

**The Italian Air Service to South America, December 1939—December 1941**

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## **Introduction and Background**

Italy inaugurated their regular air service to South America on December 21, 1939 flying with land-based planes from Guidonia airport east of Rome to Rio. The line is commonly known as LATI, an acronym for *Linee Aeree Transcontinentali Italiane*, the name officially adopted in September 1939, marking just one change in its evolution from the Atlantic Lines Division of the Italian air service *Ala Littoria*, a name that continued to be found on a number of the aircraft used during the short life of the LATI service. This regular transatlantic service was also preceded by a number of flights over the earlier years ranging from the pioneering flight of Francesco Pinedo in 1927 and the remarkable mass formation flight of Italo Balbo to Rio in 1930 to flights testing the feasibility of routes, the reliability of equipment, and the readiness of sites. Some had overlays of national pride and displays of aviation superiority such as the January 1938 record flight of the *Sorci Verde* or “Green Mice” squadron of the Italian Air Ministry, two of whose pilots, one the son of the dictator Mussolini, were important in the administrative organization of LATI and whose logo was depicted on the fuselage of planes used on the service. Some of these efforts perhaps highlighted too much the national rivalries in the development of transatlantic aviation and aircraft manufacture. But for whatever reason, the Italians were unable to work out an agreement with the French to overfly their territory in North Africa so the final route utilized Spanish and Portuguese territory.

All of this is now fairly well known and documented for any in the collecting community with an interest in transatlantic aviation and airmail. This was not the case in the 70's and 80's when I

first began to collect covers of this service as an extension of my interest in various German efforts in Atlantic aviation, from Zeppelin flights to catapult services and a developing interest in many aspects of the disruptions caused by WWII, both in services like civilian airlines as well as simply humans wanting and needing to survive. This area of transatlantic aviation during WWII was the area I finally selected for exhibiting from the 80's through the early 2000's.

Richard Beith mentions this scarcity of information in the preface to his 1993 publication, pointing out his own efforts in the 80's in various English language philatelic journals and Fritz van Beveran's broader airline survey in 1982 in Dutch. He also mentions my own article from the *Air Post Journal* in January, 1990 where I had acknowledged his earlier journal publications. My article, I might mention, came about in large part at the urging of Jim Graue and Bob Lana who had seen my exhibit at a national show and were aware of how little was known of the service. Preparation for the article was preceded by my first visit to the APRL library which provided the reference material an academic likes to have when writing and especially the book by Renato Vigliar, a pilot's reminiscence on the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the inauguration of the service. Vigliar spent his time with LATI on Sal where his efforts are remembered today.<sup>1</sup> Postal historians are often mostly interested in rates and routes and stamp collectors sometimes not even that. Pilots and aircraft enthusiast and their writings add an interesting dimension especially to the issues of routing often overlooked by collectors. Similarly, a close study of censorship often provides answers to curious routings as well as puzzling incongruencies between postmark dates and arrival backstamps when looking only at flight records for various air services, a point especially noteworthy for covers from the end of LATI service.

Again, the basics are now well known and accessible to English readers with Beith's publication and the more recent, fuller and broader publication in 2012 on LATI by Martyn Cusworth as a

handbook for the Italy and Colonies Study Circle. I will mention as a review some of the broadest general areas about LATI, but my focus in this paper will be on some problematic areas for collectors of the service and some of my areas of interest in the human dimensions of wartime communication.

### **Route and Aircraft**

The regular LATI flights departed from Guidonia on Thursday morning and arrived in Seville that same morning (a distance of 1734 kilometers).<sup>2</sup> A Seville-Lisbon shuttle brought mail from Portugal and carried mail to Lisbon to connect to the PanAm Atlantic flights to North America. The LATI route continued with a departure Friday morning for Villa Cisneros on the Spanish Sahara coast (2052 kilometers), arriving in the afternoon and departing that same afternoon on the first leg of the transoceanic crossing for a late afternoon arrival at Sal (1134 kilometers). The route continued with a Saturday morning departure from Sal to Recife (Pernambuco) where it arrived that afternoon (3089 kilometers). The leg to Rio was with an early Sunday morning departure with arrival in the afternoon (2457 kilometers). From Rio connections were available to Buenos Aires and countries throughout South, Central, and North America via the various lines that had been developed over the previous years. Eventually in July, 1941, LATI extended its own service to Buenos Aires. Ships were posted 300 miles south of the Cape Verde Islands and 300 miles north of Fernando de Noronha to relay navigational and weather information.<sup>3</sup> The return route followed the same legs (with the exception that the first Atlantic leg was from Natal instead of Recife to take advantage of its better runway) departing Friday mornings from Rio and arriving at Guidonia on Monday afternoon. On the inaugural first flight eastward (departing Rio on December 21 simultaneously with the westward inaugural flight) the plane I-ARPA on the Villa Cisneros-Seville leg crashed in Morocco. Mail with various degrees of charring was

recovered from that flight. A second aircraft, the I-BAYR, was lost on the 108<sup>th</sup> crossing on January 15, 1941, four hours out of Natal. No mail was recovered from that flight.



**Figure 1**

Rome to Brazil, December 21, 1939

From the author's collection



**Figure 2**

Mail recovered from crash in Morocco of the I-ARPA on the inaugural flight northward

From the author's collection

Over the course of its operations LATI used a variety of aircraft developed by Savoia Marchetti,<sup>4</sup> initially the SM 83 which was a civilian adaptation of a military plane. In the summer of 1940, other planes were added to handle the additional burdens of mail, freight, and passengers caused by the ending of Air France service to South America. Similarly, at the initiation of its service, LATI had been able to pick up much of the traffic Lufthansa had provided to South America prior to ending its service in August, 1939.

### **Typical Mail**

Despite the fact that LATI was an Italian line, the bulk of the mail carried by the service and available to collectors is from Germany and German controlled areas, reflecting the vast personal

and commercial ties that had been established over the decades with Lufthansa service and German immigrants in various South American countries. There was also a significant presence of Italian immigrants in many countries such as Argentina, Chile, and Peru so a large amount of mail to and from Italy is preserved. Although there is correspondence that is clearly personal in nature, a significant amount that survives reflects the commercial ties between Europe and South America. Mail from most European and South American countries exists although some is recorded in very small numbers.<sup>5</sup> Central American countries are among the scarcer ones for mail on the eastward route. Some Scandinavian and Eastern European countries are among the scarcer ones for westbound mail.



Figure 3

Rome to Uruguay, July 7, 1941

From the author's collection



Figure 4

German mail to Brazil, Nov. 30, 1940

From the author's collection





**Figure 5**

Moscow, Nov. 4, 1940, arrival backstamp Buenos Aires, Jan. 2, 1941

Only recorded cover from the Soviet Union to South America via LATI

From the author's collection

Among more sought after items are covers to and from prisoners of war; civilian internees; and senders, recipients, or addresses that reflect some of the historical focal points of WWII. Among these are covers to the internees from the Battleship Graf Spee which had been causing havoc to British shipping in the South Atlantic. It was eventually cornered near the River Platt on December 13, 1940 and slightly damaged. It took refuge in Montevideo, Uruguay for repairs but was forced to leave within 72 hours. The captain, thinking British vessels were now present in

greater numbers, scuttled his ship on exiting Montevideo. The sailors were taken to camps in Argentina, initially to Martin Garcia, an Argentine Naval Arsenal that had served as a prison camp in WWI. Some were later moved to other locations, e.g. Cordoba. Correspondence to internees was first directed through the German embassy in Buenos Aires, but later could be sent to German consulates at the other places of internment.



**Figure 6**

Mail to a Graf Spee internee directed via the German Embassy in Buenos Aires

From the author's collection



Figure 7

Mail to internee at Cordoba

From the author's collection



**Figure 8**

Return correspondence from an internee at Martin Garcia

From the author's collection

### **Use of LATI to avoid British Censorship and Confiscation**

One of the more interesting aspects of LATI service to South America was its use to transport mail ultimately destined for North and Central America. This service was available from the beginning at higher rates (significantly higher than for mail via Lisbon and the PanAm Atlantic routes). The service was useful to avoid British censorship at Bermuda on the North Atlantic route and became even vital as the British confiscated and held mail, often of commercial value to the senders. The Italians took note of this and ultimately decreed that mail destined for Central and South America had to use the national line LATI.<sup>6</sup> I covered this aspect of LATI service in my initial publication<sup>7</sup> in January 1990, but it was the primary focus of an article in the German

Postal Specialist in 1994.<sup>8</sup> Initially the routing was from Brazil northward; but when the British moved censors from Bermuda to Trinidad to intercept this mail, a more elongated route from Buenos Aires across, to, and up the Pacific coast was used. Even then some covers on this routing show censorship by the British, likely at Jamaica. An even scarcer and less known route was for mail, arriving by a variety of means including air, to be forwarded by ship from the port of Lima to Japan, thence overland via Siberia to its ultimate destination.



**Figure 9**

Example of a cover confiscated by the British at Bermuda, prompting the use of a routing via LATI to North America (see article in *Airpost Journal*, Vol. 85, September 2014, pp. 390-393)

From the author's collection,



**Figure 10**

An example of retained mail from neutral Portugal but in light of the addressee possibly containing matters of commercial interest to Germany

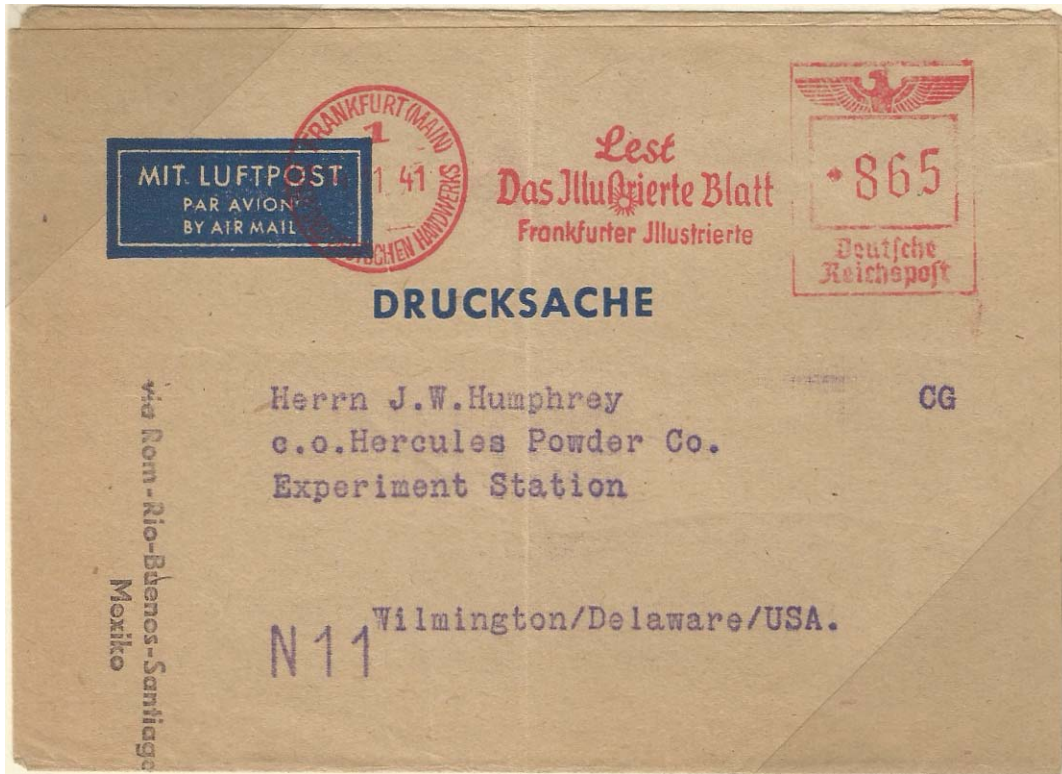
From the author's collection



**Figure 11**

An example of a cover October 13, 1940 from a French prisoner of war to the USA employing the routing via LATI and South America to avoid British censorship (it is difficult to believe they would have confiscated such a letter so the likely intent was to avoid having the British gain strategic information from the correspondence)

From the author's collection



**Figure 12**

Newspaper wrapper using the LATI and Pacific coast route to the USA. Similar wrappers are known sent via Siberia.

From the author's collection





**Figure 13a**

An example, November 14, 1941 that did not escape British censorship (Examiner 823 who reviewed the cover on December 7, 1941!) It also received censorship by the USA. The location of a censor and the length of time a cover might be held by censors could vary, a fact which is often significant in determining routing and carriage.



Figure 13b

Reverse of cover in figure 13

From the author's collection



### **Figure 14**

Although not via air mail, this cover indicates the routing via Japanese ship from Callao, the port of Lima, and via Russia

From the author's collection

### **A Problem area**

One of the interesting problem areas for LATI collectors is mail to and from Venezuela. There is no consistency in franking or route designation. Sometimes mail is marked Trsatlantico (found with and without censorship and likely implied service via the PanAm route), sometimes marked via Recife/Natal and Rome, sometimes via Chile and Recife (but still sometimes found censored by the British), and other variations as well. Incoming mail is equally interesting, especially those covers to "shipping companies" or "petroleum companies" in Maracaibo which often served as a drop mail address for Scandinavian vessels serving the allied cause. Clandestine and drop mail address are slightly outside the main focus of this paper, but are one of the intriguing areas for WWII collectors.



**Figure 15**

A cover from Holland, May 3, 1941 (transit Cologne May 5, Munich censorship) to a drop mail address in Maracaibo, arrival May 27, and forwarded to Dutch Curacao as indicated by censorship there.

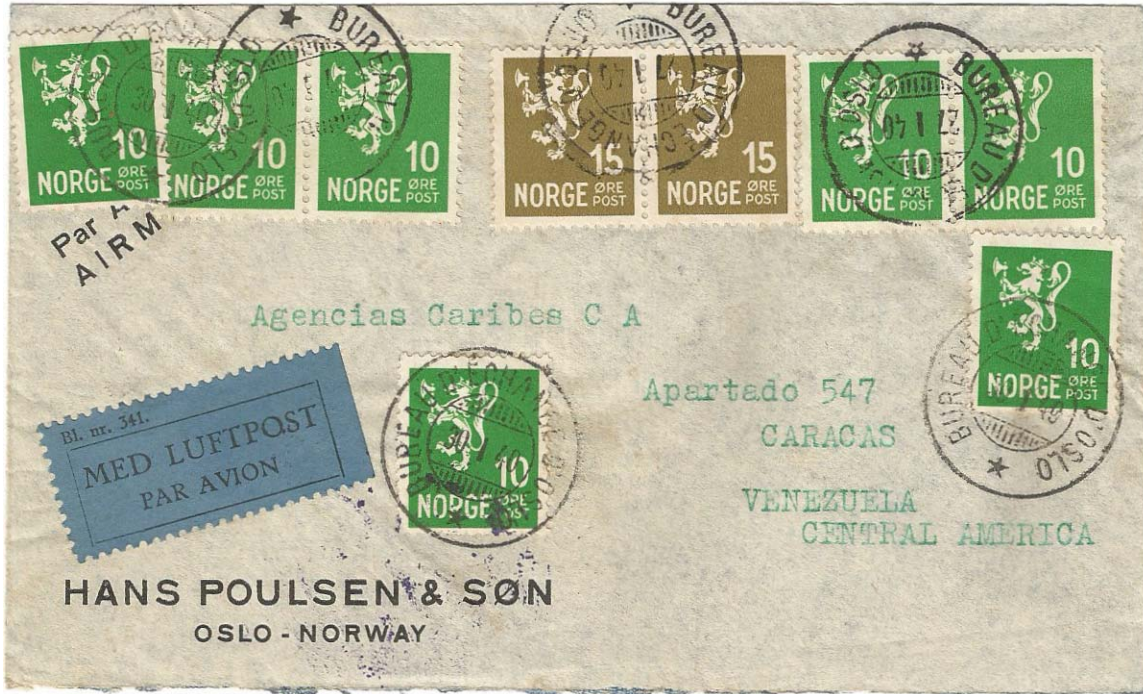
From the author's collection



**Figure 16**

Genoa, Italy, February 7, 1940, to Caracas, arrival backstamp February 17, via LATI

From the author's collection



**Figure 17**

Cover similar to figure 17 but from Oslo (January 27) to Caracas, also a February 17 arrival backstamp, but most likely by Lisbon and FAM 18; both covers indicate maritime interests

From the author's collection

### **End of Service and issues illustrated by returned covers**

Throughout its existence LATI and its service to South America was a security concern to the British, overflying as it did British shipping and naval vessels in the Atlantic, and providing strategic material as cargo on return flights. The United States had those as well as other concerns as it prepared for service across the South Atlantic to Africa. The intrigue to ultimately undo LATI's arrangements in Brazil are nicely summarized in Cusworth's Handbook<sup>9</sup> and others writing on the workings of British and American secret services, writings enhanced by the

declassification of documents from government archives of those secret services. One concern of the United States was over German agents acquiring radio equipment, especially in the United States,<sup>10</sup> but also the role Latin America might have in the process,<sup>11</sup> noting in one declassified report that a German agent in South America had been able to ship radio equipment by post on the Italian line. The gist of the plot that finally ended the service was the forgery of a letter on faked LATI stationery addressed to the general manager of LATI in Brazil purporting to outline a plot to bring the government of the dictator-president of Brazil down.<sup>12</sup> The plot included an elaborate scheme to have this forgery fall into the hands of the Brazilian authorities. It worked and President Vargas, who had previously been reluctant to curtail LATI's operation, pulled the authorizations and LATI service came to an end. The final eastward flight over the Atlantic was December 18, 1941, the final westward flight left Villa Cisneros on December 19.

From a postal history point of view, the recorded final flight dates pose a problem for mail marked for return both in South America and in Europe. A number of letters so marked were posted in sufficient time to make the final flights but were nevertheless still returned. The solution lies most likely in the time items were held by censors, an item mentioned earlier that often poses problems for those who would use only published flight records to try to understand their covers.



Figure 18

Cover posted Berlin, December 3, 1941 which should have given sufficient time to make the final westbound flight. A complicating factor here is that there was no return address so the cover was opened to determine the sender which was then written on the front of the cover, “Associated Press.” Press reports were given special scrutiny by censoring agencies of all countries.

From the author’s collection





Figure 19

Posted Bremen, December 5, 1941 which should have been sufficient time to make the final flight

From the author's collection



Figure 20

Posted December 29, 1941 from Denmark well after the final flights which obviously then had no chance; but it raises questions about how quickly information on the closing of the service was disseminated

From the author's collection

### Final Note

The airpost history of WWII is a very multifaceted one with broad or narrow avenues to explore depending on one's special interest. The story of LATI is just one byway. I hope it open avenues for your collecting and historical interests.

## End Notes

1. <http://www.asemana.publ.cv/PDF/kriolidade-127.pdf>
2. Time table published in *Tratta dall'indicatore generale dei trasporti aerie, Edizione Settembre/Octobre 1940*, illustrated in the Lino Lenzi exhibit, published at <http://issuu.com/qui-filatelìa>
3. These ships were withdrawn in June, 1940 when Italy entered the war in Europe.
4. Cusworth, *The Italian South Atlantic Airline, Fil-Italia Handbook Number 10, Italy and Colonies Study Circle*, 2012, p.8
5. The Cusworth handbook provides at least a sample range of scarcity
6. Notice published in *Rassegna delle Poste e delle Telecomunicazioni*, 1940, fascicolo 6, paragraph 534, pp 876-877, noting the difficulties of communicating with countries in Central and South America on the Rome, Lisbon, NY route due to sequestration and censorship at Bermuda (an Order of December, 12, 1940) available online at <http://www.issp.po.it/fonti/rassegna.htm>
7. Pezzillo, "The South American Service of LATI," *The Airpost Journal*, January 1990, pp. 7-17
8. Miskevich, "AirMail Through South America to the United States," *German Postal Specialist*, 1994, pp. 109-119
9. Cusworth, pp. 86-89

10. [https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/kent-csi/vol4no2/html/v04i2a05p\\_0001.htm](https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/kent-csi/vol4no2/html/v04i2a05p_0001.htm)
  
11. [http://www.nsa.gov/public\\_info/\\_files/cryptologic\\_histories/german\\_clandestine\\_activities.pdf](http://www.nsa.gov/public_info/_files/cryptologic_histories/german_clandestine_activities.pdf)
  
12. Hilton, Hitler's Secret War in South America, 1939--1945: German Military Espionage ..., pp. 205-207

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(available from APS library)