Only 15 years after the first powered flight by the Wright Brothers at Kitty Hawk, our magnificent system of air transportation was inaugurated on May 15, 1918, 60 years ago today.

Its beginning paralleled the finest traditions of American pioneering: great risks, matchless resourcefulness, personal sacrifices, total dedication, and success. It was known as the United States Aerial Mail Service.

The service began as a cooperative venture between the United States Post Office Department and the War Department. The airplanes were primitive, single engined, World War I open cockpit, wood and fabric biplanes, the Curtiss JN6H, powered with a 150 HP Hispano engine. They were flown by military pilots being trained for the war. The route was between the New York terminus, Belmont Park Race Track, and the Washington terminus, the Polo Grounds in Potomac Park. Fitted with extra tanks the airplanes had a range of about 175 miles with a cruising speed of 66 miles per hour. This range required a stop at Bustleton Field, Philadelphia, to transfer the mail to a waiting refueled airplane.

Because of White House pressure to start on May 15, mechanics worked day and night to get the airplanes ready and the extra tanks fitted. One gas tank had a hole in it the size of a lead pencil. There was no time to repair it so the hole was plugged with an ordinary bottle cork.
The service was organized for the Post Office Department by Major Reuben H. Fleet of the U.S. Army Air Service, later to become the head of the great Consolidated Aircraft Company. The first flight from Washington with four sacks of mail was witnessed by President and Mrs. Woodrow Wilson, the Postmaster General A.S. Burleson, the Second Assistant Postmaster General Otto Praeger who was largely responsible for the experiment and its subsequent success, and by coincidence, the Japanese Postmaster, M. K. Kambara.

Major Fleet suffered considerable embarrassment when he discovered that the fuel he had ordered for the flight had not been delivered to the Polo Grounds as scheduled. Fuel was taken from another airplane. Compelled by political pressure to permit a student pilot to take the first flight, he was again embarrassed when the pilot lost his way only 25 miles from Washington, went over on his back breaking his propeller. The mail was brought back to Washington to be sent off the next day.

The flight from Belmont Park Race Track in New York took off with 4,000 letters. These were transferred at Bustleton Field to the Washington flight, arriving at the Polo Grounds three hours and twenty minutes after leaving New York.

Despite initial problems and mishaps, the air mail soon was flown with railroad regularity. By midsummer the air mail service was well established. On August 12, the Post Office Department assumed full control, furnishing its own equipment and personnel. The Curtiss JN and similar airplanes were replaced by the British designed De Havilland DH-4 biplane powered with the American designed Liberty Engine of 400 HP. The DH-4 required some 600 alterations to satisfy the rigorous
demands of scheduled air mail service. Capable of carrying 500 pounds of mail with a range of 350 miles and a cruising speed of about 114 mph, it became the reliable, durable workhorse of the U.S. Air Mail Service. This is an elegant model of it. A reconstructed DeH-4 is on loan by the NASM to the Bradley Air Museum in Hartford. With them the Post Office Department gradually extended the air mail service to San Francisco, a distance of 2643 miles. All together the service operated 3455 miles with 23 landing fields. The time between New York and San Francisco was 36 hours. The running time for trains was 5 full days.

The dedicated ground crews of the U.S. Air Mail Service worked far beyond the call of duty in great extremes of weather. The pilots had a life expectancy of about 4 years. One in every six was killed flying without airborne radio communication or the instruments and navigational systems considered essential today. The first night routes were marked by bon fires!

After a sacrifice of 43 lives in 200 crashes from May 15, 1918 to August 31, 1927, the Post Office Department, having proved the practicability of scheduled air transportation over long distances, relinquished the service to civil aviation. In the last year of operation the Douglas M-2 Liberty powered biplane with a fabric covered steel tubular fuselage replaced the DeH-4.

Then the great transcontinental service was inherited by Boeing Air Transport, a predecessor of United Air Lines, now the largest airline in the United States.

The slogan of the Post Office Department had been satisfied to the ultimate: "Neither snow nor rain nor heat nor gloom of night stops
the couriers from the swift completion of their appointed rounds."

As President of and on behalf of the Air Mail Pioneers I wish to thank the National Air and Space Museum for recognizing this significant anniversary and for the commemorative anniversary cachet.

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