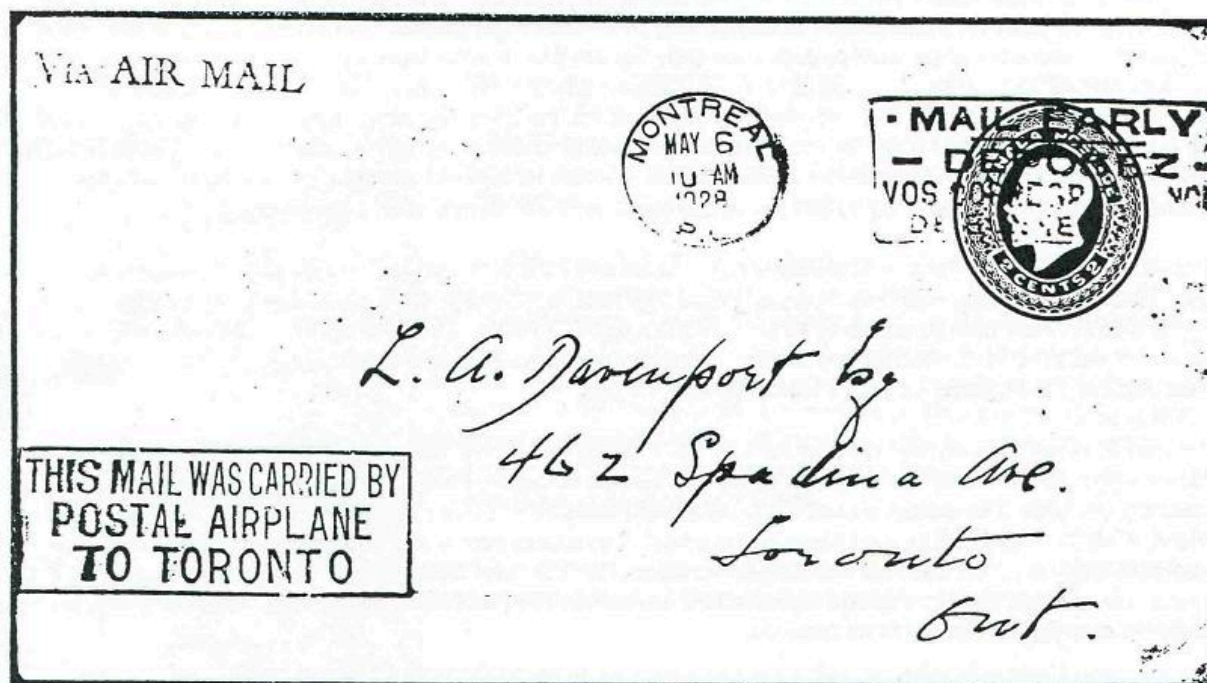


THE FIRST OFFICIAL CANADIAN AIRMAIL DESIGNATION - 1928

Murray Heifetz



Since the first regular airmail service began in 1918, various methods were used to designate this mode for transmission of the mail. The vast majority of these were private, although U.P.U. agreements in 1924 and 1928 established some uniform concepts. Hence we find use of etiquettes; the words "Via Airmail" or "Par Avion" either typed, written, or handstamped; blue and red lozenges or stripes on envelopes, and specific stamp issues valid only for airmail service.

The Canadian postal service had no need to create specific rules until late 1927 since, until that period, it had no contracts for carriage of mail by air. From 1927 to mid 1928 it authorized a series of experimental flights to demonstrate the feasibility of mail transmission by air, culminating with the introduction of the 5c airmail rate in August and the issuance of the first airmail stamp in September.

On May 5, 1928, the Toronto Postmaster's office issued a letter advising of the inauguration of an airmail service between Toronto and Montreal with a connection link to Rimouski. The initial frequency was to be twice weekly in each direction. On each eastward trip there was to be a close connection at Rimouski with an outgoing mail-carrying transatlantic liner. The airmail service would initially carry only first class and special delivery mail.

On the same date, a letter was issued from the Ottawa Postmaster's office advising of the inauguration of once weekly service between Ottawa and Montreal. From Montreal there was a similar letter in French. However this letter was dated May 2, and made no mention of connection with Rimouski or frequency of service and merely noted the potential interest and importance of the first flight cover in which it was enclosed.

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THE FIRST OFFICIAL CANADIAN AIRMAIL DESIGNATION - 1928 by Murray Heifetz - continued:

According to these Postmaster letters, the May 5 departure from Toronto was to connect with the Empress of Scotland sailing from Rimouski. The May 12 flight was to connect with the Laurentic. However, the Toronto Star, on May 5, reported that mail from Toronto to Rimouski May 5 "destined for the steamer Regina"..... The Empress of Scotland was due to dock on May 5 coming westbound, and mail from this ship was to be carried on the return flight from Rimouski via Montreal to Toronto on May 5. However, the Empress was delayed by fog in the Gulf of St. Lawrence and was not expected to dock until early Sunday May 6. Mail from this ship was picked up and flown to Montreal and Toronto but, being Sunday, the Postmaster advised that there would be no delivery until Monday May 7 except for special delivery mail which, on phone advice from the Post office, could be picked up. Mail and parcels for the May 5 flight from Toronto to Rimouski could be delivered to the Adelaide St. post office up to 10.40 a.m. and at Union Station up to 11.00 a.m.. From there it would be stamped, checked, put into bags, and then trucked to Leaside aerodrome. Up to 800 lbs. of combined mail and parcels could be accepted.

The air mileage from Toronto to Montreal was 310 miles and from Montreal to Rimouski 350 miles. The flying time Toronto to Montreal was 3-1/2 hours and from Montreal to Rimouski 4-1/2 hours. The previous time required by rail was 21 hours from Rimouski to Montreal - a saving of 13 hours. The first flight from Toronto to Montreal on May 5 was by J. H. St. Martin of Canadian Transcontinental Airways in a Fairchild aircraft. The first flight from Rimouski to Montreal on May 6 was by Romeo Vachon.

Presumably in anticipation of these new services, the Post Office ordered cachets to indicate the carriage by air. This study of the cachets or markings has revealed a number of curious things for which no explanation is presently available. The cachets all had the same general wording - "THIS MAIL WAS CARRIED BY POSTAL AIRPLANE TO MONTREAL (or Ottawa or Toronto)". The strikes were proofed in Ottawa in April 1928. As will be subsequently detailed, there are two distinct varieties of strikes - one with a "wide" vertical spacing and one with a narrower spacing. The proof strikes reproduced in the Robert Lee publication are only the wide spacing yet the narrower spacing is by far the more common.

The question of how, when, and by whom these strikes were applied is also uncertain.. It is assumed that the Post Office issued specifications as to size which local postmasters in the three cities could then have reproduced.

Because of variation in the size of the markings, this seems to fit better than the idea of the markings all having been made by one source in Ottawa and then distributed. There is a question of how the markings were applied. In most cases, the strike would indicate a hand held device. The letters are probably made of metal as there is very little variation in the lettering of the kind expected if they were a rubber stamp. The rectangular border is a little more difficult to judge. Here, one finds slurred strikes of the type that would result from uneven pressure on a hand held rubber stamp. However, even the assumption of a hand held device is uncertain. Covers are known with a strike in the left portion of the envelope and a piece of the same strike overlapping the right side of the envelope as though the strike were applied by a roller or machine with fixed spacing between strikes. Beyond the question of where and how, there is also a question of 'when'. Many covers are known carried on these services, including the first flights, which did not receive the marking. There are several possibilities. The marking could have been randomly applied. It is possible that the covers were bundled and only the top of the bundle received the marking. These are however only speculations. This writer has not yet found any clue as to when it was applied.

To date, three distinct types of markings have been identified:

- Type I - The "Narrow" spacing, best described by the rectangular width - 20 mm.
- Type II - The "Wide" spacing, described by the rectangular width - 23 mm., with period after the city name.
- Type III - The "Wide" spacing with no period after the city name. This type has so far been found only on the Montreal marking. The length of the enclosed lines in type II for Montreal is greater than in type III and is in excess of the size shown on the proofed markings.

In addition to variation in types, there is variation in colours of ink used. In the vast majority of cases, the strike is in black or a grayish black. Colour variations are very rare but are known in violet, blue, and a blue-gray. One cover is known with a double strike on the front. There are several with a strike on both front and back. The length of the three lines within the rectangle are the same for both the wide and narrow spacing types except for Toronto, where the bottom line in the narrow spacing is 2-3 mm longer than in the wide spacing.

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THE FIRST OFFICIAL CANADIAN AIRMAIL DESIGNATION - 1928 by Murray Heifetz - continued:

The time saving in this Rimouski route did not apply only to mail from incoming transatlantic ships. The "Maritime Express", operated by CNR from Halifax is known to have been routed such that mail from Halifax and other maritime cities on its route were offloaded at Rimouski and put on the flight to Montreal and Toronto, thus saving about 13 hours in mail delivery from the Maritimes. Covers are known posted at Halifax 9.30 a.m. May 7 and Moncton 9.00 pm May 14 that were delivered using this route.

The complete range of dates during which the marking was used has not yet been established. My earliest 1928 dates are from the UK westward dated from Perth, Scotland April 26th (via Montreal). My earliest eastward cover is from Toronto dated May 4 (flown May 5). My latest date is Oct. 11, 1928 from New York (to Montreal). In 1929 my westbound covers are April 24 from London and June 5, posted at sea, - both to Toronto. I also have one cover from Rimouski to Montreal May 9 without the cachet.

As in many other aspects of this marking, one can only speculate about its ending. Lack of usage between October 1928 and April 1929 can be associated with cessation of ocean traffic up the St. Lawrence. On October 1, 1928 regular scheduled service on contract mail started between Toronto and Montreal and on Jan. 28, 1929 between Montreal, Ottawa, and the Maritimes. Hence there was little purpose in specifically distinguishing the 3 routes for which the cachet had been used. Also, in April, May, and October 1928 a new marking had been proofed - a smaller rectangular box enclosing the words "AIR MAIL" without any city reference. This was the marking that was used from 1929 well into the modern period to designate carriage of mail by air and evidently replaced the earlier cachet. It is likely that the continued usage in 1929 applied only on westbound mail offloaded from incoming ships at Rimouski and continuing by flight to Montreal or Toronto.

The basic marking is shown below. Various key dimensions are noted as a means of distinguishing between the various types. Dimension "K" is the important one to separate the wide and narrow spacing types.

In summary, based on the covers in the collections of the writer and a few friends, there is presently known 3 major types distinguished by size, 3 and possibly 4 colours of ink used for the marking, application by hand stamp and possibly by machine or roller, and with an earliest date of posting April 26, 1928 and latest date June 5, 1929. If there are any known covers which will expand the range in any of the above categories, or add anything new to the present knowledge, please send this to Murray Heifetz, 40 Fairhill Cres., Don Mills, Ont. M3C 2B5 or send it for publication in a future issue of the CAS Bulletin to Chris Hargreaves.

