight-cents per ounce carried.

Varney started with a fleet of six Swallow mailplanes that were adapted from the standard 90-hp Swallow three-seat sport trainer introduced in 1924 as one of the first significantly new post-war designs. In addition to converting the two-seat front cockpit into a mail compartment, The Swallow Airplane Manufacturing Co., of Wichita, Kan., increased the wing span by four feet and replaced the 90-hp Curtiss OX-5 engine with a later 160-hp Curtiss C-6.

Pilot Leon Cuddeback flew Varney's first trip from Elko to Pasco on April 6, 1926, and then completed the round trip. The second run was not as successful—the plane was forced down in the desert, and Varney suspended operations until June 6, while the inadequate water-cooled Curtiss engines were replaced with new 200-hp Wright J-4, air-cooled radials. This gave Varney a significant first in commercial aviation. Although several other lines quickly adopted air-cooled radials, his was the first to put the air-cooled radial to consistent civil use.

Varney expanded service to other routes and finally became a subsidiary of Boeing Air Transport, later to become United Air Lines, on June 30, 1930. Although the names have changed, the corporate continuity can be traced back to that April 6th flight that establishes the present United Air Lines as the oldest continuously operating airline in the United States. □