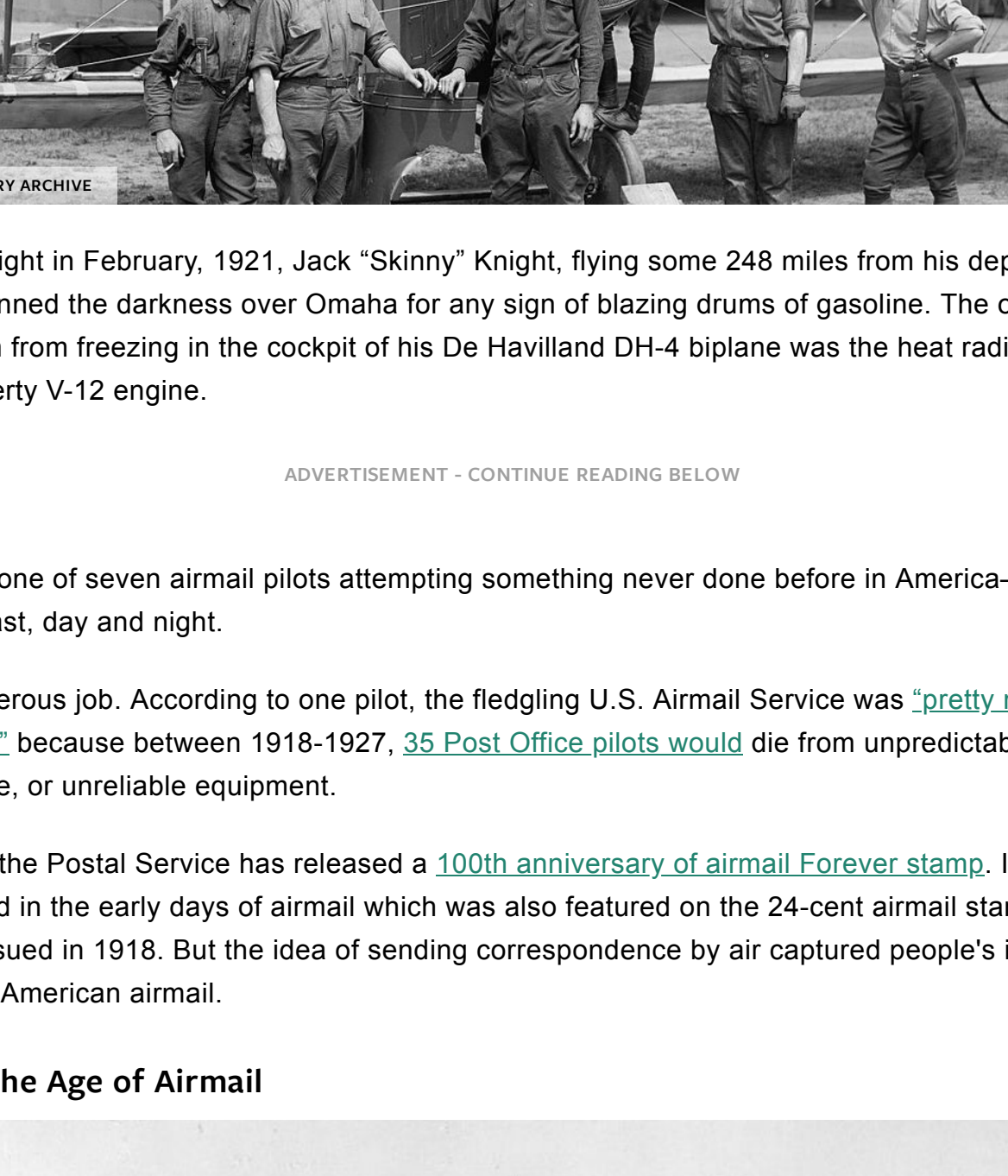


'A Suicide Club': How WWI Pilots Pioneered the Age of Airmail

On May 15, 1918, the U.S. Post Office officially launched the age of airmail.

By Eric Tegeler May 9, 2018

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UNIVERSAL HISTORY ARCHIVE

One frigid night in February, 1921, Jack "Skinny" Knight, flying some 248 miles from his departure airstrip, scanned the darkness over Omaha for any sign of blazing droplets of gasoline. The only thing keeping him from freezing in the cockpit of his De Havilland DH-4 biplane was the heat radiating back from its Liberty V-12 engine.

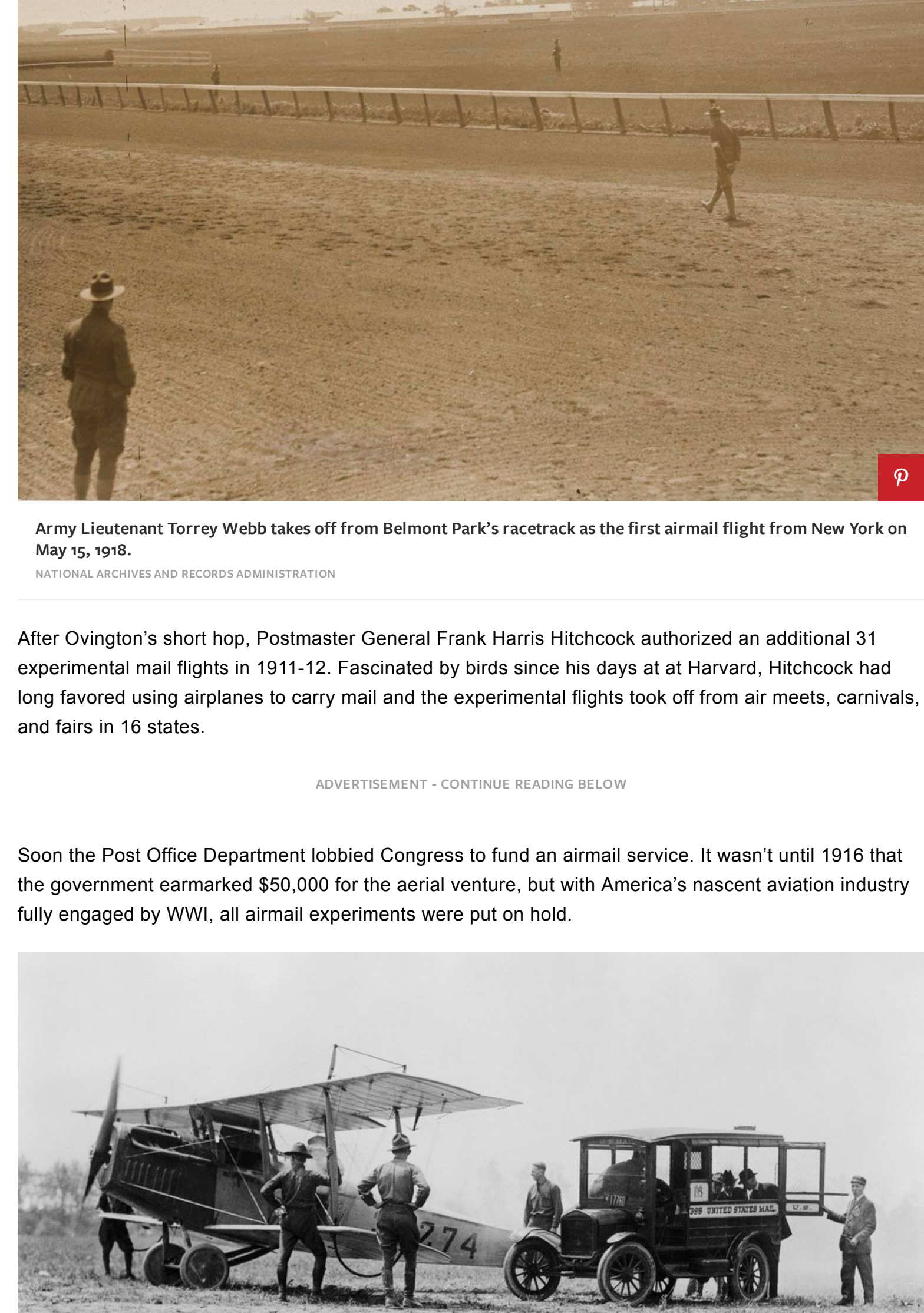
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Knight was one of seven airmail pilots attempting something never done before in America—flying mail coast to coast, day and night.

It was dangerous job. According to one pilot, the fledgling U.S. Airmail Service was "pretty much a suicide club," because between 1918-1927, 35 Post Office pilots would die from unpredictable weather, inexperience, or unreliable equipment.

This month the Postal Service has released a 100th anniversary of airmail Forever stamp. It depicts a biplane used in the early days of airmail which was also featured on the 24-cent airmail stamps originally issued in 1918. But the idea of sending correspondence by air captured people's imagination long before American airmail.

Entering the Age of Airmail



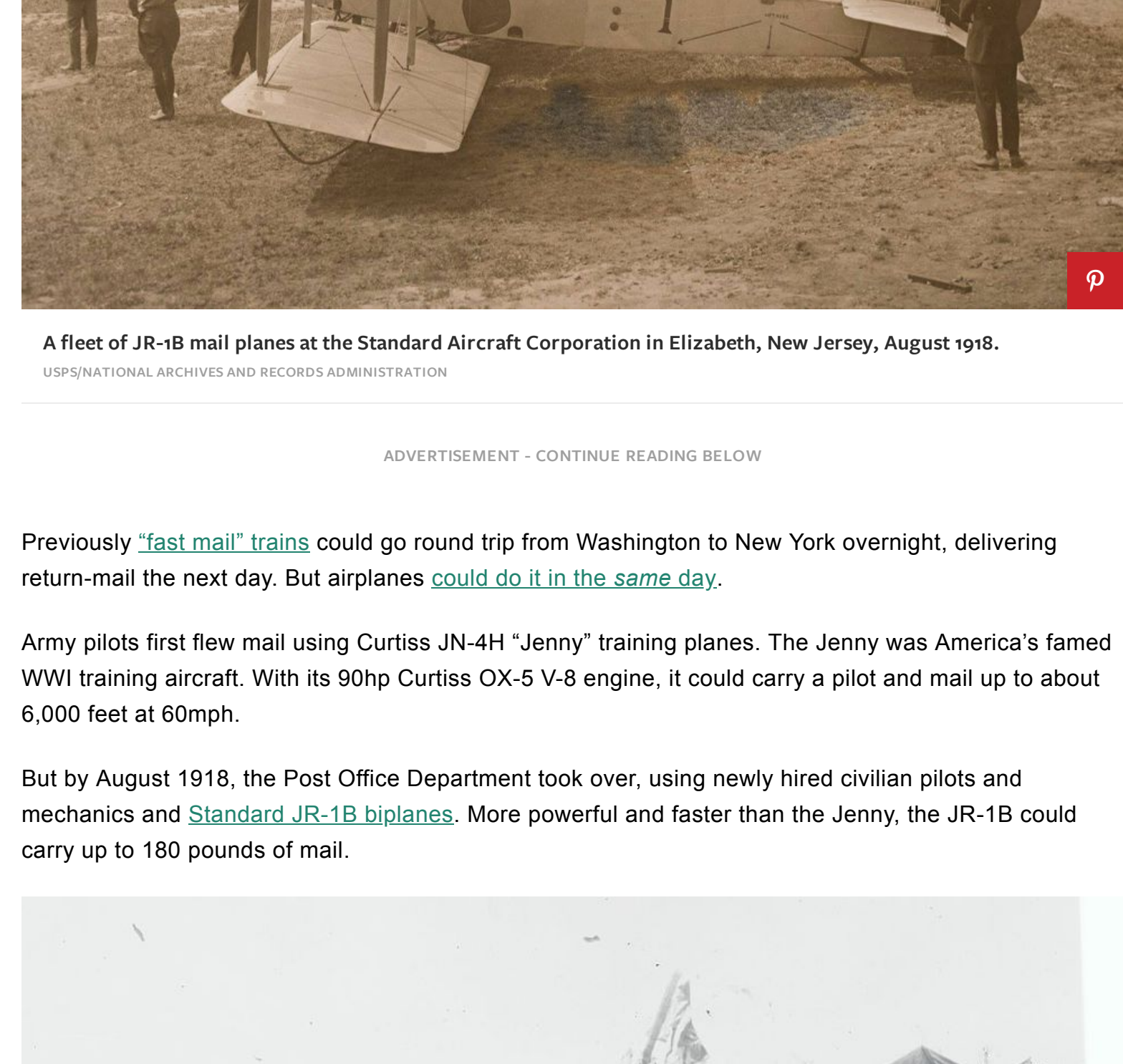
U.S. Postmaster General Frank Hitchcock hands the first mail bag to Earle Ovington at Sheepshead Bay, New York, 1911. GETTY IMAGES / PHOTOQUEST

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You can trace the concept of airmail from the homing pigeons of antiquity to the hot air balloons of western Europe in the 18th Century. But when the Wright Brothers flew at Kittyhawk in 1903, the airplane quickly became the principal tool in the new age of air travel.

It wouldn't be until the later half of The Pioneer Era of aviation, that the first official airmail flight took off in British India in 1911. There, a 1910 Humber-Sommer biplane with a 50hp rotary engine carried 6,500 letters about 8.1 miles.

Seven months later, pilot Earle Ovington and his Bleriot XI Monoplane made the first U.S. airmail delivery, flying 1,800 letters and postcards 5.5 miles from Garden City, New York to Mineola, New York.

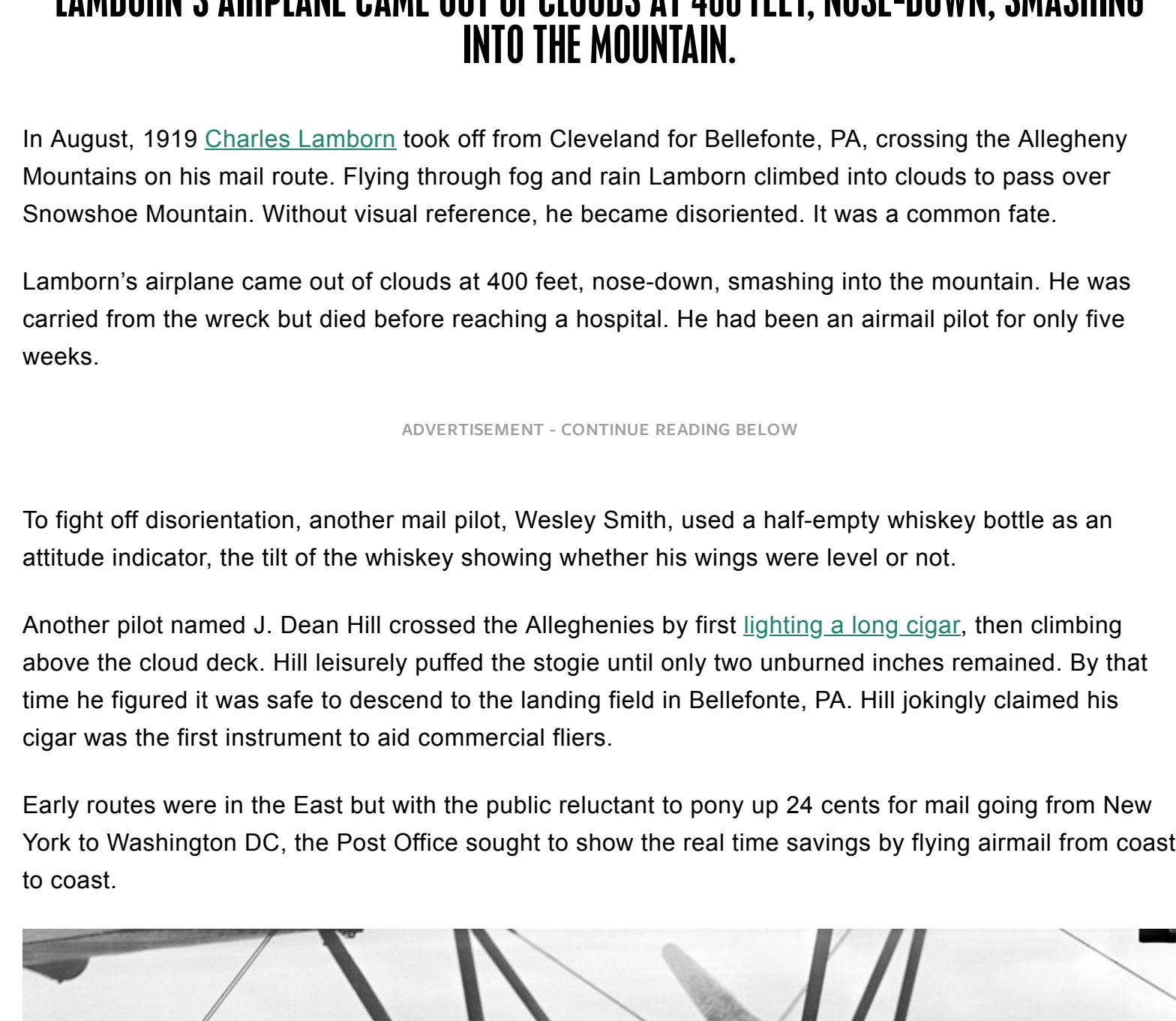


Army Lieutenant Torrey Webb takes off from Belmont Park's racetrack as the first airmail flight from New York on May 15, 1918. NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION

After Ovington's short hop, Postmaster General Frank Harris Hitchcock authorized an additional 31 experimental mail flights in 1911-12. Fascinated by birds since his days at Harvard, Hitchcock had long favored using airplanes to carry mail and the experimental flights took off from air meets, carnivals, and fairs in 16 states.

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Soon the Post Office Department lobbied Congress to fund an airmail service. It wasn't until 1916 that the government earmarked \$50,000 for the aerial venture, but with America's nascent aviation industry fully engaged by WWI, all airmail experiments were put on hold.



Transferring mail bags in Philadelphia, PA, to an airplane bound for New York, May 1918. GETTY IMAGES / BETTMANN

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With the defeat of the Central Powers in 1918 came an additional \$100,000 to establish experimental airmail routes. This time the U.S. Army Signal Corps would lend its pilots and planes to help launch airmail service. It was a win-win for the Army since flying mail cross-country would provide valuable experience to Army student aviators.

With the Army onboard, scheduled airmail service between New York and Washington, D.C., began on May 15, 1918. Army airplanes took off simultaneously from Washington's Polo Grounds and from Belmont Park, Long Island, each stopping in Philadelphia en route to their destination.

Delivery and Death



A fleet of JR-1B mail planes at the Standard Aircraft Corporation in Elizabeth, New Jersey, August 1918. US NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION

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Previously "fast mail" trains could go round trip from Washington to New York overnight, delivering return-mail the next day. But airplanes could do it in the same day.

Army pilots first flew mail using Curtiss JN-4H "Jenny" training planes. The Jenny was America's famed WWI training aircraft. With its 90hp Curtiss OX-5 V-8 engine, it could carry a pilot and mail up to about 6,000 feet at 60mph.

But by August 1918, the Post Office Department took over, using newly hired civilian pilots and mechanics and Standard JR-1B biplanes. More powerful and faster than the Jenny, the JR-1B could carry up to 180 pounds of mail.



The wreckage of an airmail plane flown by Charles Lindbergh in the late 1920s. GETTY IMAGES / BETTMANN

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JR-1Bs and other mail planes had few instruments, no radios, or other navigational aids. Pilots navigated by dead-reckoning, using landmarks, rail lines, roads, and even telephone lines as their guide. But obstructive clouds and fog along with ice forming on wings could potentially stall an airplane, killing pilots in the process.

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Many of these early airmail pilots were WWI aviators. Although few actually saw combat, flying mail could sometimes be just as deadly.

LAMBORN'S AIRPLANE CAME OUT OF CLOUDS AT 400 FEET, NOSE-DOWN, SMASHING INTO THE MOUNTAIN.

In August, 1919 Charles Lamborn took off from Cleveland for Bellefonte, PA, crossing the Allegheny Mountains on his mail route. Flying through fog and rain Lamborn climbed into clouds to pass over Snowshoe Mountain. Without visual reference, he became disoriented. It was a common fate.

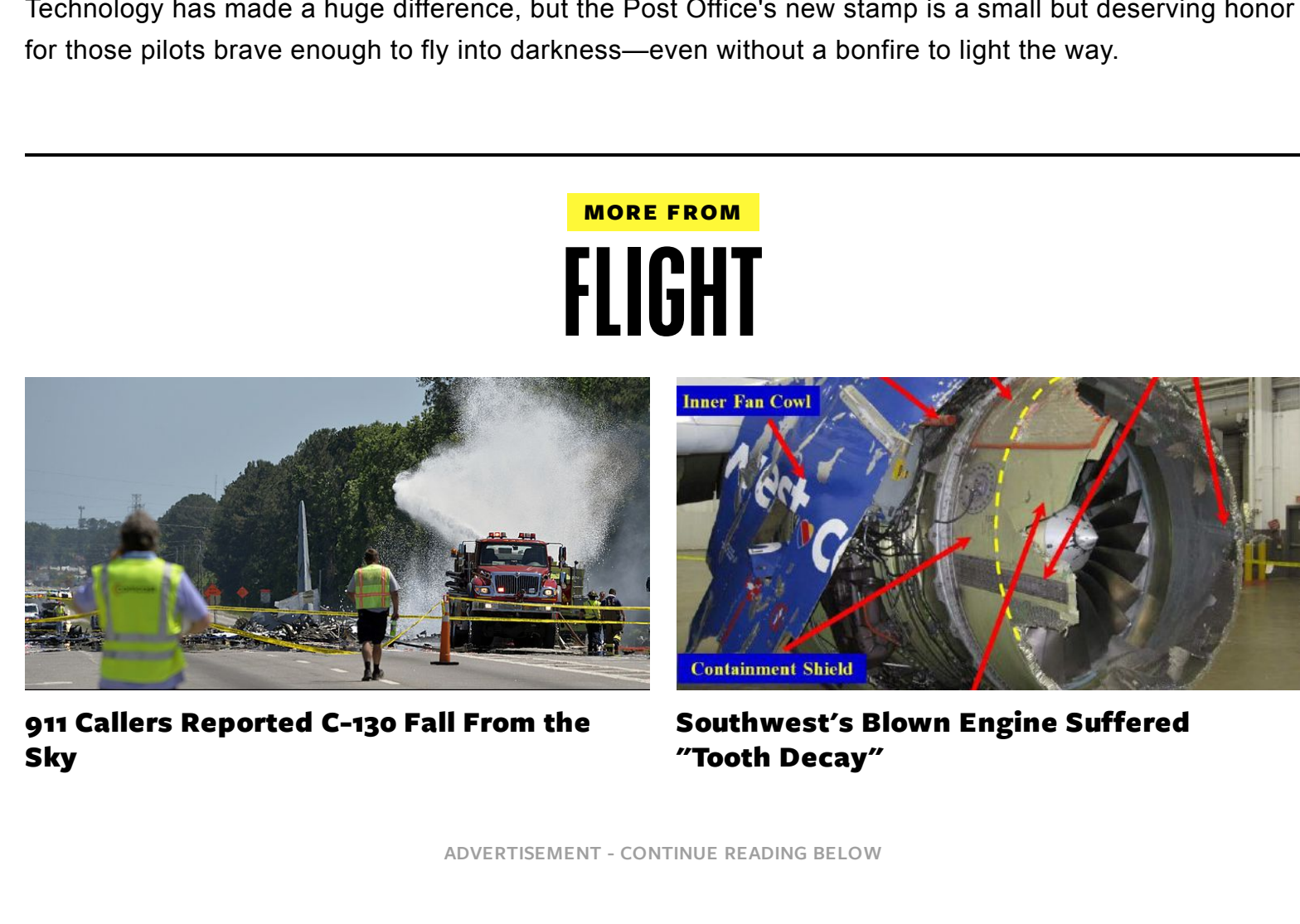
Lamborn's airplane came out of clouds at 400 feet, nose-down, smashing into the mountain. He was carried from the wreck but died before reaching a hospital. He had been an airmail pilot for only five weeks.

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To fight off disorientation, another mail pilot, Wesley Smith, used a half-empty whiskey bottle as an altitude indicator, the tilt of the whiskey showing whether his wings were level or not.

Another pilot named J. Dean Hill crossed the Alleghenies by first lighting a long cigar, then climbing above the cloud deck. Hill leisurely puffed the stogie until only two unburned inches remained. By that time he figured it was safe to descend to the landing field in Bellefonte, PA. Hill jokingly claimed his cigar was the first instrument to aid commercial fliers.

Early routes were in the East but with the public reluctant to pony up 24 cents for mail going from New York to Washington DC, the Post Office sought to show the real time savings by flying airmail from coast to coast.



Pilot standing next to the Cleveland-Pittsburgh air mail airplane. GETTY IMAGES / BUYENLARGE

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Flight legs were established from New York to Cleveland, Cleveland to Chicago, Chicago to Omaha, and so on to San Francisco. By 1920, the Department had installed radio stations at ten airfields along the route to provide pilots with weather information. Mail was flown during the day and placed on trains at night. The combination cut transcontinental mail delivery from 90 hours by train to 72 hours.

But if mail could be flown continuously, day and night, the time could theoretically be cut in half or more compared to rail. And as snow fell in Omaha, Jack Knight was dead-set on making it happen.

Jack Knight as a pilot for United Air Lines, 1921. GETTY IMAGES / BETTMANN

No Bonfires, Just Mail

It was now 1:10 a.m. and Knight was low on fuel. Through the overcast, he spotted signal fires and descended, landing on the Post Office's primitive grass strip at Omaha.

Climbing out of the biplane, Knight shivered, asking the field manager, "who's going to take her on from here?"

"Nobody," came the reply. The pilot for the next stage to Chicago was weathered-in.

"I CAN MAKE IT IF THEY KEEP ON LIGHTING BONFIRES."

Jack Knight's nose hurt. He had broken it in a rough landing the week before. He was fresh from the hospital when he took over for the stage from North Platte, Nebraska, to Omaha.

"It's too damn bad to get halfway across the continent and have the flight fizzle out," he said. "I'm going to take this mail to Chicago."

Knight had never flown the Omaha-Chicago leg, even in daylight, the field manager protested.

Jack Knight after his flight from Salt Lake City to Chicago, 1921. GETTY IMAGES / BETTMANN

"I know," he sighed. "But I can make it if they keep on lighting bonfires."

At 2 a.m. Knight took off on a compass course for Des Moines, Iowa. He had a flashlight and a Rand-McNally road map on his lap. There were no signal fires. Postal officials assumed the flight was off.

Knight fought a strong crosswind and increasing cloud cover. On reserve fuel, he saw the lights of Des Moines but there was too much snow for a safe landing. He continued on to Iowa City.

The landing field there was dark. With minutes of gas left, he buzzed the town, revving his engine. A small red flare lit up and Knight landed beside it. With the man who'd lit the flare, he found a drum of gas and refueled the DH-4. Minutes later he took off into darkness again, his nose pointed toward Chicago.

He made it.

Two more pilots flew the remaining legs to Hazelhurst Field on Long Island. The letters which left San Francisco were in New York in 33 hours and 20 minutes. By that time, Knight was the toast of Chicago, hailed in newspapers nationwide.

An Aerial Revolution

RICHARD CUMMINGS

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Congress set aside \$1.25 million to expand the airmail service. Just four years later, in 1925, the government decided to contract for airmail service to spur commercial aviation.

The Post Office disbanded its own flight department and by 1927 private airmail carriers delivered all airmail. One of these carriers, the Robertson Aircraft Corporation of St. Louis, hired a young former Army pilot to fly the route between St. Louis and Chicago. His name was Charles Lindbergh.

THE HISTORY OF AVIATION

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By 1931, the airlines derived 85 percent of their domestic revenue from airmail, but airmail as a separate class of domestic mail officially ended on May 1, 1977. Transportation patterns had changed, and most first class letters were carried cross-country by air anyway.

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Flying the post remains vital to commercial air carriers who transport eight million pounds each week. With modern aircraft, satellite navigation and communication, the mail basically always gets through, faster than ever.

Technology has made a huge difference, but the Post Office's new stamp is a small but deserving honor for those pilots brave enough to fly into darkness—even without a bonfire to light the way.

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