

MONTREAL SALUTES GENERAL BALBO

by Albert Pelsser

The fields of aviation and philately have strong links; so it is no wonder that airmail stamps are so popular. A very unusual set of airmails was issued by Italy in 1933 to commemorate a special transatlantic flight led by General Italo Balbo, who commanded an "aerial armada" of 24 seaplanes from Rome to Chicago, where the World's Fair was being held.



Figure 1

Built in Italy, the Savoia-Marchetti S.55, a real flying catamaran, appeared, in the period between the two world wars, to be one of the most advanced and successful flying boats in the world. Two engines mounted in tandem above the wings powered the airplane. Although its design was not orthodox by any standards, it was a remarkably airworthy craft; in 1926, the S.55 set 14 world records for speed, altitude, and distance with a payload. Twenty-five Savoia-Marchetti S.55X, a military version of the S.55, were delivered in 1933 for an aerial show in mass formation intended to publicize advanced Italian technology. Air Minister General Balbo was also one of Italy's greatest aviators. On the S.55, his hundred crewmen practised precision formation flying for two years and water landing for months before taking off from the Orbetello seaplane base on 1 July 1933 for a transatlantic flight to Chicago. Each plane carried its proper name painted under the wings of the machine and the first four letters of the commander's name. One of the 25 aircraft and a crewman were lost when they landed in Amsterdam, the first leg of the trip. Their route took them to Ireland, Iceland, Greenland, Labrador (Cartwright), New Brunswick (Shediac) and Montreal, before they dazzled the crowds when they arrived at the Chicago's Century of Progress Exposition on 15 July 1933. The outbound flight took 49 hours for the 6,065-mile journey with no mechanical problems. This was the first formation flight to cross the North Atlantic Ocean.

The 24 airplanes arrived at Shediac on 13 July and landed at the Fairchild Aircraft Harbor, Longueuil on 14 July at 13:45. General Balbo and his crew took quarters in the Mount Royal Hotel (on the second and third floors) on Peel Street, Montreal. A formal address of welcome was pronounced at the City Hall around 16:30. In the evening,

a banquet was held at the Mount Royal Hotel, with an Italian touch to the menu. On 15 July 1933, the planes took off for the Montreal-Chicago hop around 10:00, later than anticipated because of bad weather conditions.

Some 3,500 cards and covers were flown on the various legs of the cruise; they have been avidly collected ever since. To commemorate Balbo's landing in Newfoundland and to supply postage for mail to be carried by Balbo on the return flight to Rome, the Newfoundland postal authorities overprinted and surcharged in black the 75-cent bister "Labrador, the Land of Gold" airmail stamp Scott #C17 to become Scott #C18 (see Figure 1).

The Italian postal service created two three-part airmail stamps to honour the crossing over the Atlantic (Scott #C48-49). Scott #C49 (with further overprinting) was reproduced on the Paraguay souvenir sheet shown at Figure 2, issued for the 100th anniversary of Sir Rowland Hill's death and the 75th anniversary of aviation. The design of this souvenir sheet included the International Civil Aviation Organization emblem (ICAO's headquarters have been in Montreal since 1945), surrounded by *75° Aniversario de OACI*. Paraguay inadvertently confused the 75th anniversary of the Wright brothers' triumph, i.e. the first successful flight of a manned heavier-than-air vehicle on 17 December 1903, with ICAO that, even today, has not yet reached such a milestone. It should also be noted that the date of issuance of the set by Paraguay in June 1979 did not correspond to an anniversary of the first flight (which should have been in 1978) nor to an anniversary celebrated by ICAO.

The left part of the triptych is a registered express label showing the Italian flag, with the arms of Savoy. The central part bearing the face of King Victor Emmanuel III is denominated 5.25 lira, the rate then for an ordinary registered letter sent by express mail. The right part shows planes in transatlantic flight from Rome (represented by the Coliseum on the left part) to Chicago (represented by skyscrapers on the right part) and is denominated 44.75 lira, then the supplementary charge for the flight for delivery to the United States and Canada; thus the total charge for mail carried to North America was 50 lira.

The border tablets of the triptych are coloured red and green. On the left stamp, the words *ITALIA-POSTA AERA* and *RACCOMANDATA PER ESPRESSO* appear respectively on the top and bottom. The right stamp has the words *POSTA AERA ITALIANA* on the top and *CROCIERA NORD ATLANTICA* at the bottom. On the left and right panels, appear vertically *MCMXXXIII* and *ANNO XI*, corresponding to the year 1933 as the 11th anniversary of Mussolini's government in Italy.

The left part is overprinted in black *APPARECHIO*



Figure 2

(airplane in English) on one line, and on the second the letter "I" (i.e. the international aeronautic code for Italian aircraft) followed by *MIGL* (i.e. the first four letters of the last name of the pilot who would carry mail franked with that stamp; in this case Capt. Miglia). Twenty triptychs value differ in name overprint.

At the time of their issue, the Italian stamps did not sell well, undoubtedly because of their hefty face value, which many collectors could not pay during the height of the Depression, and the fact that a complete set consisted of a total of 40 triptychs. The Italian dealer who had a hand the creation of the stamps, Vittorio Lo Bianco, conceived of the idea of overprinting the right part of the 50-lira values with *VOLO DI RITORNO NEW YORK-ROMA* in black in

two lines. Five hundred triptychs were so overprinted. He was hoping the U.S. Post Department would accept mail franked with both the overprinted triptych and a 3-cent U.S. stamp for letters returning to Italy from New York. Because that plan did not succeed, the overprinted triptychs were temporarily forgotten. However, they appeared later in the Italian stamp catalogues. Although quite valuable today, the stamp with the return trip dealer-added overprint has no legal status.

Following celebrations in Chicago and New York, the fleet took off for Rome on 25 July 1933. A crash in the Azores took the life of a second crewman. Balbo's remaining 23 flying boats arrived home on 12 August, still flying in tight V formation.

CHECKLIST

Italy	C48-C49	1933 May 20	Balbo's transatlantic flight
Newfoundland	C17	1933 May 31	Labrador, The Land of God
Newfoundland	C18	1933 Jul 24	Newfoundland #C17 overprinted and surcharged for Balbo flight
Paraguay	1892s/s	1979 Jun 11	Stamp-on-stamp Italy #C49

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