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'You've got airmail'



Commemorative flight marking 100th anniversary of U.S. Air Mail makes stops in Cottage Grove and Creswell

COURTESY PHOTOS

Ron Englund, current owner of the original Fleet 2 biplane once flown by U.S. Air Mail pilot Clyde Blakely, holds the 50th Anniversary Air Mail cover that was flown in the Fleet 2 during the 50th anniversary back in 1968.

The inaugural flight of the U.S. Airmail service took place in the foggy, early morning hours on May 15, 1918, officially establishing airmail service between Washington, D.C., and New York, N.Y., by using Army aircraft and pilots. In those earlier years, the Postal Service had just begun using new transportation systems like railroads and steamboats, contracting directly with owners of the lines to carry the mail. However, at the advent of airmail, commercial airlines had yet to be established — leaving no existing airlines or routes to contract with.



Ron Englund delivers more than 400 covers to Tammy Berry in Cottage Grove on May 16, as part of the 100th anniversary of the U.S. Airmail service.

As a result, Army Major Reuben H. Fleet was tasked with establishing the first U.S. Airmail route, linking airmail service between Washington, D.C., Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and New York City. The army pilots chosen to make that inaugural flight included lieutenants Howard Culver, Torrey Webb, Walter Miller and Stephen Bonsal — all handpicked by Major Fleet — along with lieutenants James Edgerton and George Boyle, who were chosen by U.S. Postal Service officials.

Some 50 years later, a 1929 Fleet 2 biplane hangared at Walker Airfield — at the time then the oldest registered aircraft in the state of Oregon — was chosen to fly a commemorative airmail route on May 16, 1968, from Creswell to Eugene to celebrate 50 years of U.S. Airmail.

Clyde Blakely was the owner and pilot on that route, carrying several hundred commemorative covers. So it was only fitting that this past May 15, which commemorated 100 years of airmail service, Blakely's Fleet 2 biplane, though no longer the oldest aircraft in Oregon, once again take to the skies as part of the celebration — this time with current owner Ron Englund piloting the historic run.

still available for purchase at OAHs for \$5, can be mailed directly between now and early June.

The following day, on May 17, the commemorative light of the Stearman Junior Speedmail, CAM 8 also made their way through the Eugene Airport, joining in the celebration of the historic occasion.

The Junior Speedmails flew the contract airmail routes from the late 1920s up until WWII.

The Cam 8 planes were specially designed open cockpit biplanes with more than 450 horsepower and the capability to carry several hundred pounds of mail over several hundred miles at a time.

The CAM 8 commemorative tour was flown by three Stearman Speedmails, which began at Gillespie Field in San Diego, Calif., on May 12, making all of the historic CAM 8 route stops, including Eugene, before ending at Paine Field in Seattle, Wash., on Friday, May 18.

For more information about the flight or commemorative covers, contact the office for more information: info@oregonaviation.org.

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