The Horseshoe Route   Robert Clark

Chapter 4: Services in June 1940 by other Airlines

4.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the airmail services across the Mediterranean by *Ala Littoria*, *KLM* and *Air France* both before and immediately after 10th June 1940.

4.2 *KLM/KNILM*

During the early part of the war, the *KLM* service to the Dutch East Indies was between Naples and Bandung. The route was: Naples – Athens – Alexandria – Lydda – Baghdad – Basra – Jask – Karachi – Jodhpur – Allahabad – Calcutta – Rangoon – Bangkok – Penang – Medan – Singapore – Palembang – Batavia – Bandung. Mail on *KLM* flights from the Dutch East Indies was subject to being censored in Singapore. That meant that it was taken off one flight, censored and then put on the next flight [Dyc]. Not surprisingly, this was extremely unpopular with the Dutch authorities although it is not clear if all items were offloaded or only a selection.

The Netherlands was invaded by Germany on 10th May 1940 and the flights from Bandung on the 6th, 9th and 14th May were recalled and the mail returned to the sender. There were through flights from Bandung to Naples on 27th May – 2nd June and on 3rd – 9th June. The last flights from Naples to Bandung were on 2nd – 10th and 9th – 17th June [AH].

Figure 4.1 shows a cover from Java to London postmarked on 22nd May which was opened by the censors in the Dutch East Indies, but has no Singapore censor marks. It is franked with 75c which is the *KLM* rate to the UK for 10gms (2 x 30c air fee + 15c surface) [Boy]. It was either flown on the second last through flight to Naples on 27th May or, if offloaded in Singapore, on the last flight on 3rd June.

An article [Dyc] describes 11 items sent on the last through flight from the Dutch East Indies on 3rd June. However, this mail was offloaded in Singapore to be censored and so did not continue on that flight. All 11 items have the Singapore code *L* and *30* both enclosed in a circle and it appears that, after being offloaded and censored in Singapore, they were returned to *KLM* for their next flight from Singapore on 10th June. That flight was held up in Medan on 10th June for several days before returning to Batavia [AH]. They were then returned to the sender by the Dutch authorities Many of the items were reposted on dates ranging from 5th to 12th July which suggests that it was some time before the authorities in Batavia decided to return the covers to the senders.

Items posted in the Dutch East Indies on 7th June [Leg4] and 8th June [McC] and addressed to the UK have also been reported. They both have the Singapore code *A* and *30* and have not been returned to sender. If they were offloaded in Singapore from the *KLM* flight of 10th June then they would not be returned to *KLM* after being censored as, by this time, it was clear that the service was suspended. They would therefore likely have been sent on from Singapore by sea in the same way as the mail from *SW 248* [Cla5].

Figure 4.1: Java – London postmarked 22nd May 1940.

Figure 4.2 shows a registered airmail cover postmarked Switzerland 27th May 1940 and addressed to Perth, Australia. First sent to Chiasso (in manuscript on front) and then Locarno. Flown from Locarno to Rome by *Swissair* and then by rail from Rome to Brindisi (Brindisi transit mark on 31st May) presumably with the intention of connecting with the *BOAC* service *SE 251* to Australia that flew from Marseilles to Athens via Bracciano (Rome) and Brindisi on 31st May and arrived in Darwin on 8th June [Cla11].

However there is a Napoli transit mark on 2nd June and so it was not flown on the *BOAC* service, but instead sent by train from Brindisi to Naples to connect with a *KLM* flight from Naples to Batavia and Bandung. There were flights from Naples on 2nd June arriving 8th June and on 9th June arriving 17th June. As it has a Darwin transit datestamp on 25th June, the cover likely missed the 2nd June service and was flown on the last *KLM* service from Naples on 9th June arriving in Batavia on 17th June.

Then flown Batavia to Darwin by *KNILM* on 23rd – 24th June and Darwin to Perth by the twice weekly *MacRobertson-Miller Aviation* service on Wednesday 26th – Thursday 27th June. It has a Perth arrival datestamp on 27th June where it was opened by the censors in Perth and sealed with a 5 dot (Perth) censor label.

Figure 4.2: Switzerland – Australia, flown from Naples by *KLM*.

Qantas had always opposed *KNILM* flying mail from Sydney, but according to the *Sydney Morning Herald* of 17th June, the *KNILM* flight that left Sydney on Saturday 15th June carried mail for Darwin, Sourabaya, Batavia and Singapore as the *Qantas* service had been temporarily suspended after *SW 249* on 12th June until the first *Horseshoe* service on 19th June. This was the first time that mail had been flown from Sydney by a foreign airline [Tro].

KLM started a regular service between Lydda and Bandung in late July 1940. *Lydda Airport is now Tel Aviv Ben Gurion International Airport*.

4.3 *Ala Littoria*, June 1940

Before 10th June 1940, the Italian airline *Ala Littoria Societa Anonima (ALSA)* had a service from Rome to Basra via Brindisi, Athens, Rhodes, Haifa and Baghdad and a service from Rome to Italian East Africa via Syracuse, Benghazi, Cairo, Wadi Halfa, Khartoum and Asmara. (According to NACIS 47 on 8th May, Rome – Cairo was operated directly from 1st May.) *CAIS 51* on 5th June reported that *Ala Littoria* had suspended the Rhodes – Basra service. The *Greek P.O. Circular 177228* of 9th June 1940 reported [Pap]:

> *"... the flights of Ala Littoria are now suspended. The air services to Dodecanese Islands and Albania are also suspended. Airmail to Italy is now via Budapest (DLH). Airmail to France and GB is with Imperial Airways."*

The *BOAC* (not *Imperial Airways*) service of course did not last much longer with the last service from Athens to UK on 9th June and from Athens to Egypt on 11th June.

The cover in Figure 4.3 was postmarked in Boston, USA on 20th May and is addressed to Alexandria in Egypt. It has a transit mark in Cairo on 31st May and an Alexandria datestamp on 4th June. It was likely flown on the trans-Atlantic flight from New York to Lisbon on 22nd – 26th May. After arrival in Lisbon, it was likely flown to Rome by *Ala Littoria*. The *KLM* and *BOAC* services from Italy to Egypt went to Alexandria while the *Ala Littoria* service to Addis Ababa was the only service from Italy to Cairo and so the cover was likely flown on one of the last Rome – Cairo flights by *Ala Littoria*.

Figure 4.3: USA – Egypt with Lisbon – Rome – Cairo by *Ala Littoria*.

A cover, postmarked in Rovetta, north of Milan) on 3rd June and addressed to West Africa was opened by the censors in Khartoum where it was backstamped on 7th June. This was likely flown on the last flight from Rome to Cairo on Thursday 6th June and on to Khartoum on the 7th. It then was flown to West Africa, but by the time it arrived, Italy had entered the war and it was redirected to '*The Custodian of Enemy Property, Accra*'.

After 10th June 1940

Although the Mediterranean was closed to allied air mail services after 10th June, that was not the case for Italian flights. *CAIS 54* on 26th June reported that the *Ala Littoria* Rome – Lisbon service via Cagliari (Sardinia) and Barcelona was still in operation. This enabled a connection from Athens and Rome with the *Pan American* Transatlantic service from Lisbon. According to *CAIS 53* on 19th June there was also a Barcelona – Lisbon service operated by the Spanish company *Trafico Aero Espanol*.

The cover to Switzerland in Figure 4.4 is postmarked in Detroit at 5pm on 12th June 1940 and has a St Moritz backstamp on 18th June. It therefore made very good progress from USA to Switzerland. There were *Pan American* flights from New York to Lisbon on 13th – 14th June and on 15th – 16th June and so it made a very tight connection in either New York or in Lisbon. It would have been flown from Lisbon to Rome by *Ala Littoria* and then from Rome to St Moritz by rail.

Figure 4.4: USA – Switzerland *by Pan Am* and *Ala Littoria* 12th – 18th June 1940.

The cover on Figure 4.5 is postmarked *Thessaloniki* (Salonica) on 23rd June 1940 and is addressed to London where it was opened by the censors. It has *Jusqu'a Lisbonne* below the *Par Avion* etiquette and has transit marks on the back in Athens on 24th June and in Lisbon on 29th June. It is franked with 26 Drachmas which is the same as the rate for Athens – Lisbon – USA.

The air mail service from Athens to Italy was now *Deutsche Lufthansa (DLH)* via Budapest. Rome – Lisbon would then be by *Ala Littoria.* Therefore, although it seems unlikely that *DLH* and *Ala Littoria* would have carried mail for Britain, it seems to have happened. A surface route would also not have avoided passing through axis territory and, given the circumstances, would have been a very tight schedule. The cover would then either complete its journey to the UK by surface or was flown on the new Lisbon – UK service.

Figure 4.5: Greece to Britain, flown Athens–Rome–Lisbon in late June 1940.

CAIS 56 on 10th July 1940 reported that the *Ala Littoria* Brindisi – Athens – Rhodes service had been resumed on a weekly basis [Win], while the *Greek P.O. Circular 197767* of 19th July 1940 reported:

> *"the ALSA services are now resumed. Airmail to the Dodecanese Islands, Italy, France, Switzerland and America by ALSA is now possible."* [Pap]

These last two covers show that although the air route through the Mediterranean was closed to *BOAC* and *KLM*, it was still available to airlines of axis countries. The service was suspended again on 26th October just before the invasion of Greece by Italy on 28th October 1940.

4.4 *Air France*

Air France had flown a weekly service from Marseilles to Hong Kong whose main purpose was to connect France with its colony in Indo China. The route was Marseilles – Tunis – Tripoli – Benghazi – Alexandria – Beirut – Baghdad – Bushire – Jask – Karachi – Jodhpur – Gwalior – Allahabad – Calcutta – Akyab – Rangoon – Bangkok – Saigon – Hanoi – Hong Kong. The last services on that route were Marseilles – Hong Kong on 30th May – 5th June and Hong Kong – Marseilles on 25th – 30th May. It was replaced by service via the Sahara that avoided the Italian held cities of Tripoli and Benghazi.

The cover to France in Figure 4.6 is postmarked in Hanoi on 23rd May and on 24th May. It would have been flown on the last *Air France* flight from Hanoi via Benghazi and Tripoli on 25th May and arrived in Marseilles on 30th May. It was backstamped on arrival in St Loup Si Semouse on 1st June.

Figure 4.6: Indo China – France, flown by *Air France*.

Because of the threat of Italy entering WW2, at the beginning of June *Air France* replaced their Marseilles – Beirut service via Tripoli and Benghazi (which were under Italian control) by a long detour across the Sahara. The new route between Marseilles and Beirut was **Algiers** – Aoulef – **Gao** – Niamey – Zinder – **Fort Lamy** – Al Fashir – **Khartoum** – Wadi Halfa – Luxor – Cairo [AH]. (The overnight stops are shown in bold.) across the Sahara.

The *Air France Sahara Route*, the original route via Tripoli and the *BOAC Sahara Route* are shown in the map in Figure 4.7.
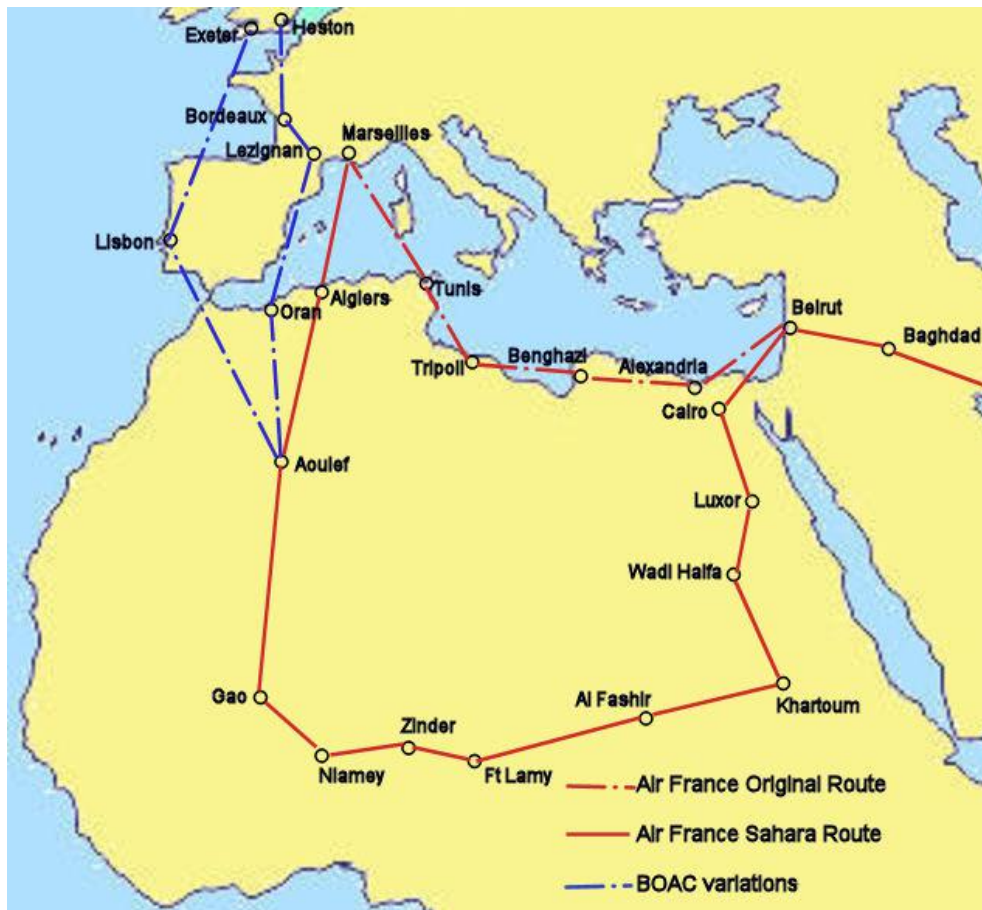
Figure 4.7: The *BOAC* and *Air France* Sahara Routes

Three services in each direction were completed using this revised route. Westward services left Hong Kong on 1st, 8th and 15th June and arrived in Marseilles on 9th, 17th and 29th June while eastward services left Marseilles on 2nd, 9th and 16th June and arrived in Hong Kong on 11th, 18th and 26th June. A fourth service left Hong Kong two days late on 23rd June and Saigon on 25th June bound for Bangkok, but on approaching the Siamese border received radio instructions to return to Saigon [AH].

The cover in Figure 4.8 is postmarked in Moulins sur Allier in central France on 1st June 1940 and is addressed to Bombay where it was opened by the censors and backstamped for delivery at 8 a.m. on 15th June. It would have been off-loaded from the Air France service at Karachi. According to [AH], the first trans Sahara flight left Marseilles on 1st June and was overnight in Karachi on 8th – 9th June suggesting a significant delay by the censors. The second flight not arriving in Karachi until 15th June [AH] and so that would rule it out.

The cover in Figure 4.9 is postmarked in Beyrouth (Beirut) in Lebanon on 6th June and is addressed to the UK where it was opened by the censors. The *Air France* services that left Hong Kong on 1st and 8th June were overnight in Beirut on 4th – 5th and 12th – 13th June respectively and so this cover was flown on the second flight via the Sahara on 13th – 17th June. Presumably it went from Marseilles by surface to Lisbon and was sent from there either by sea or by flying boat, perhaps *Cathay* on 26th June.

Figure 4.8: Airmail cover from France postmarked on 1ˢᵗ June 1940 and flown via the Sahara.

Figure 4.9: Airmail cover from Lebanon postmarked on 6ᵗʰ June 1940 and flown via the Sahara.

The registered cover in Figure 4.10 is postmarked in Biarritz on 14th June 1940 and is addressed to Mussooree in India where it was backstamped on 26th June. It was passed by the censor in Karachi (B). The third and last Air France flight across the Sahara left Marseilles on 16th June and arrived in Karachi on 22nd June.

The service between Marseilles and Beirut was re-opened on 27th August and was now via Rome and Athens [CC1].

Figure 4.10: France – India flown on last trans Sahara service.

Air France had set up a Marseilles – Oran – Tangier – Lisbon air mail service in March 1940 to connect at Lisbon with the *Pan Am* trans Atlantic service. (The flights left Lisbon on Mondays and Fridays while the flight from Marseilles was on Tuesdays and Saturdays.) It enabled a through airmail service to USA from Australia and New Zealand with mail being off-loaded from the Qantas / BOAC service at Marseilles and then being flown to Lisbon. It also enabled them to use their existing (Hong Kong) – Egypt – Marseilles service to provide a service from Egypt to USA that was started on 16th May. The rate was 70 Mills for 5 grams compared with the *Ala Littoria* service which had a rate of 145 Mills for 10 grams [Boy].

The air mail cover to USA in Figure 4.11, postmarked in Alexandria on 5th June, is franked with 70 Mills and so was intended to go via this service. It would have missed the first *Air France* service via the Sahara that was in Cairo on 5th June and been flown from Cairo to Marseilles on the second service on 13th – 17th June. It has a black 'X' Jusqu'a cancel that was applied in Marseilles (Toulouse?) showing that the air mail service terminated there as the Marseilles – Oran – Tangier – Lisbon air mail service had been terminated by 17th June. It presumably then went by surface to Lisbon and then by sea. It is backstamped in New York on 9th July.

Figure 4.11: Airmail cover from Egypt postmarked on 5th June 1940 and flown via the Sahara.