

THE ADAMS PICK UP FROM THE SS LEVIATHAN

By Mike Dovey

During the late 1920s the earliest attempts at transferring mail from ship to shore were conducted from SS *Leviathan* to the east coast of the USA. Mike Dovey, of the TPO & Seapost Society, outlines the pioneering equipment developed by part-time inventor Dr Adams that was used and showcases the postal history items carried during the attempts.

In the 1920s, there was a race between the Germans, French and finally the Americans into a means of flying from ships at sea so that mail could be transferred to land far ahead of the ship's arrival. This idea of a fast movement had been used by the P&O Line where they used a rail service to send mail, etc., far quicker between Brindisi and London and also the English Mails TPO in Australia. The Germans and French favoured a catapult system, although using this method meant that the aeroplane could take off just once only and could not return as there was no means of landing. However the Americans began to test their own enterprise.

The American tests

On 31 July 1927, the SS *Leviathan* was some 70 miles from New York. It had a deck that was utilised to launch an aeroplane that had been loaded on board before the ship left Europe. A fragile bi-plane, it had fuel for a two-hour flight and could only carry a payload of around 200 pounds. The pilot was Clarence Chamberlin, an American aviator.

With the SS *Leviathan* at her top speed of 22 knots, Chamberlain succeeded in making a risky cross-wind take off at sea. He then flew about 100 miles to Long Island, then onwards to New Jersey the next day to deliver the mail. His load of 'air mail - via sea' consisted of a single mail bag that contained 900 letters, including around 600 envelopes that had been imprinted 'FIRST AIRMAIL Steamer to Shore' for the occasion - some examples have survived.

A second experimental flight was attempted three weeks later by a US Navy pilot in an open-cockpit aeroplane. His plan was to drop mail onto the *Leviathan's* deck, however fog prevented

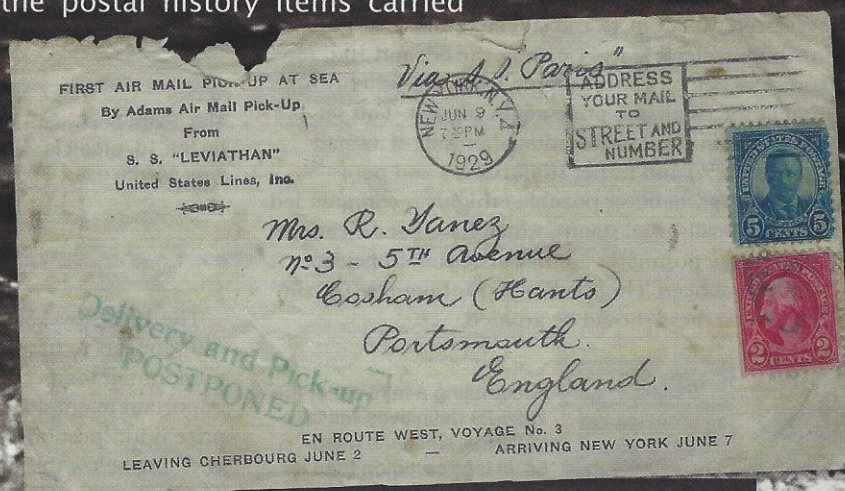


Fig 1 The front of the envelope from the unsuccessful attempt at a first airmail flight to the SS *Leviathan*. A 'POSTPONED' cachet was applied to all of the mail before being returned to sender



Fig 2 The reverse of the envelope showing the cachet applied in anticipation of a successful pick up. This has been annotated in ink as 'Delivery and Pick up Postponed'

the pilot from finding the ship, and he was forced to abandon the attempt and return with the mail undelivered. The returned letters were returned to their senders, after being stamped 'AIR MAIL FLIGHT FAILED TO S.S. LEVIATHAN' and also 'RETURNED TO SENDER AUG 24 1927 DO NOT POST IN THIS WRAPPER AGAIN'.

The Adams Pick Up

Dr Lytle S Adams, a dentist and part-time inventor, devised a means to deliver and pick up mail using a small aeroplane without it having to land and take off. This was to service isolated locations in the USA and was a variation on the pick-up system used by railway travelling post offices (TPOs). A hook is dangled from the aeroplane to engage in a large loop held up by two tall posts on the ground. The loop is attached to a mailbag, then the aeroplane flies low enough to allow the hook to engage with the loop and the mailbag is hauled on board the aeroplane.

A platform made of steel tubing was erected on the deck of the *Leviathan* to support Adams' apparatus. The liner left Cherbourg, France, on 2 June 1929 bound for New York harbour. Adams arranged for a US Navy aeroplane to deliver to and pick-up mail from the ship on either 6 June or 7 June. Alas, all did not go well. On 5 June, the aeroplane that was expected to be used crashed during a test flight. The pilot, Lieutenant Commander George Pond, USN, was unharmed.

The next day, a substitute aeroplane that was carrying the mail to the *Leviathan* was struck by lightning before it could reach the ship. The aeroplane was unharmed, but Pond, unnerved by the incident, returned to base with his cargo undelivered.

On 7 June, heavy fog prevented the same aeroplane from finding the *Leviathan*. The souvenir envelopes that could not be delivered were returned to the people who had posted them marked 'Delivery and Pick-Up/ POSTPONED' (Fig 1 and Fig 2).

By 12 June 1929, the *Leviathan* was outbound, heading for Europe. Dr Adams had arranged for another aeroplane to be fitted with the cable needed for the retrieval part of the Adams package-delivery system. Pond had to make a number of low-level approaches to the ship on the day, before successfully snagging the shipboard part of the apparatus with his trailing cable and mail bag.

Dr Adams and a friend had 2000 cachets printed and numbered for the occasion with half of them addressed to Adams himself (Fig 3). Adams was present on the vessel when this first air mail pick up was carried out. The covers were marked with cachets stating 'FIRST AIR MAIL/TO/SS LEVIATHAN/OF THE UNITED STATES LINES INC./BY ADAMS AIR MAIL PICK-UP'.

Figure 4 shows a cover from the pick up which does not have a number printed on the front. The reason for this is that the envelope contained a typed letter written by the President of the United States Lines Inc. himself (Fig 5). In addition to the Adams' 2000 ready-made envelopes this would make 2001.

Following the first pick up on 25 June 1929, a second mail delivery was made to the *Leviathan* while she was inbound to New York. However there was no pick up made. It is not known why, but any envelopes dated on board the ship for that flight were 'returned to sender' after being marked 'WEST BOUND/ PICKUP Deferred'.



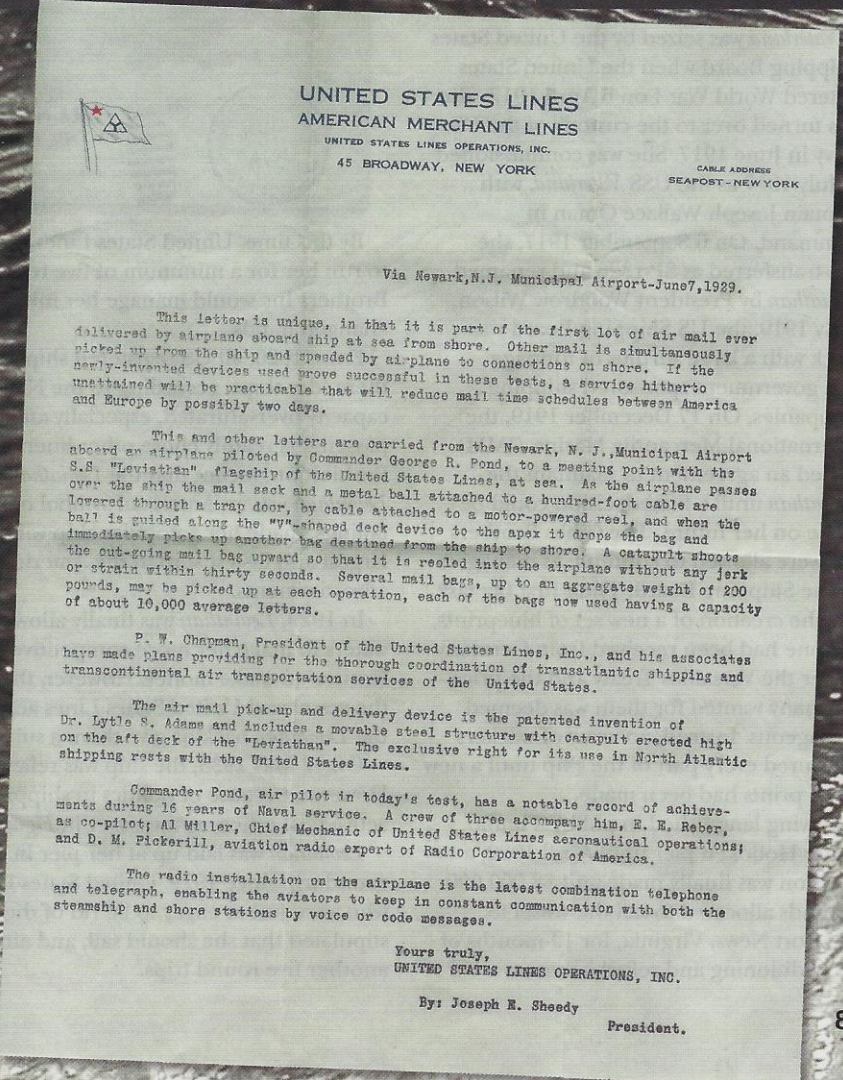
Fig 3 One of the 2000 envelopes prepared by Dr Adams for the first airmail flight to the *Leviathan*



Fig 4 An unnumbered cover from the first successful mail pick up containing a unique letter from the President of United States Lines

Fig 5 The enclosed letter

All covers shown reduced



Base image credit: The SS Leviathan, c1920s, Wikimedia Commons

These attempts did not generate any further interest in making airborne pick up and delivery of mail at sea a standard practice. This may be because a recession in the United States in August 1929 led to the 'crash' on Wall Street in October and then the Great Depression began.

The SS *Leviathan*

SS *Vaterland*, a 54,282 gross ton passenger liner, was built by Blohm & Voss of Hamburg, Germany, as the second of a trio of very large ships for the Hamburg-America Line's trans-Atlantic route. She was launched 3 April 1913 and, upon her completion, was the largest passenger ship in the world, superseding SS *Imperator*, but later being superseded in turn by the last ship of this class, SS *Bismarck*, later renamed the RMS *Majestic*.

The SS *Vaterland* had made only a few trips when, in late July 1914, she arrived at New York city just as World War I broke out. With a return to Germany made difficult by British dominance of the seas, she was laid up at her Hoboken terminal and remained immobile for nearly three years. Later, the three ships of the class were all confiscated as war prizes by the Allies to make up for war losses. The *Vaterland* became the *Leviathan* for the USA, while the *Bismarck* became the White Star's RMS *Majestic* and the *Imperator* became the Cunard Line's RMS *Berengaria*.

Vaterland was seized by the United States Shipping Board when the United States entered World War I on 6 April 1917. She was turned over to the custody of the US Navy in June 1917. She was commissioned in July 1917 as the USS *Vaterland*, with Captain Joseph Wallace Oman in command. On 6 September 1917, she was transferred as SP-1326 and renamed *Leviathan* by President Woodrow Wilson.

By 1919, the US Shipping Board was stuck with a large surplus of tonnage and government sponsored shipping companies. On 17 December 1919, the International Mercantile Marine (IMM) signed an agreement to maintain the *Leviathan* until a final decision could be made on her future. The Gibbs Brothers Inc were allowed to continue as managers by the Shipping Board. Their first big task was the creation of a new set of blueprints, as none had been received from Germany under the Versailles Treaty and the price Germany wanted for them was deemed outrageous. Instead, an army of workers measured every part of the ship until a new set of prints had been made.

Having languished in political limbo at her Hoboken pier until April 1922, a decision was finally made and \$8,000,000 in funds allocated to sail the vessel to Newport News, Virginia, for 14-months of reconditioning and refurbishment.



Fig 6 A cover sent on the last day of operation of the mail office on board the *Leviathan* – or maybe not?



Fig 7 Another cover supposedly from the last day of mail on board the ship

All covers shown reduced



Fig 8 A cover showing the extended use of the 'U.S.-GER. SEA POST' mark in 1934, more than a year after the on-board post office was originally closed

By this time, United States Lines, had bought the ship and was contractually obligated to run her for a minimum of five return voyages on the Atlantic run per year. The Gibbs Brothers Inc would manage her initially and train the crew until ownership officially changed hands.

From 1920, all US registered ships counted as an extension of US territory, making them 'dry ships' according to the National Prohibition Act. With the Atlantic shipping capacity oversaturated, especially after the Immigration Act of 1924, alcohol-seeking passengers readily chose other liners. High labour and fuel costs, compounded by Prohibition, meant that the *Leviathan* soon ran into economic problems. However, the *Leviathan* was an American symbol of power and prestige, which despite her economic failings, made her a popular ship with loyal travellers. She attracted attention as the largest and fastest ship in the American merchant marine and featured in countless advertisements.

In 1929, *Leviathan* was finally allowed to serve 'medicinal alcohol' outside US territorial waters to make her more competitive with foreign lines and was quickly sent on 'Booze Cruises' to make money. However, the Great Depression was the final nail in the coffin for the vessel and United States Lines actively lobbied for the Shipping Board to either take the *Leviathan* back or give them a subsidy for her operation.

On 12 May 1933, the ship was relieved of the post office on board (Fig 6 and Fig 7). However, because of politics in shipping circles, the ship did in fact sail again with an active post office, as the cover in Figure 8 shows.

Leviathan was laid up at her pier in Hoboken in June 1933, having lost \$75,000 per round trip since 1929. United States Lines had been acquired at auction by IMM in 1931, who were just as eager to be rid of their white elephant. The government steadfastly stipulated that she should sail, and after a refurbishment costing \$150,000, she did for another five round trips.

The first round trip sailed on 9 June 1934. In 1937, the *Leviathan* was finally sold to British Metal Industries Ltd, and on 26 January 1938, she set out on her 301st and last voyage, under the command of Captain John Binks. He was the retired master of RMS *Olympic* and had been hired to deliver her to the breakers. She arrived at Rosyth, Scotland, on 14 February. In the 13 years that she served United States Lines, she carried more than a quarter of a million passengers and never ever made a profit.

Dropping the pick up

The use of the Adams Pick Up on board the SS *Leviathan* was not the success that had been hoped for, although following the first pick-up flight in 1928, the service on the US mainland had steadily expanded. However, by 1939, Dr Adams had used all of his own wealth in maintaining the company, and he then sold a major part of it to another investor. They managed to keep the company going throughout the war with the help of government contracts.

The demise of the company was complete with the advent of the HPO (Highway Post Office) routes, where mail was sorted as a bus travelled by road. Throughout all the time of operation of the pick-up service, there was never any profit made (Fig 9). The company was eventually split up and the engineering side using the technology gained in building the pick-ups was made into a new company. This technology was used to great effect, when fully adapted, on aircraft carriers to catch landing aeroplanes, a system still in use to the present day.

The next time you see a jet land on an American aircraft carrier and gets caught on the 'string' with a hook below the aeroplane, just remember that it was all those years ago when Dr Adams first devised the same system to obtain bags of mail – instead of catching bags of mail, the system catches aeroplanes. The other half of the company was sold repeatedly over the years and is now part of US Airways. While the pick-up apparatus for collecting mail is long gone, the company Dr Adams founded is still in existence, but only just.

Other attempts

While all this was going on in the Atlantic, various other nations were fighting to get the best possible result from either catapults and flown aeroplanes. While not on the scale of the experiments in the Atlantic, it was still significant.

On 30 January 1931, there was the very first flight of an aeroplane carrying mail from ship to shore (Fig 10). On 24 January 1931, the mail had been received on board the SS *City of Los Angeles* as per the backstamp on the envelope (not shown).



Fig 9 A cover collected by the Adams Pick Up service at Youngstown in Ohio and delivered to the SS *Leviathan* in August 1929 – two months after the trials on board the ship



Fig 10 A cover prepared for the experimental shore-to-ship flight to the SS *City of Los Angeles* in 1931



Fig 11 A cover carried on the 1931 Goodyear balloon flight. The cachet on the reverse shows that it was delivered to San Pedro and not the designated ports. The very hurried cancel was not very successful because in many cases the ink did not transfer to the cover

The ship had presumably left Los Angeles on that date and on arrival in Honolulu some six days later any mail for the USA was passed to an aeroplane for the flight back to Los Angeles.

The attempt with the aeroplane was maybe not the success envisaged because by June of the same year it was decided that the transit of mail would be attempted by an airship instead of an aeroplane (Fig 11). As a result, a system was devised between the *City of Los Angeles* and the Goodyear airship *Volunteer* to carry mail from San Francisco and Los Angeles to Honolulu or vice versa. Alas, the very first flight was landed at San Pedro on 12 June 1931, which is some distance from either of the designated ports.

It has to be assumed that, much like the Adams Pick Up and other the attempts to speed up the mail, neither of these flights were ever to be a flyer in real terms. Instead, the ships just got faster and faster, making the need to transfer mail to an aircraft unnecessary.

Probably the only thing to come out of all this was that Dr Adams created a pick up system that if he had not thought of would mean that all USA aeroplanes landing on an aircraft carrier would certainly be hard to stop from going straight through the landing deck and into the sea and, more important, we have some great envelopes created to cover the various events.

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For a free copy of the Society's journal and membership application form, please contact: Keith Morris, TPO & Seapost Society, 1 St Mary's Drive, Fairford GL7 4LQ or telephone 01285 713 075.

The Society has recently published a new DVD titled *Paquebot Cancellations of the World and More*. For details of how to obtain a copy, please contact the Society at the above address.