

Voyage To The Land of the Pharaohs:
The *Graf Zeppelin's* 1931 Egyptian Flight
By Jim Hill



▲ Fig. 1. Vatican Dispatch Flown On The Egypt Flight And Signed By Dr. Eckener

For collectors of zeppelin mail, the *Graf Zeppelin's* 1931 voyage to Egypt and Palestine must surely rank among the most fascinating, intriguing, and philatelically challenging of the airship's numerous foreign journeys. The flight is notable, among other things, for on-board mail that was posted without stamps, Egyptian zeppelin stamps with overprint date errors, and a small number of Suez dispatches that rank among the greatest rarities of zeppelin mail. Significantly, during the twenty-five years since the publication of Blau and Deighton's seminal work on the flight, (*The Egypt Flight L.Z. 127 - Graf Zeppelin*), attentive collectors have also discovered several classes of previously unrecorded dispatches. Examples of these items can be found in the illustrations accompanying this article.

In light of the *Graf Zeppelin's* successful 1929 Orient Flight, it was only natural that Dr. Hugo Eckener would regard a return trip to the middle east as an attractive proposition. Thus it was that on the morning of April 9, 1931, the *Graf Zeppelin* lay poised for its remarkable 90,000 km. voyage to the Land of the Pharaohs.

The Luftpost desk of the Friedrichshafen Post Office had undoubtedly been busy in the preceding days, organizing a large quantity of mail for the flight from origins both near and far. Although German mail was by far the most numerous, there was also "transmitted mail" from Austria, (420 pieces) Switzerland, the Netherlands (146), Saar (138), Danzig, and Liechtenstein. Also aboard were dispatches from Hungary (Blau and Deighton recorded six pieces in 1981 - several more are known today) and Luxemburg (even today, just a few of the latter are known).

Several other aerophilatelic treasures lay nestled among the mail bags, and today, they are among the most highly prized mail from the Egyptian Flight. A few days earlier, the well known stamp dealer Sam Bayér had posted a handful of post cards from the Vatican, each of which featured a colorful Italian scene. The cards were addressed to Oberpostinspektor F. Kuhn in Friedrichshafen, and bore the following routing instruction: "1° volo Roma-Berlino." Just below this endorsement was the handwritten word "Cairo."

All of the Bayér cards bear triple mixed franking on the picture sides of the cards: stamps of the Vatican, Italy, and Germany. The 1 Lire Italian franking, postmarked April 1, 1931, paid the air mail rate for the first Italian air mail flight from Rome to Berlin. None of the Bayér cards traveled to Berlin, however. All were unloaded at an intermediate stop in Munich, as indicated by the "Mit Luftpost Befördert/Postamt München 2" transit cachet on the reverse of each card. From there, the cards were routed to Friedrichshafen for the zeppelin flight to Egypt. An example of the Bayér Vatican mail, complete with Dr. Eckener's signature, is shown in Fig. 1.

According to Blau and Deighton, 1,672 German letters and 5,416 German post cards were flown aboard the *Graf Zeppelin* during the Egypt Flight. Among German mail, pieces postmarked on the first day of the flight, April 9, 1931, are probably the most common. Such items exist in two varieties: those bearing a Friedrichshafen (Bodensee) circular date stamp, and others bearing the "Luftschiff Graf Zeppelin" bordpost cancellation.

Of the transmitted mail from the Egypt Flight, Austrian and Swiss dispatches are thought to be the most numerous. Most Swiss mail from the flight is franked with Swiss air mail stamps. The card shown below in Fig. 2 is the exception to the rule, bearing Swiss Pro Juventute charity stamps, along with a 75 Centime Icarus air mail stamp. It is correctly franked at the 1 Franc, 40 Centime rate for Swiss cards flown on the Egypt Flight.

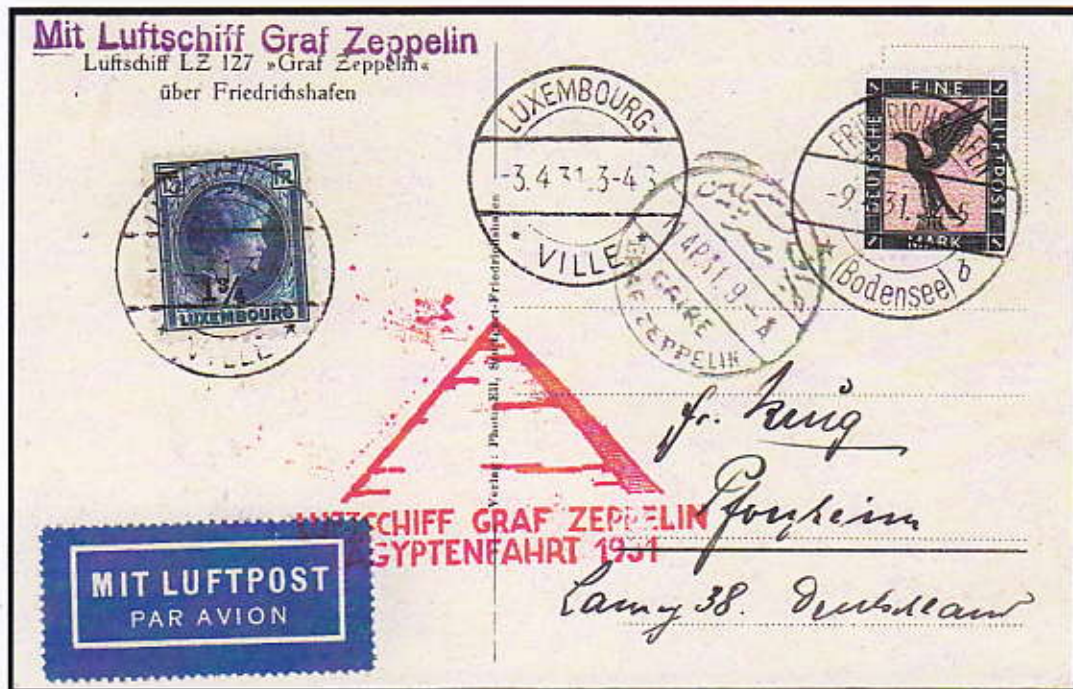
The Hungary and Luxemburg dispatches shown in Figs. 3 and 4 are among the rarities of transmitted mail from the Egypt Flight. The Hungarian card in Fig. 3 is franked with Hungary air mail stamps, since that nation, by 1931, had executed an agreement with the Reichspost for the transport of zeppelin mail. This piece is franked with air mail stamps totaling 2 Pengö, the correct card rate for Hungarian dispatches. The Luxemburg card in Fig. 4 bears mixed Luxemburg and German franking, since the Grand Duchy and the Reichspost never concluded an agreement on zeppelin mail. The 1 RM air mail stamp paid the required postage from Germany to Egypt.



▲ Fig. 2. Swiss Mail Dispatched From Romanshorn and Flown On The LZ 127 From Friedrichshafen to Cairo



▲ Fig.3. Hungarian Card Posted From Budapest and Flown Aboard the Graf Zeppelin to Cairo



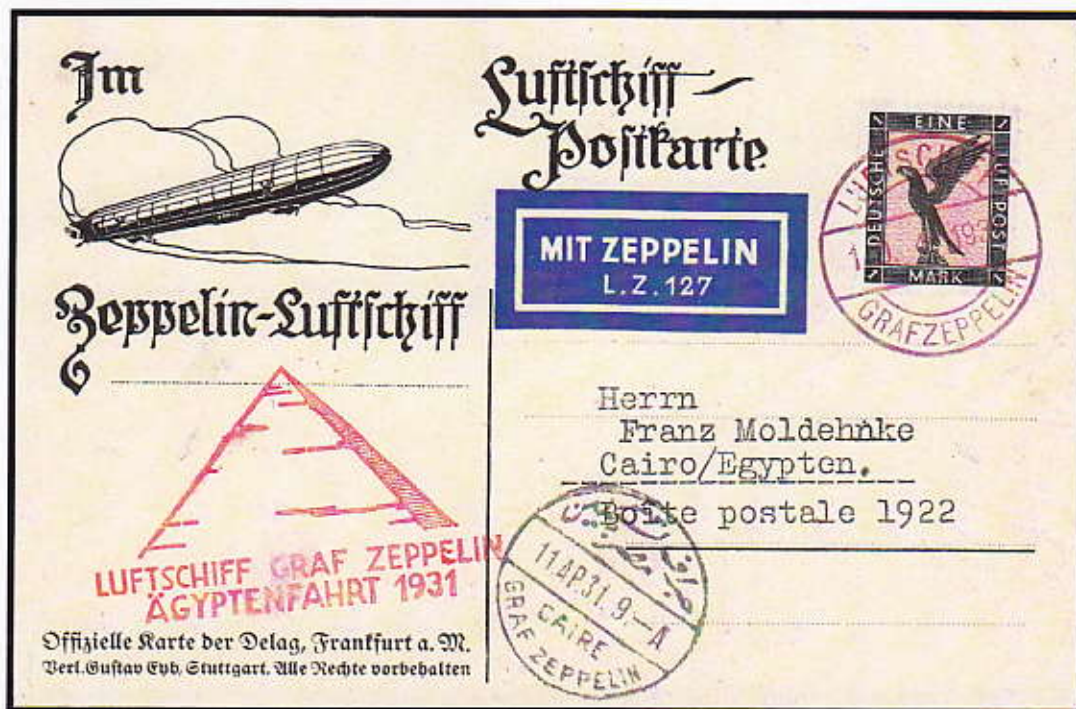
▲ Fig. 4. Luxemburg Dispatch From the Egypt Flight With Appropriate Mixed Franking

Shortly after six a.m. on April 9, 1931, with Dr. Eckener in command, the *Graf Zeppelin* began its epic journey to Egypt. The ship flew west to France, and then south, down the Rhône Valley to Marseilles and into the Mediterranean. During the day, the *Graf Zeppelin* passed over the islands of Corsica, Sardinia, Sicily, and Malta. By dawn on April 10th, the airship had reached the North African coast near Benghazi, Libya. From there it embarked on an aerial tour of Egypt, where passengers were treated to spectacular views of the Sphynx, the Pyramids, the Nile River, and the bustling city of Cairo.

Throughout the day, enthusiastic passengers swarmed the zeppelin's on-board post office to mail cards and letters to friends and loved ones. So great was the demand for stamps that the ship's supply was actually exhausted. As a result, the airborne postmaster, Max Pruss, accepted a number of dispatches without postage. To reflect that passengers had paid the required fees, Pruss cancelled each item with a 10. 4. 1931. Bordpost date stamp and inscribed each card "Affranchissement percu 1 RM," indicating that notwithstanding the absence of stamps, 1 Reichsmark had actually been paid by the sender. A German *DELAG* card posted prior to the stamp snafu and bearing a 10. 4. 1931 bordpost cancellation is shown in Fig. 5 below.

In their book, Blau and Deighton reproduce a 1956 letter from Pruss in which he describes the unorthodox bordpost procedure and recalls that no letters (only cards) were posted in that manner. However, at least three such letters have surfaced since then. One changed hands at a 2001 Ulrich Felzmann auction for DM 4,700.

The *LZ 127* landed in Cairo at 5:15 on the morning of April 11th, where it was met by a crowd numbering in the tens of thousands. There, it took on a quantity of Egyptian mail to be flown on the next leg of the airship's trip: a flight to Jerusalem and the Holy Land. The Egyptian mail had been posted from four official locations: Cairo, Alexandria, Port Said, and Suez. Only a handful of Suez pieces were flown, and they are among the great rarities of Egypt Flight mail. One such item, shown opposite in Fig. 6, sold at a 2001 Felzmann auction for DM 27,000. Most of the Egypt mail bore overprinted Egyptian air mail stamps bearing the legend "Graf Zeppelin, Avril 1931," together with an overprinted value of either 50 Mm or 100 Mm, which amounts paid the card and letter rates for the flight, respectively. Two overprint errors can be found: a "1951" date misprint on the 50 Mm stamp and a double impression of the 100 Mm overprint. The former is scarce; the latter is exceedingly rare.



▲ Fig. 5. German Card Postmarked April 10th - Before The Airborne Post Office Ran Out of Stamps



▲ Fig.6. A Rare Suez Dispatch From The Palestine Round Trip Flight



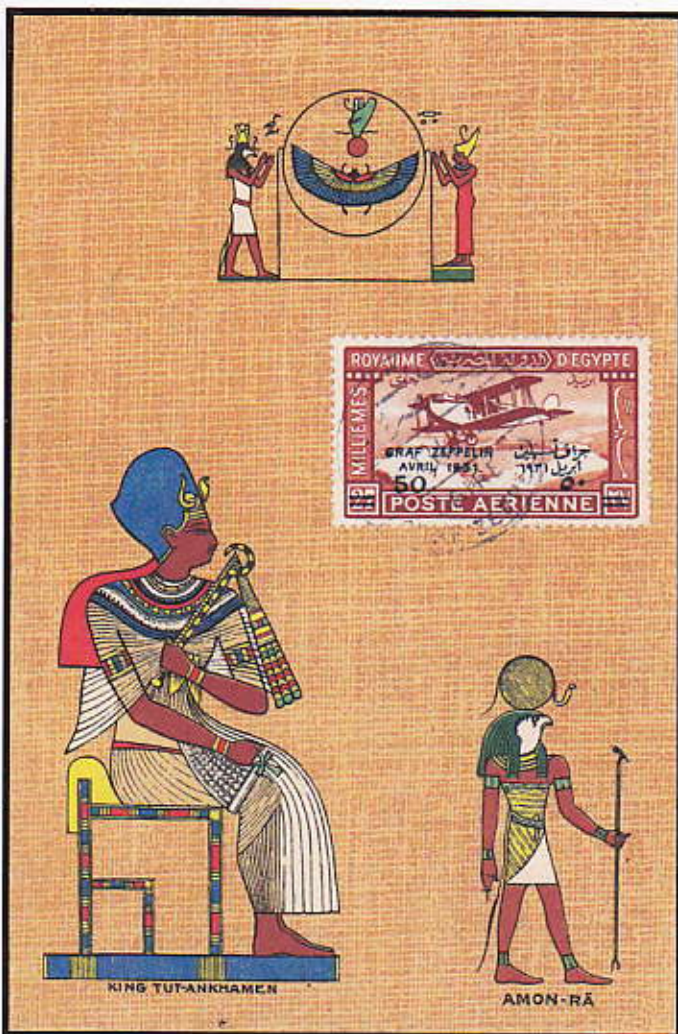
▲ Fig. 7. Scarce April 11th German Bordpost From The Palestine Round Trip Flight



▲ Fig. 8. Card With German And Egyptian Franking

▶ Fig. 9. Egyptian Card With "1951" Overprint Error

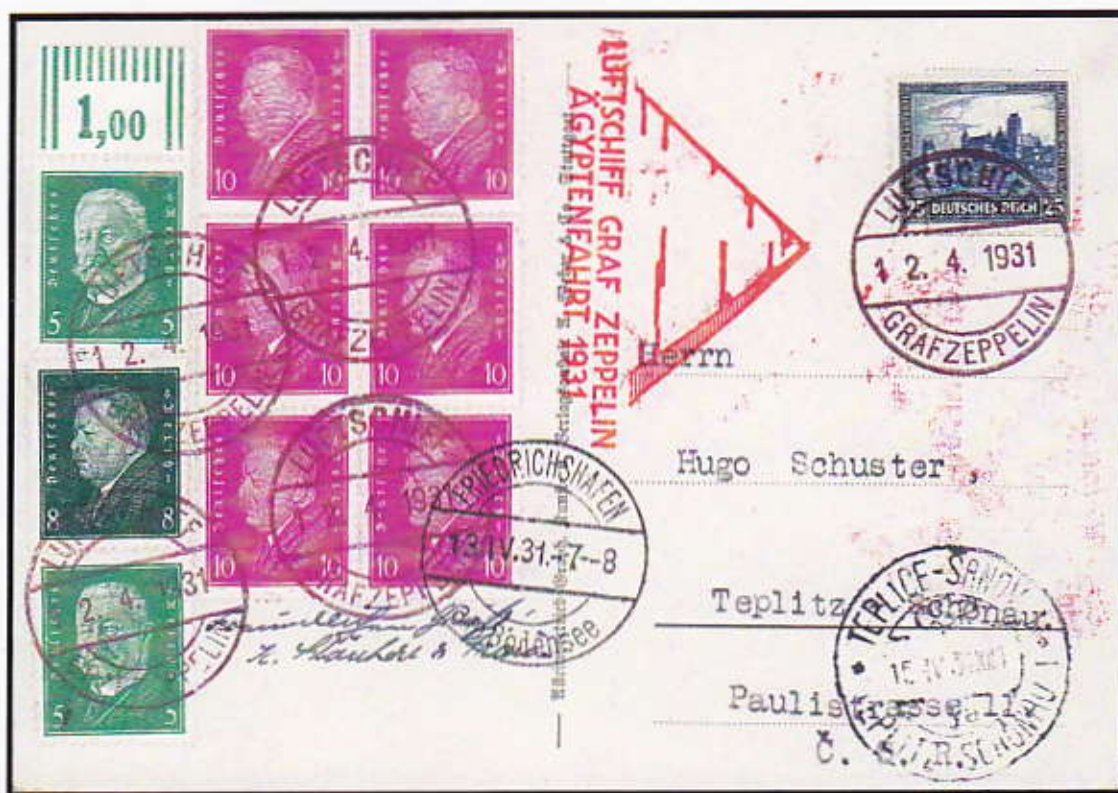
▼ Fig. 10. Egyptian Card Flown On Return Flight



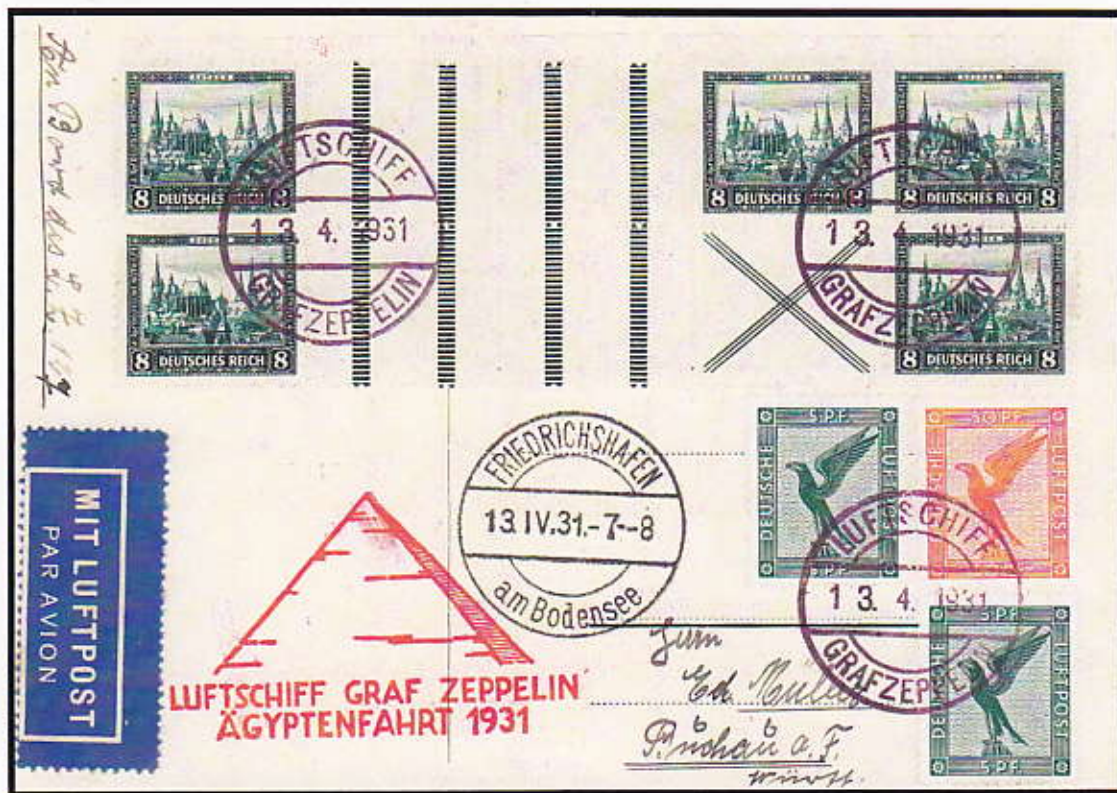
Although collectors had hoped that a mail drop over Jerusalem could be arranged during the Palestine Round Trip Flight, the Friedrichshafen post office had announced on April 1st that no such drop would be made. Consequently, Egyptian dispatches on the flight traveled from Cairo to the Holy Land and then back to Cairo. All Egyptian mail from this leg was postmarked at its point of origin and received the red Pyramid "Ägyptenfahrt 1931" flight cachet. Significantly, the Palestine Round Trip Flight also produced a much sought-after rarity: German Bordpost dated April 11th. Although Blau and Deighton reported that "we have never seen Bordpost dated April 11th," a few such pieces have since been discovered. Each of these pieces received an 11. 4. 1931 bordpost cancel during the flight and an 11 AP 31 arrival postmark upon the zeppelin's return to Cairo. Curiously, these items are known to exist with both 8 p.m. and 8 a.m. arrival postmarks. The latter is probably the work of a postal clerk who failed to set the slugs in his date stamp properly. A striking example of April 11th bordpost (with unusual IPOSTA souvenir sheet franking and the mistaken 8 a.m. arrival cancel) is shown in Fig. 7.

The return flight to Friedrichshafen left Cairo at 5:30 p.m. on April 11th, with the airship carrying over 12,000 pieces of Egyptian mail. These dispatches are distinguished from mail of the Palestine Round Trip Flight by the absence of the red Pyramid cachet. As with the Palestine Flight, the official Egyptian cities of origin were Cairo, Alexandria, Port Said and Suez. Several examples of Egyptian mail from the return flight are shown opposite. The card shown in Fig. 8, dispatched as German mail on April 10th and re-posted from Cairo on April 11th, was apparently unknown at the time of Blau and Deighton's book, as no reference is made to such mail. The decorative return flight cards shown in Figs. 9 and 10, posted from Cairo, not only document the zeppelin flight, but provide an interesting glimpse into Egyptian history and culture.

As was the case with April 11th bordpost, Blau and Deighton had not identified any April 12th bordpost when their book was published. A few such items have since been discovered, one of which is shown in Fig. 11 below. With no stamps available from the board post office, the sender cobbled together the required postage with quite an odd combination of stamps.



▲ Fig. 11. Elusive April 12, 1931 Bordpost From The Return Flight To Friedrichshafen



▲ Fig. 12. Bordpost From The Final Day Of The Egypt Flight, April 13, 1931

The *Graf Zeppelin's* return flight to Friedrichshafen took the airship west to Tripoli, Libya, back east to Benghazi, and then out into the Mediterranean, where it flew over Crete on its way toward Greece, Albania, and Yugoslavia. After passing the Adriatic port of Split, the *LZ 127* made a course over the Dinaric Alps toward Vienna, where it arrived at midnight. The final segment of its journey took the ship to Passau and on to Friedrichshafen, where it landed at 7 a.m. on April 13th. Bordpost dated 13. 4. 1931 is known to exist, albeit in small numbers. The April 13th bordpost has been the subject of considerable speculation. Some believe that because of the early hour of arrival, April 13th dispatches were likely to have been posted and cancelled after the airship's landing in Friedrichshafen. Others maintain that such a procedure was prohibited, and that the ship's postal officer would not have dreamt of violating established rules for the dispatch of on-board mail. The author is among those who subscribe to the latter theory. The question remains unresolved, but one thing is certain: April 13th bordpost remains highly sought after by collectors of the Egypt Flight.

Assembling a representative collection of Egypt Flight mail would be a daunting task for all but the most affluent of philatelists, yet for the average collector, the chance of discovering an unidentified Egypt Flight rarity remains a very real possibility. For example, it is thought that there were Egyptian dispatches on the Palestine Round Trip Flight from origins other than Cairo, Alexandria, Port Said and Suez. Blau and Deighton report the existence of two such items, one from Helwan les Bains, and another from El Malakanazli. Imagine the excitement of mining such a unrecognized gem from a dealer bourse box! Regardless of the odds, as any seasoned zeppelin collector will attest, much of the fun is in the hunt. Even after seventy-five years of collecting activity, new Egypt Flight discoveries are undoubtedly waiting to be made.

References:

- Blau, Fred, and Deighton, Cyril. *The Egypt Flight L.Z. 127 - Graf Zeppelin*. Germany Philatelic Society, 1981.
- Duggan, John. *The Egypt Flight By The Graf Zeppelin 1931*. Germany and Colonies Study Group, 1987.