

Air Pick-Up
by James O'Donnell

Volume 9, Issue 1, January–March 2000

On April 12, 1939, a bright red Stinson Reliant plane swooped down out of the sky in Latrobe, Pennsylvania snatching a container of mail suspended on a rope between two poles. This event kicked off a unique chapter in airmail history. At that time, airmail service was restricted almost exclusively to metropolitan centers, out of reach of the majority of the country's population.

But Dr. Lytle Adams, a dentist and part-time inventor, believed that airmail service could be expanded to rural areas. Adams had become intrigued with the potential of the burgeoning field of aviation. Adams, with the assistance of Boeing engineers, developed a pick-up apparatus in 1928. Dr. Adams quit his dentistry practice to travel the country promoting this innovative new system. Because he envisioned bringing the pick-up system to all of North and South America, he named one of his speculative companies All American Aviation (AAA), and the system was to be known as Air Pick Up.

By 1938, Adams had depleted his own fortune promoting his scheme. Fortunately, he met Richard du Pont, a wealthy young aviation enthusiast, who purchased a controlling interest in AAA. Excited about future prospects, the men began purchasing planes and hiring pilots and staff to make the company operational.

Although the Post Office Department was indifferent to Adams & du Pont's plans, Congress, led by Jennings Randolph of West Virginia, was supportive of the plan. Randolph's constituents were among the first to be served by Air Pick Up. As a result of his support the service was authorized by Congress as an experiment. President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed the bill into law on April 30, 1938 and the first scheduled Air Pick Up service began on May 12, 1939 flying two experimental routes. The first route went from Pittsburgh to Philadelphia. The other went from Pittsburgh to Huntington, West Virginia.

The planes chosen for the service were rugged Stinson Reliants, a tight-turning airplane superbly adapted to flying around hills and through valleys. For the next ten years a fleet of these planes provided Air Pick Up to locations in the northeast United States that could not be served by regular airmail service. Adams and du Pont modeled the pick-up technique on the Railway Mail Service's Mail-on-the-Fly service. The Stinson, painted bright red for easy identification, had a long take up boom with a hook and a winch that operated through an opening in the fuselage. Traveling between towns at 110 miles per hour, the Stinsons collected and delivered mail and express packages at each community without landing.

A pick-up flight started in the morning at the main airport where mail and express accumulated from all over the country were loaded for route stations. These stations received their airmail and express by Air Pick Up the same day it reached the terminal city. At each route point, a messenger collected cargo at the local express agency, mail from the Post Office and drove to the station site where he rigged a portable station for the pick-up. The station consisted of two poles some fourteen feet high and twenty feet apart a container of mail was attached to a rope stretched between the poles. An experienced messenger could set up the station in about two minutes. The messenger monitored flight status on a company radio.

The Stinson flew in and swooped down over the station, first dropping the incoming mail in a cargo container, then flying twenty feet off the ground and lowering its boom between the poles so that the hook engaged the rope. This was connected with the winch, which paid out rope to absorb the shock and then reeled it into the plane. In a few seconds, the plane was out of sight headed for another pick-up. Inside the plane the flight mechanic opened the container and took out several labeled mailbags which he transferred to the appropriate bins.

Since many of these communities did not have airports, the pick-up station was set up on golf courses, pastures or even cemeteries on the edge of town.

Most stations were located in the Allegheny mountains, which had gained a reputation as the graveyard of aviation during the early days of airmail service thanks to inhospitable terrain and weather.

In the first year of service, All American Aviation flew over 438,000 miles, making over 23,000 pickups and handling 75,000 pounds of mail and 6,500 pounds of freight without a single casualty. With the reliability of the system proved, AAA received a certificate of convenience and necessity to engage in air transportation with respect to property and mail. It was called Air Mail 49.

As the second year of operation began, the AAA Stinsons flew four flights daily on five different routes radiating from Pittsburgh to towns and villages in six states—Pennsylvania, New York, West Virginia, Ohio, Kentucky and Delaware.

After America entered World War II in 1941, military enlistment and letter writing soared. All American's pick-up service grew as the volume of airmail flowing to men in distant theaters of war increased. The fleet of Stinsons was expanded to eleven planes, and the workforce grew to hundreds of employees. However, even during World War II, when it carried its largest volume of airmail, AAA's air transport division did not break even. In fact, any profit the company made was the result of military contracts placed with the engineering division. The company argued unsuccessfully for a higher reimbursement rate from the Post Office Department.

After the war, the volume of airmail carried by pick-up decreased dramatically. To make up for those lost funds, AAA requested for additional route miles, but were denied. For one thing, postal officials argued that if pick-up was losing money on its present routes, why expand it? Another explanation was the growing success of the Highway Post Office Service, which began in 1941. Highway Post Office Service, using clerks on moving buses to sort and carry mail between small towns, proved to be a more efficient way of improving mail service to the areas served by air pick-up.

AAA had planned to expand pick-up service to multi-engine passenger planes

to carry passengers and provide pick-up service to other places. But fatal crashes in 1944 and 1945 helped end both public and Congressional support for such an expansion. The Civil Aeronautics Board denied AAA the permission to expand into the mixed passenger and pick-up service.

In 1948, the company was awarded a temporary certificate to carry passengers only if the air mail pick-up lines were terminated. It was the end for America's last mail-only aviation company and this unique service was discontinued the next year. The president of AAA, Robert M. Love, realized the future of the company lay in passenger transport. He purchased DC-3s from the Army and refurbished them for passenger traffic. Later that year, All American Aviation became All American Airways, a passenger airline which operated out of National Airport in Washington, D.C.

For a few months in 1949, All American Airways flew both Air Pick Up out of Pittsburgh and passengers out of Washington, D.C. Fittingly, the last pick-up route, on June 30, 1949, from Jamestown, New York to Pittsburgh was flown by Norman Rintoul, the pilot who had flown the first pick-up a decade earlier.

The Engineering division of AAA split off from the main company in 1953 and became part of International Controls in 1982. Its pick-up apparatus technology had been used extensively in aircraft carrier aviation and even for the recovery of information capsules from satellites. In 1953 All American Airways became Allegheny Airlines. Fifteen years later, it merged with Lake Central, and in 1972 with Mohawk. On October 28, 1979, Allegheny Airlines became US Air. In 1989 it acquired Piedmont. Finally, on February 27, 1999, US Air became US Airways.

Norman Rintoul, who had piloted the first and last pick-up flights for All American Aviation purchased a Stinson when All American upgraded its fleet in 1949. Later that year he donated the plane to the Smithsonian's Air and Space Museum. The Stinson was kept in storage at the Paul Garber facility in Silver Hill, Maryland until it came to be displayed at the National Postal

Museum in 1993. Visitors are often impressed with the beauty and grandeur of the Stinson now suspended from the atrium ceiling.

Stinson Reliant and the Mail Pick-Up Service

Stinson Reliant monoplanes were used in 1939 to test a unique airmail service for communities that did not have landing fields. Mail was loaded into the container on the right which was then placed on top of a contraption resembling a goal post. As the pilot guided the airplane down, the flight officer lowered a grappling hook to snag the container. Mail destined for the community was then dropped from the plane onto the airfield. The technique was modeled on the Railway Mail Service's "mail-on-the-fly" pickups.

In the 1930s, postal officials decided to test the feasibility of inaugurating airmail service in areas without adequate railway or highway mail links. Unfortunately, the towns which needed this type of service usually did not have adequate landing fields for planes.

Although a low-flying airplane could easily dump a sack of mail onto the ground, the difficult part would be getting ground mail into the moving plane. The Railway Mail Service's successful on-the-fly mail exchange system provided the inspiration for an aviation experiment. Mail would be "caught" by a plane flying overhead and reeled up into the plane. Of course, catching the mail was not going to be easy.

An airplane outfitted with a hook flew over the posts, and successfully hooked the mail and reeled it in. At the top of each pole was a small direction flag, which showed the pilot the prevailing wind direction; and a pincer, which was used to keep the 60 foot long noose attached to the mail canister in place.

Postal officials realized that throwing the mail out of a passing airplane wasn't going to be easy either. A simple mail sack wasn't going to be sufficient because it would be prone to fall in a random direction depending on the wind. A weighted holder was needed. But, if the canister was too heavy it might cause significant damage if it hit something when it fell. Then too, the

canister holding the mail had to be able to survive repeated drops. Various different styles of receptacles were tested. Ultimately a hollow rubber design, resembling the nose cone of a rocket, was chosen.

The plane that was initially used was a single engine Stinson aircraft, capable of operating at speeds of approximately 150 miles an hour. The crew consisted of the pilot and a flight officer who worked the pick-up mechanism, making the mail exchange. To deliver the mail, the flight officer lowered the mail container out of the bottom of the aircraft through a special opening. Just before reaching the poles he released the canister. Almost at the same instant an arm was lowered. The grappling hook snagged the hanging mail pouch then slid down the arm and caught the noose. Once the catch was made the flight officer activated the winding mechanism to reel the mail canister into the plane.

The method of exchanging mail in transit was adopted for experimental airmail routes in Ohio, New York, Pennsylvania, Kentucky, and West Virginia. In all, more than 150 post offices were served. This style of pick up and delivery service began on May 12, 1939. The mail contractor that used the service was All American Airways Company. (Which later became known as Allegheny Airlines, and is now USAir.)The experimental routes covered 1,040 miles. During the first year of operation, more than 23,000 pick ups were made, amounting to 75,000 pounds of mail. The service was used in those areas for about ten years.