

ZEPPELIN MAIL FROM SHANGHAI

By Dieter Leder

ON OCTOBER 1936, THE CHASE BANK IN SHANGHAI, CHINA sent an ordinary commercial airmail cover to the Banco Germanico de la America del Sud in Buenos Aires in Argentina. They surely did not know what they were sending from Shanghai to Buenos Aires. For them it was just another commercial bank cover, but for aerophilatelists this became, 72 years later, the only recorded zeppelin cover from China.

There is not much on this cover that would identify it at first sight as a zeppelin cover. The reverse of the cover bears eight stamps with a total face value of 555 Yuan. The stamps were postmarked at Shanghai on October 28, 1936 at 7 p.m. There are no other postal markings on the cover except two arrival markings from Buenos Aires dated November 15, 1936, 8 p.m. The routing instruction *Via Hanoi* appears on the front side three times: in manuscript, type-written and even stamped in red color.



19th South America Flight 1936 *Commercial zeppelin cover sent from the Chase Bank in Shanghai to Buenos Aires in Argentina.*

The dispatch marking, the routing via Hanoi and the arrival markings are sufficient information to reconstruct how this cover traveled from its dispatch in Shanghai on October 28, 1936, to its arrival at Buenos Aires on November 15, 1936.



Reverse of the zepelin cover from Shanghai to Buenos Aires.

The journey of this cover began with its dispatch at Shanghai on Wednesday, October 28, 1936, at 7 p.m. The following morning, Thursday, October 29, the cover was flown by *China National Aviation Corp.* (CNAC, which later merged into Air China) from Shanghai to Canton. Departure at Shanghai was at 6.30 a.m., Wenchow was reached at 8.25 a.m., Foochow at 10.05 a.m., Amoy at 11.35 a.m., Swatow at 12.55 p.m. and Canton finally at 3 p.m.

A second CNAC flight departed Canton the following day, Friday, October 30, 1936, to Hanoi in French Indochina. Departure was at 8 a.m., Fort Bayard was reached at 10.30 a.m. and Hanoi at 2 p.m. This Canton-Hanoi flight flew only on Fridays. It was the connection service to the *Air France* flight from French Indochina to Europe.

Air France left Hanoi on Saturday November 1, 1936 to fly via Bangkok, Rangoon, Calcutta, Allahabad, Jodhpur, Karachi, Djask, Bushire, Baghdad, Damascus, Tripoli, Castelrosso, Athens, Corfu and Naples to Marseille. The cover from Shanghai was offloaded at Marseille on Sunday, November 8, where it was held for the next airmail flight to South America on Thursday morning.

Three days later, on Wednesday November 11, 1936, the German airship LZ-127 GRAF ZEPPELIN departed Friedrichshafen in southern Germany for the 19th South America Flight in 1936. The airship already had mail on board and it flew without landing to Recife/Pernambuco in Brazil. However, before crossing the South Atlantic, the airship stopped at Bathurst, British Gambia (Africa) on November 13, 1936.

When the zepelin departed Friedrichshafen (Germany) on Wednesday, November 11, 1936, the cover from Shanghai was on hold at Marseille. The journey of the cover continued on Thursday, November 12, 1936 at about 9 a.m., not by zepelin but by the South Atlantic airmail service operated by the German airline, *Deutsche Lufthansa*.

On Thursday, November 12, 1936 at 7:04 a.m., the DLH (Deutsche Lufthansa) flight departed Frankfurt am Main. The first stop for this flight was Marseille in southern France, there to pick up more airmail. At about 11:30 a.m., the airmail with the cover from Shanghai included was loaded and the Lufthansa flight continued via Lisbon to Las Palmas (Canary Islands) and then finally to Bathurst, arriving at 7:33 a.m. on Friday morning, November 13, 1936.

At Bathurst, the arrival of the Lufthansa flight from Frankfurt was in time to meet the arrival of the zeppelin from Friedrichshafen. This may sound strange, but an airplane was way faster than the zeppelin. The mail brought in by the Lufthansa flight was offloaded and transferred to the zeppelin. The airship did not land at Bathurst. A rope was dropped from the airship, tied to the mailbags and then hauled up to the hovering zeppelin. Now the cover from China was on board the airship LZ-127 GRAF ZEPPELIN.

On Friday November 13, 1936 at 8.23 a.m., the zeppelin left Bathurst to cross the Atlantic, continuing the 19th South America Flight 1936. On the morning of Saturday, November 14, 1936 the zeppelin reached South America at the city of Natal in Brazil. Natal is the closest point to Africa. By 9:00 a.m. (GMT) the airship had reached Natal and at 9:09 a.m. the entire mail load was dropped from the zeppelin while hovering over the Natal airfield.

A special connecting flight of the Brazilian airline *Syndicato Condor Ltda.* was waiting at Natal to take the zeppelin mail. The airplane was faster than the zeppelin, so it was the airplane service that provided airmail distribution in South America. The Condor connecting flight departed Natal immediately for Recife, Bahia and Rio de Janeiro which was reached the same day at 9:52 p.m.

A second Condor connection flight departed Rio de Janeiro on Sunday morning, November 15, 1936, with the zeppelin mail addressed to larger cities south of Rio de Janeiro. After stops at the Brazilian cities of Santos, Porto Alegre and Rio Grande do Sul as well as Montevideo (Uruguay), the Condor flight from Rio de Janeiro reached Buenos Aires in Argentina on Sunday, November 15, 1936 at 7:25 p.m.

The airmail cover from Shanghai (China), which traveled via Canton, Hanoi, Bangkok, India, Iraq, Greece, France and Spain to British Gambia, then by zeppelin to Brazil and finally by airplane to Argentina, was offloaded and the arrival postmarks *Buenos Aires, November 15, 1936, 8 p.m* were applied and the cover was delivered to the addressee.

With the routing instruction (Via Hanoi) and with the information from the dispatch and arrival postmarks, this cover's route was reconstructed. It came through numerous countries, traveled through four continents (Asia, Europe, Africa and South America) and was carried by five different airlines: China National Aviation Corp., Air France, Deutsche Lufthansa, the Zeppelin service and finally Condor. ■