

Seventy years ago saw the first mail to be carried by air in Australia. Taking it could well have fallen to a showman from the United States but instead the honour was bestowed on an unsuspecting French pilot, Maurice Guillaux. Peter Cooksley relates the adventure.

Left: Route of Australia's first air mail between July 16 and 19, 1914.

Guillaux...

AT THE beginning of the Century, 'Empire trotting', so beloved in Victorian times, was still very much in vogue in Britain particularly by the sons of more comfortably-off families. One such was Charles H Powis who was eventually to be one of those instrumental in bringing aerial mail to the widely divided centres of population in Australia.

Records of Mr Powis's movements are scarce, but there are sufficient to indicate that he was a man of taste who had earlier crossed the Atlantic, visiting the St Lawrence waterway before going on to Vancouver where he stayed at the luxury Empress Hotel. It was from here that he sailed across the Pacific to Australia where he struck up an acquaintance with Roy Sissons. The pair evolved the idea of inaugurating an air mail service similar to that established in England in 1911 and made representations to Mr Wynne, the Postmaster-General.

Once the idea was accepted as workable, a search was begun to find a suitable pilot. The obvious choice seemed to be the American A B 'Wizard' Stone, a showman who had arrived in Bundaberg in May 1912 with a Bleriot monoplane. He had recently recruited the services of the penniless son of a German-born immigrant who, although deeply interested in flying, was chiefly qualified to act as Stone's mechanic by his experience in a foundry. His name was Hubert Hinkler who later was to carve for himself a niche in aviation's hall of fame by his prowess as a long distance flyer.

But now, the twenty-year old Bert was occupied chiefly in maintaining the Bleriot as the outfit toured Australia's towns and cities, plus carrying out some modifications including fitting a four-wheel undercarriage together with a seven cylinder rotary motor in a species of open, circular cowling.

Before the planned mail-run could be carried out, 'Wizard' Stone had entertained all the Australian centres that seemed profitable and was turning his attention to New Zealand, taking Hinkler with him - the latter being kept constantly employed due to

'Wizard's' penchant for crashing.

Promoted at the new venue by Auckland C Bailey, Stone planned to demonstrate at the sponsor's home town in 1913 so that, after much publicity, a crowd of some 11,000 assembled at Auckland Domain.

Here, in a haze of blue smoke, the little monoplane trundled forward to raise a gasp from the assembled throng as it rose into the air.

A few moments later another gasp arose, not of admiration this time but of anger for the Bleriot had scarcely crossed the Domain's perimeter before it stalled and hit the ground with a crash.

Mindful that this was not the type of spectacle they had paid to witness, the crowd now began to converge on the uninjured 'Wizard' who had to be rescued by prompt action from the police.

Nothing daunted, the showman was determined to succeed and after intensive work by Hinkler, all was ready for a new demonstration on June 1, this time at Napier's racecourse. But here this colourful gentleman's hopes, together with those of taking Australia's first air mail, were to be



finally defeated. A combination of a gusty wind and tall trees on the boundary brought about another crash, forcing the outfit, now heavily in debt, to return to Australia where it disbanded.

The team of Powis, Sissons and Wynne was now in something of a quandary for plans to fly the mail from Melbourne to Sydney had been forging ahead and souvenir postcards had already been sold for one shilling each. As matters turned out a new candidate was to turn up in the shape of a Frenchman, one Maurice Guillaux. Complete with another Bleriot monoplane and a team of helpers consisting of Ms. Cominos, du Coque, Begin and Rupeausseu - plus Maistre, seemingly the Manager - arrived at Sydney on April 8 the following year in SS *Orontes*.



Maurice Guillaux in the cockpit of the historic monoplane. Note the bird and globe mascot under the cabane. (Stuart Dyson/Museum of Applied Arts).

...Par Avion!

Hitherto unpublished, like all the photographs in this feature, a dramatic view of Maurice Guillaux leaving Melbourne in the Bleriot Monoplane on July 16, 1914. (via V J Garwood).

saw an obvious successor to Stone. His Manager was approached and a contract agreed, the load of mail being 2,000 specially-printed postcards hastily put on sale at two shillings each. The entire stock was disposed of within a week. Each bore a photograph of Guillaux and an inscription to the effect that the flight was also an attempt to establish a record for the distance of 583 miles.

Meanwhile, arrangements were made with Shell Oil Company, whose logo appeared on the souvenir cards, for the supply of fuel and lubricant while the pilot, supremely confident, was to be seen for several days before the scheduled departure date from Melbourne, performing aerobatics.

Newspapers coined a new phrase - "sky watching" - to describe the activities of the groups who now gathered at almost every street corner to watch the spectacle over their heads; 'black marketeers' were quick to take advantage, converging on these gatherings to offer the now-scarce

By 9am all was ready and Maurice was standing by his aircraft at the Royal Agriculture Showground to await arrival of the mail bag. Gathered also was a crowd of only about 50 spectators including a small number of children, all of them warmly clad in long winter coats against the chill.

Five minutes later, acting Deputy Postmaster-General W B Crosbie arrived in company with the Superintendent of Mails, the first carrying the white post-bag with its unfamiliar legend 'Aerial Mail'. A delay occurred as the envelope containing greetings from the Lord Mayor of Melbourne to his counterpart in Sydney, had failed to arrive but Guillaux, anxious to be away, agreed to deliver this message verbally.

Other special items were also being carried: a letter of greeting from Sir Arthur Stanley, Governor of Victoria to Sir Gerald Strickland, Governor of New South Wales; one from M Homery, French Vice-Consul in Melbourne to M Chayet, French Consul-General in Sydney; and the first Australian air freight, consisting of a quantity of Lipton's tea, a consignment of O.T. chilli cordial and some lemon squash intended for the CTA (Tennis) Club of Sydney.

The crowd had now considerably

Aged 31, pilot Guillaux, a native of Montoire-sur-Loir, had held a pilot's certificate for two years having been granted No. 749 on February 19, 1912, at Crotoy after tests on a Caudron. His subsequent career seems to have consisted, in the main, of participation in displays and contests culminating with the capture of records for speed, duration and distance with a passenger, M Bruyerie, in a Clement-Bayard on February 11, 1913.

Whatever the reasons for Guillaux departing for Australia, it is known that his welcome was a warm one, being given by the Lord Mayor of Sydney on April 24. The monoplane, like the itinerary, had been carefully prepared and he was able to make a flight to Newcastle, New South Wales, the next day, with a public demonstration at Sydney on the following Saturday.

In Guillaux, the Australian authorities

postcards at as much as double the original price!

Thursday, July 16 dawned sunless and cold, but Maurice Guillaux was up early and at 6am seated himself at the Cafe Denat for breakfast of a lamb cutlet before leaving for Fremlington to check over his machine.

increased and the pilot was obviously in high spirits as he climbed aboard, resplendent in his leather coat, fur-lined against the cold in the open cockpit. He tightened a red, white and blue scarf and pulled down his goggles from the white helmet before waving away the chocks. It was exactly 9.12am as the monoplane lifted from the grass.

Sixty-one miles away was the first stopping place, Seymour, and this leg of the journey was completed in exactly 42 minutes flying time. Jordan's Paddock, the field set aside for the aeroplane, was not difficult to pick out for the entire community seemed to have turned out to see their first flying machine.

The facilities at Seymour were more primitive than those at the point of departure with its neatly railed areas where officials had found it convenient to hang their bowlers on the palings. But Jordan's Paddock did offer the all-important re-fuelling service and as well as oil, eleven gallons of petrol were taken on board.

This was a protracted business, taking about half an hour, time enough for the proprietor of the local hotel to produce a bottle of "gold-top" in which the aviator was toasted, wishing good luck to the enterprise before he was once more winging on his way at 10.40am for Wangaratta, 84 miles distant.

If the crowds at Seymour had seemed large, this was purely relative for a small community, a fact that became clear to Guillaux as Racecourse Road slid into his view. Here, a paddock belonging to Mr J Sisely had been set aside for the landing and was easy to pick out from the huge numbers of spectators thronging towards it - numbers which might have been even greater had not the Frenchman been 45 minutes ahead of schedule at this point, touching down at 11.40am.

By now, Maurice Guillaux was beginning to feel the effects of the cold and perhaps regretted that he had descended some 20 yards from a great bonfire lit to guide him to the selected paddock. Supervising replenishment of petrol he repeated his only English phrase, "Keep back, no smoking here."

The time was exactly 12.15pm as the Bleriot rose from Wangaratta and a quarter-of-an-hour later was observed over Chiltern at an estimated 70mph, flying fairly high with the pilot now suffering acutely from the intense cold. Just before the next stop at Albury came into view, the machine was caught in a series of descending currents, or 'air pockets' as they were to be later described.

One reason for the success to date was the standard of organisation. Arrangements had been made for a representative to be present at every landing ground en route with the exception of the border town of Albury, but even here matters were being looked after by a Frenchman, Alderman G P Frere, who was responsible for Guillaux's decision to land there. Something of a gala reception was planned and the racecourse again provided a natural airfield.

At 12.50pm the flyer made one of his immaculate landings and with bursts of blue smoke as he blipped the little rotary motor, Maurice taxied up to the crowd gathered round the judges' box. Drawn up nearby was a guard of honour provided by mounted

police and Alderman Waugh, the Mayor called for three cheers.

However, Guillaux was anxious to be away again as the forecast indicated deteriorating weather. He ate only a hurried lunch before leaving at 1.35pm setting course for Wagga, 79 miles distant, a town at which he had shown his aircraft a few weeks before.

In order to help navigation it had been arranged that Guillaux should fly over several towns where the population was sure to turn out en masse to wave and cheer, one being Culcairn, little more than 30 miles out from Albury. It was here that a hoaxer got to work.

His first move was to telephone the Shire Office and, passing himself off as one of the flyers' representatives, declared that in a change of plans the monoplane was to land at Culcairn to take on more fuel. Not only was permission given for ground on Railway Parade to be used, but the Shire Clerk offered to personally obtain the petrol.

The time was 1pm at which hour the airman was still on the ground at Albury. A little later a second call, this time to the local newspaper, made the same claim and demanded that more fuel be made available. The proprietor himself, it is said, took charge of the situation and, improvising a warning flag from a length of red flannel and a pitchfork, stood guard at Railway Parade to keep the landing strip clear.

At 2.15pm the Bleriot was seen approaching, but naturally passed overhead. The gentleman on guard assumed that Guillaux had failed to spot the area and made strenuous efforts to attract attention with his makeshift flag.

At Henty, too, the same hoaxer seems to have been at work and not only was petrol made ready and a crowd gathered at Spence's Hotel, but special mail prepared to be added to the official pouch already carried. Great was the disappointment when the machine passed overhead without hesitation on its way to Wagga.

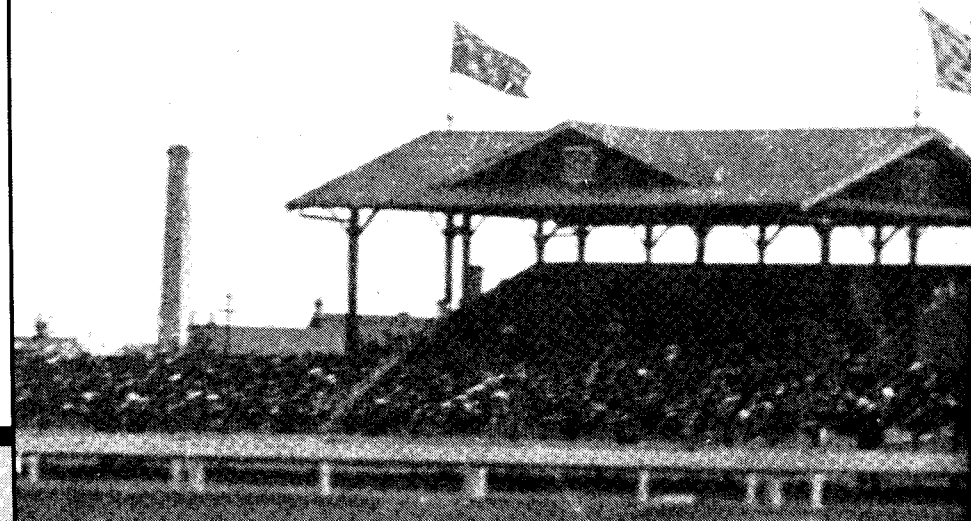
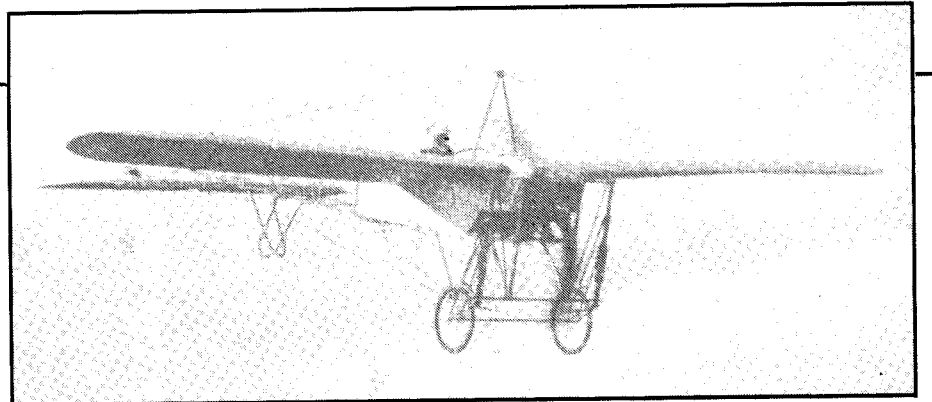
Matters continued to go awry on reaching here since, for some reason, there was no bonfire on this occasion. Guillaux searched for the expected crowd at a racecourse and at last this came into view. Confident that this was the agreed M.T.C. racecourse, the little machine was put down with the characteristic smoothness, the pilot unmindful of consternation as he came to a halt near the judges' box.

In fact, this was the wrong venue, and the crowds had gathered not to welcome the aviator but to watch a horse race which had only just concluded! Nevertheless, the good-natured Australians welcomed the Frenchman before giving him directions to the correct location nearer Wagga's town centre.

Although this was the middle of winter in a part of Australia where even modern air-planes are wont to be cancelled due to fogs and bad weather, on this occasion there was hardly a cloud in the sky. Even so, Guillaux was mindful of the threatened deterioration in conditions so having accepted several items of unofficial mail to be dropped at towns on his route he was away again by 3.30pm.

Almost at once he was caught up by a helpful tail wind, giving an average speed of 120mph and Guillaux was over Juneee by 3.45pm, arriving at Harden, where an

Making a preliminary pass over the Racecourse on July 19, 1914, Guillaux has to contend with a stiff breeze. Inset: Historic moment as the final approach to land is made at Moore Park. What may be a small flag can be made out above the tailplane. (Sydney Daily/Museum of Applied Arts).



exhibition was expected of him, 20 minutes later.

There was great disappointment when the machine passed over, but hardly had he gone three miles towards Goulburn when the favourable weather suddenly gave way to headwinds. Fearful that a landing in darkness might be called for, Guillaux turned back and landed at Harden for the night.

Alas, the next day was cold and wet but Guillaux made amends for his failure to provide a display on the previous day by treating the Harden people to an exciting exhibition of aerobatics. And instead of demonstrating a loop - because he didn't have the braces that held him to the machine - he took three residents for their first experience of flying.

Despite pleas to the contrary by his representative, Guillaux finally left for the 94-mile journey to Goulburn at 2pm, only to run into the headwinds of the previous day so that an average speed of only 40mph was possible. Still only 20 miles on his way, he was overcome by air sickness and forced to again return to Harden and spend another night there.

When the Saturday arrived it did so with no improvement in the weather. When takeoff was made at 7.15am it was to encounter the headwinds once more for the whole of the journey that took some two hours.

But by 9.15am the welcome blaze of the signal fire of Goulburn Racecourse slid into view and Guillaux stood by the side of it chafing his numbed limbs while the refuelling was going on. He was away again after an hour and fifty minutes, giving a brief display of aerobatics first. Next scheduled stop was Moss Vale, about 50 miles distant.

Conditions forced the pilot to an altitude of 18,000ft from which it would be difficult to spot the bonfire, so he came down to 10,000. Even from this height neither blaze nor landing area could be made out so there was nothing for it but to press on to the final

destination, Sydney.

There was only one drawback to this plan, namely that he had been instructed to arrive around 3pm so in order to lose time Guillaux selected a clearing near Liverpool, 113 miles out from Goulburn, where he put down at 12.35pm. A surprised but welcoming Mr and Mrs Clarke invited him to lunch.

Only twenty-two miles remained of Australia's first air mail flight when Guillaux took off again 90 minutes later. He found a tail wind that enabled him to fly over several football games at such spots as Parramatta and Manly, waving to the crowds as he did so. Soon afterwards snow began to fall so it was prudent to set down as soon as possible, landfall being made at Moore Park at 2.50pm.

Hardly had the Frenchman began to clamber from the cockpit than he was mobbed by well-wishers who carried him on their shoulders to a nearby sports-ground, their ringing cheers rising to a new crescendo as the official mail bag was taken out and held aloft in triumph.

Not only had Guillaux made the first delivery of aerial mail in Australia, he had also established a world record for the carriage of air mail. No one was surprised when, on Saturday night, the pilot appeared on the stage of Sydney's Tivoli Theatre to a rapturous reception.

In the weeks that followed, Guillaux rightly became a public hero and established a different type of record on July 24, 1914, by remaining aloft with a passenger for two hours.

On August 1, it seemed as if the luck that

Right: Maurice Guillaux adjusts a flag at the rear of his Bleriot Monoplane. (Sydney Dyson/Museum of Applied Arts).

had blessed his career suddenly vanished over Ascot Racecourse where he was seen to carry out a loop, the first in Australia. Some authorities claim it was involuntary, but be that as it may, control of the Bleriot was certainly lost on this occasion. In the subsequent crash the aircraft was severely damaged and Guillaux injured sufficiently seriously that a considerable stay in hospital resulted.

A few days later war broke out in Europe, and as he slowly recovered Guillaux determined to return to his own country. Exactly when he did so is unknown, but what is certain is that having served for some time as an aircraft engineer of great skill, Guillaux finally became a test pilot. At Villacoublay on May 21, 1917, he was killed in a crash and buried at Neuilly-sur-Seine.

The historic Bleriot monoplane was repaired and used to pioneer a new air mail flight between Adelaide and Gawler in South Australia, although whether this was another enterprise by Messrs Powis and Sissons is now unclear.

Guillaux's historic Bleriot again suffered damage and in 1918 was sent to Mascot in Sydney for repairs. In fact these were never carried out but it lingered on for a further 16 years when it was acquired by the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences. By 1981 it had become due for some restoration, the work being entrusted to Mike Richards who saw the machine restored almost to original condition and placed on exhibition again.

● **The enthusiasm of Mrs L J Shaw of the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, Ultimo, Sydney, is acknowledged with thanks, while correspondence with V J Garwood and A C Schaefer has also been useful in the preparation of this feature.**

