Rocket Mail

Early experiments demonstrated why this idea never got off the ground

By William I. Lengeman III

In the annals of wildly inaccurate predictions, postal official Colonel Paul Henderson's assertion in 1919 that airmail was "an impractical sort of fad" has to rank with the best of them. Given this attitude, it's not hard to figure out what Henderson might have made of the experiments carried out at Greenwood Lake, New York, in 1936. On February 24, a crowd estimated at 700 strong walked more than a mile from their cars to the frozen lake, then waited six hours to see the second attempt in two weeks to launch the first mail-carrying rockets in the United States. The target was Hewitt, New Jersey, just across the state line.

The previous attempt, on February 10, had drawn an audience of about 500, including post office officials as well as representatives of the Daniel Guggenheim School of Astronautics at New York University, the American Rocket Society and numerous philatelists. The two rocket gliders, which used a liquid fuel mix, carried 6,000 pieces of mail between them. Among the partners in the venture were Fred W. Kessler, president of the Rocket Airplane Corporation of America, and German rocketry pioneer Willy Ley. Onlookers stood at what they hoped was a safe distance while the experimenters tinkered with the rockets. But in two launch attempts the gliders went nowhere. As one report noted, the experiment "ended in flame, fizzle and failure."

After the second experiment, two weeks later, Kessler and his cohorts gleefully pronounced their efforts a "complete success," with the rocketeer declaring, "We have proved the value of the rocket." But not all spectators were in agreement. The first rocket launched that day barely hopped off the end of the small launch scaffold, traveling about 20 feet and landing abruptly. Another hour of waiting ensued, during which volunteers dragged the second rocket closer to its destination. Once the fuse was lit, that craft shot straight up on its tail, then landed and skittered across the ice for a considerable distance. Somehow it rose back into the air perhaps 50 feet before going into a cartwheel and slamming into the ice. Hewitt postmaster Walter White contributed to the "success" of the venture by dragging the two bags of mail at considerably less than rocketlike speed across the frozen lake to the post office. Much of this booty, affixed with 50- and 75-cent stamps made by Kessler, eventually made its way into the hands of collectors.

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Loaded with thousands of letters, *Gloria*, a liquid-fueled rocket glider, is set to take off from a launch ramp at frozen Greenwood Lake, N.Y., in February 1936. It fizzled.

The United States had never seen such a thing before—aside from a failed experiment in Astoria, N.Y., the previous year—but the theoretical precedent for rocket mail had been set more than 60 years earlier in France. In late 1870, with Paris besieged by the Prussians, J.D. Schneiter sought a patent for a rocket to carry mail out of the city. It was granted about six weeks later, after the siege was over, but there's no evidence to suggest that the notion advanced beyond the theoretical stage.

The first known use of mail-carrying rockets supposedly took place in the Tonga islands, in the South Pacific. Niuafoo, or Tin Can Island, was so tough to get to that mail was delivered there by sealing it in tin cans and tossing them in the water, to be retrieved by strong swimmers. Around 1902 some ship captains apparently decided to experiment with delivering mail by rockets, with varying degrees of success.

One of the earliest verified attempts to use rocket mail came in 1928, courtesy of rocketeer Friedrich Schmiedl. His first unsuccessful attempt took place on June 28, 1928, with a launch from a balloon high over Graz, Austria. About a month

Schmiedl's next notable experiment came on February 2, 1931, when he sent 102 items about two miles between two Austrian towns. Austrian postal authorities prohibited such flights in 1934 and a year later banned private rocket experiments altogether.

Another European associated with the early days of rocket mail was German Gerhard Zucker, whose personality apparently combined elements of rocketeer, showman and huckster. From 1931 to 1933, Zucker traveled around Germany with his rockets, stirring up interest in rocket mail, but only achieving marginal success in getting them off the ground. His best effort in Germany was a well-publicized launch in April 1933, in which the rocket made it to a not-so-spectacular altitude of about 50 feet.

In 1934 Zucker turned up in the United Kingdom. Three launches took place on June 6, 1934, at Sussex Downs, two of which carried a cargo of postal covers. Zucker's next effort was an attempt to launch a rocket about 1,600 yards from the town of Harris to the Isle of Scarp, in the Outer Hebrides. It exploded, scattering its cargo all over the launch area. Some of the pieces were recovered and sold to collectors.

After British postal authorities ran Zucker out of the country for assorted improprieties, he ran afoul of German authorities, who suspected he might be a spy. According to at least one mistaken report, he was executed by the Germans. Though Zucker resumed his rocket and rocket mail experiments after World War II, the rest of his career was somewhat checkered. Among the lowlights were more suspected incidents of postal fraud and a failed test, in 1964, that resulted in the death of a spectator. Zucker himself died in 1985. His time in the Outer Hebrides was later dramatized in a 2001 movie, *The Rocket Post*.

Rocket mail experiments got underway in India in 1934, courtesy of Indian-born Stephen Hector Taylor-Smith. The secretary of the Indian Airmail Society, Smith began experimenting with rockets on September 30, 1934. Over the course of the next decade he conducted at least 270 launches, more than 80 of which carried mail.

Smith's experiments included the first rocket mail parcel flight, which contained mals. A chicken and a hen named Adam and Eve flew along with 189 postal covers and managed to survive the flight. In 1992 India commemorated "the originator of rocket mail in India" with a stamp that marked the centenary of Smith's birth.

One of the earliest international rocket mail flights took place in 1936, on the Texas-Mexico border. In reality the two towns involved—McAllen, Texas, and Reynosa, Mexico—were not that far apart, with the Rio Grande running between them. The rocket mail event was conceived as a fundraising opportunity for the McAllen American Legion. As luck would have it, the post commander's son, 16-year-old Keith Rumbel, was a stamp enthusiast and an aspiring rocketeer. Rumbel suggested that the sale of rocket mail postal covers might bring a tidy sum, got the OK and set to work designing and constructing the stamps and rockets.

When the great day came in early July, McAllen's mayor had the honor of lighting the fuse on the first rocket. It exploded a few feet off the launch platform, scattering mail everywhere. The second rocket made it across the river and landed outside a Reynosa bar where, one writer later quipped, "its smoldering remains were doused with the cheaper brands of tequila."

All in all, 1,500 postal covers were launched from McAllen to Reynosa and another 1,500 the other way, though 1,000 never made it to their destination. Of the covers rocketed into Mexico, 150 were confiscated by Mexican customs officials, who later returned them. They were stashed away in a bank vault, discovered two decades later and sold to eager collectors.

As for young Rumbel, his early interest in rockets would lead him to a career in the aerospace industry, including formulating new and improved solid propellants.

Rocket mail flights continued in the United States and abroad over the course of the next few decades. A notable one, albeit a failure, took place just outside Havana, Cuba, in October 1939. Said to be the first postal rocket experiment in Latin America, it was a joint effort of the Philatelic Club of Cuba and the Department of Communications. The spectators. In the end, though, the rocket did not cooperate, falling to the ground just a short distance away from the launch site.

Postmasters and other postal authorities had been involved with rocket mail in an unofficial capacity for many years, but the U.S. Post Office lent its support to only one such flight, in 1959. (The test might have been a response to the space hysteria that followed the Soviet launch of Sputnik in October 1957.) The mail launch took place on June 8, 1959, following an unofficial test a few months earlier. A remotely controlled Regulus guided missile, carrying 3,000 letters, was launched from *Barbero*, a U.S. Navy submarine located 100 miles off the coast of Florida. After a 22-minute flight, the missile landed on target at a naval air station near Jacksonville. Postmaster General Arthur E. Summerfield claimed that it was the first time any country's postal service had used missiles to carry mail in an official capacity. Letters from the postmaster general to various officials bore a stamp that featured a picture of a Regulus missile and the designation First Official Missile Mail.

Summerfield waxed bullish on the notion of rocket mail, proclaiming the launch was "of historic significance to the peoples of the entire world." He predicted that "before man reaches the moon, mail will be delivered within hours from New York to California, to Britain, to India or Australia by guided missiles." Although there was no rocket mail service in place by the time Buzz Aldrin and Neil Armstrong rode their rocket to the moon, the Apollo 11 astronauts carried a stash of postal covers as well as a device to cancel letters. Since time constraints ruled out doing so while still on the moon, the astronauts completed the task on their return trip to Earth.

In 1957 rocket mail pioneer Willy Ley concluded that it was "doubtful whether there will ever be a long-range rocket mail." As the private space industry continues to grow, it's likely that before long we may see a niche type of rocket mail service, providing delivery of items when speed is vital and cost no object. But since current methods of mail and package delivery are relatively quick and efficient, it seems unlikely that rocket mail will ever come into widespread use—at least not while the human race still resides on earth. ✠