

Yesterday in Stamps:

The Siege of Paris Issue

by Carl T. Boettger (*From Stamps Magazine, June 4, 1949, with images added*)

In July 1870 France declared war on Prussia. The victorious Prussian armies steadily advanced through France to the environs of Paris. The Emperor Napoleon was taken prisoner, the Government transferred to Bordeaux and the people of Paris, after revolutionary outbreaks, set up a temporary republican form of government. On September 19, the siege of Paris began.

The new Government was without suitable postal stationery. To use the stamps of the Empire when that regime was non-existent was out of the question. It was impossible to create new plates for the immediate needs. The plates of the 1849 Ceres issue were resurrected, re-issued and the stamps perforated. This is known as the Siege of Paris issue. It was used only on mail emanating from Paris. But with a wall of Prussian steel around the city, of what use were the stamps? How could letters and information reach the outside world?

Several methods were attempted. Pigeons were flown from Paris, but the Prussians sent falcons after them; result—dead pigeons. Metal containers [Boules de Moulins] filled with mail were floated down the Seine, but again the Prussians outwitted the scheme by placing nets across the river.



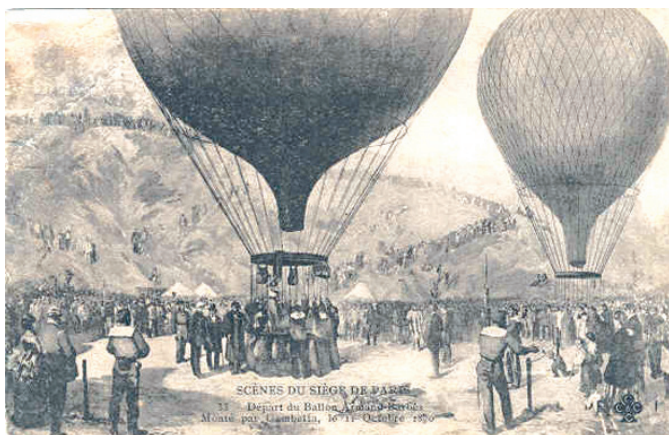
A "boules de moulins"



Cover carried "Par Moulins" December 30, 1870

The third experiment, however, was quite successful. Large balloons were constructed and a basket suspended underneath, enabling the carrying of mail, passengers, a pilot and pigeons.

These manned balloons (ballon monte) could be released



Picture post card showing the lift off of the "Armand Barbes" in October 1870

only when the winds were favorable. The distance covered depended upon the velocity of the wind plus the rate of gas dissipation. The balloon, upon reaching the ground, was deflated and sent to Tours. The mail was delivered to the nearest post office and thence forwarded to its destinations.

The first ascension took place September 23, 1870, at 8 a.m., and after three hours landed 101 km. from Paris. The last flight was January 28, 1871.



Folded letter with "R.St. Lazare" datestamp of Sept. 24 1870, arrival datestamp of Sept. 29 on reverse, carried on the second manned balloon out of Paris

Of the fifty-five postal balloons which left Paris during the siege, two were lost at sea (see page 24); six landed in Belgium; four in Holland; two in Germany and one in Norway at a distance of 1460 km. in 15 hours. This was the longest distance covered. Three were captured by the Prussians (see page 23). The others landed on French soil. From September to January, a period of four months, two and a half million pieces of mail were safely transported by this method.

Obviously, each flight required a new balloon and it was realized at the outset that this was an expensive proposition.



Cover flown on the "Ville de Paris" which crashed in Prussia in December 1870 with 140 pounds of mail and 12 homing pigeons

Therefore another idea was put into operation. Small paper balloons were released with packages of letters and post cards tied to them. These balloons, however, fell into the Prussian lines. Some of the packages broke open while in the air. After the second attempt this method was discontinued. These were known as unmanned balloons (Ballon non-monte). Mail from them is quite rare.



Ballon Monte to San Francisco Cal. endorsed "Par Ballon Monte" and carried on the voyage of the "Fulton," with "Paris R. St. Lazare 5e 29 Oct. 70" double-circle datestamp, large dotted star cancels tying 25c and pair of 30c Napoleon Laureate issue, paying the 80c rate, also with red "San Francisco Paid All Nov. 22" receiving datestamp.



Gazette des Absents, No. 32 of Jan. 26 1871, addressed to Limoges and bearing 20c Siege issue with "17" in Star cancellation and with Rue du Pont Neuf datestamp of Jan. 27, arrival datestamp on reverse; this was the last Ballon Monte flight.

A post card inscribed at left "Par ballon libre" carried on the only unmanned balloon, which was dispatched September 30, 1870 and landed behind Prussian lines

The postal rates varied according to the destination of the letters: — 20 centimes for domestic mail and to Algiers; Belgium, England and Switzerland, 30c; Italy, Germany and Egypt, 40c; parts of Germany, 40c, and other parts, 60c; Sweden and Vienna, 60c. To the Atlantic seaboard of the United States, 70c, and to the interior of the U. S., 80c (see next column); Norway and Russia 80c. Peru, which is exceedingly rare, was 1 franc. Domestic cards were 10c.

The stamps used were the current Ceres heads, and the Laureate Napoleon issue of 1863.

Carried in addition to letters and post cards, were miniature newspapers, such as *La Gazette des Absents* (see next column), *Depeche-Ballon* and many others. These journals had space in which senders could write letters. These newspaper-letters, besides their philatelic value, are documentary evidence of the happenings during the siege. They tell the hardships and deprivations of the beleaguered people:—the anxieties of the populace; the scarcity and rationing of food;

and how, to supply meat, the animals of the zoo were utilized.

How may we determine which letter travelled on which balloon? There are no individual balloon postmarks. Thus it is largely a matter of conjecture but of logic even more. The time of each ascent is known. Hence, if a letter was mailed, as shown by departure postmark, at a time sufficiently prior to the release of any particular balloon, and the arrival backstamp also fits with that flight as recorded, we can safely presume that the letter was carried on that balloon. If two or more flights were released the same day, then your choice is as good as the next—unless arrival postmarks give information.

The list of flights with dates and hours of start, dates and places of ending, is in print in several places.

Departure postmarks are of the usual double circle town type, with office, date and time, applied to the face of the letter. The stamps are cancelled with the star and numeral, or the central office star without numeral, as then in use at Paris. Letters for foreign countries also bear the customary PD in rectangle in brown, black or red, signifying full payment to destination.

Arrival postmarks are usual, and sometimes more than

Continued on page 24



Folded letter carried on "General Uhrich", Nov. 18, 1870



Folded part-printed lettersheet to Luxembourg bearing 10c and 20c Ceres stamps tied by red "Paris 28 Nov. 70" that was carried on the "Jacquard", which crashed in the water near Falmouth.

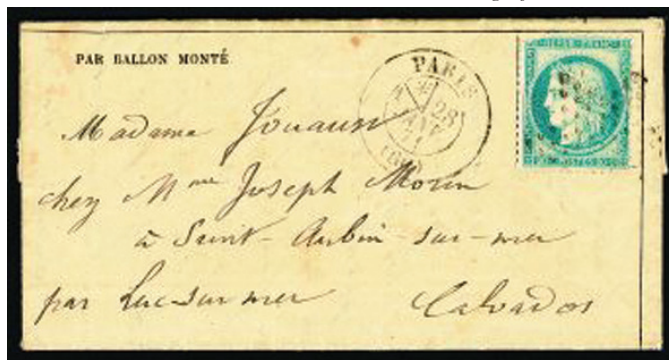
one to a cover. They designate the railway postal route onto which the letter went after the flight. Landing places do not appear as backstamps, as the bags of mail were delivered to the nearest post office and forwarded without further delay. There are, however, three exceptions: the *General Uhrich* fell at Luzarche on November 18; the *Jacquard* fell in the sea off the English coast on November 28; and the *Richard Wallace* was lost at sea on January 28. Some mail from these was washed ashore at La Rochelle and elsewhere along the French coast.

The most striking journey was the flight of the balloon *Ville d'Orleans* (see page 23). Released at Gare du Nord in Paris, 11:40 p.m., November 24, it carried 250 kilos of mail in four bags, 6 pigeons, Leonard Bezier, a passenger, and pilot Paul Roller. High winds carried it northward across the Low Countries, out over the North Sea. There the *Ville d'Orleans* began to descend. The pilot hastily threw two bags of mail overboard, to lighten the load and keep from landing on the sea. Finally they came down at Lifjeld, 100 km. southwest of Oslo, Norway. The bags which had been jettisoned were picked up by a Norwegian ship, taken to Mandal and sent on to France.

Pigeons, as has been mentioned, were carried on these balloons. It was just as important for Parisians to receive mail



Two covers, both addressed to London, carried on the "Ville d'Orleans", which landed at sea. Top, with Rue Montaigne datestamp of Nov. 21 1870, London arrival datestamp of December 12; bottom, with stamp missing (floated off at sea as did many covers on this flight) with Place de la Bourse datestamp of Nov. 24 1870 and red London/Paid arrival marking of Dec. 2.



Gazette des Absents, No. 33 of Jan. 28 1871, bearing Siege 20c with Star cancellation and Paris datestamp of Jan. 28 alongside, sent by ordinary mail to Luc sur Mer, following the lifting of the siege.

as to send it. The pigeons were taken to Tours. Messages were there microfilmed, attached to the pigeons and flown thus to Paris. On arriving, these films or "pellicules" were projected on a screen and copied. No doubt this is the first form of "V-Mail" as we know it nowadays. Should any photographically informed reader be puzzled by this early use of film for photography, let it be mentioned that the "film" was really the collodion image, stripped from the glass plate. This all antedated the use of gelatine photographic emulsions.



Piece of pellicule (mounted for display on a glass microscope slide) carried by pigeon into Paris