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Author(s)	William K. Everson William Boehnel
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AIR MAIL/1932

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"AIR MAIL" (Universal, 1932) Directed by John Ford; written by Lieut-Commander Frank Wead and Dale van Every; Camera, Karl Freund; 8 rls With Pat O'Brien, Gloria Stuart, Ralph Bellamy, Lillian Bond, Russell Hopton, Slim Summerville, Leslie Fenton, Frank Albertson, William Daly, Tom Carrigan, Francis Ford, David Landau, Hans Furburg, Charles de la Motte, Lieut. Pat Davis, Lew Kelly, Frank Beal, James Donlon, Louise Macintosh, James Flavin, Jim Thorpe, Jack Pennick, Ed Burns.

Stunt flying by Paul Lantz

"Air Mail" marked John Ford's first association with ex-Naval officer Frank Wead, one of the most prolific writers of aviation and service scenarios in the thirties, and himself the subject of the later John Ford-John Wayne film, "Wings of Eagles". Not a major Ford, "Air Mail" is one of his least known yet in many ways one of his most entertaining films, made at a time when he was turning out films (and good ones, as witness "Pilgrimage" in our next series) so prolifically at Fox that one wonders why and how he found the time to do this one at Universal. (He hadn't been at Universal since his Harry Carey days in the early 20's, not has he ever returned to Universal since; why the property wasn't handed to a Universal contract director like William Wyler or James Whale is something of a mystery). It's formula stuff perhaps, but Ford's various trademarks are visible throughout; moreover the dialogue is punchy and snappy, the performances uniformly good (it's a pleasure to see the two young ladies from "The Old Dark House" together again), and the camerawork (by Karl Freund) and the manipulation of exceptionally realistic miniatures, really quite fine. One sometimes wonders why these pioneering aerodromes were always constructed in locations that boasted a plethora of mountain peaks, electric nylons and constant fogs, causing more planes to crash than to get through safely, but perhaps that's just dramatic license. A programmer, "Air Mail" is, like all such Universal programmers, a thoroughly professional and vastly entertaining job that deserves more attention than we can give it in these notes, but hopefully we can remedy that in the comments prior to the screening, the discussion period afterwards.

---- William K. Everson ----

At the Mayfair:

Pat O'Brien Ralph Bellamy
Gloria Stuart Lillian Bond
Slim Summerville Leslie Fenton
Frank Albertson William Daly
Tom Carrigan Francis Ford
David Landau Hans Furburg
Radio Announcer David Landau

By WILLIAM BOEHNEL

ALL the better-class virtues of melodrama are present in "Air Mail," at the Mayfair; suspense, action, thrills; a simple, well-told plot and some mighty fine acting. In a week that has not been even averagely in the cinema—indeed, it could be described as a pretty poor one—"Air Mail" stands out. **World-Telegram**

Some more exacting observers of things cinematic may report to that the sight of airplanes crashing and making forced landings is no longer as thrilling as it once was and that the inevitable conflict between two characters of the Sergeant Quirt-Captain Flagg type has lost some of its effect by repeated usage.

I, for one, however, am convinced, especially after witnessing "Air Mail," that neither of these staple elements of movie melodramas is as wooden or passe as it obviously seems if it is handled with a certain amount of intelligence and freshness. **NOV 8**

And certainly this is what has happened in the case of "Air Mail." Old material has been given a fresh and intelligent treatment and the result is a rattling good melodrama.

The narrative has to deal with a phlegmatic braggart who also happens to be a brilliant flier and what happens when he comes to a desert airport to replace a mail flier who has crashed a few days before. He immediately makes love to another flier's wife, breaks all the rules of the airport and is constantly at odds with the commander of the flying field.

When the commander, whom the braggart has known and flown with years before, crashes in an isolated mountain spot and is left there to die from starvation because no rescue plane can land in the region, this braggart takes a plane and effects the rescue in one of the most thrilling air stunts ever filmed.

As the braggart, Pat O'Brien establishes himself more and more firmly as a screen star and the best moments of the film are those which centre mostly upon him. Ralph Bellamy does good work as the commander of the flying field and Lillian Bond is both alluring and capable as a faithless wife. The others in the cast are all good.

By Marguerite Tavelar

"Air Mail"—Mayfair

"AIR MAIL," a screen drama, produced by Universal, directed by John Ford and presented at the Mayfair with the following cast:

Pat O'Brien Ralph Bellamy
Gloria Stuart Lillian Bond
Slim Summerville Leslie Fenton
Frank Albertson William Daly
Tom Carrigan Francis Ford
David Landau Hans Furburg
Radio operator David Landau

"Air Mail," now showing at the Mayfair, should not be missed. It is an exciting, rapid and thrillingly performed picture of Uncle Sam's mail flights across the country. John Ford has put into his direction something of the pioneer, pathfinding quality that the subject deserves and at the same time never loses track of the drama entangled in the lives of his small group of mail-fliers stationed at a lonely airport on the West Coast.

The story hinges on that quotation from Herodotus carved over the entrance of the main postoffice on Eighth Avenue here: "Neither snow nor rain nor gloom of night stays these couriers."

From the swift completion of their appointed rounds, it would have easily been possible to make this picture a sentimental bit of hokum, but Mr. Ford and his writers have restrained themselves, for the most part, from doing this; and certainly the grand performance of Pat O'Brien as the daredevil flier gives the picture the authenticity striven for.

A great deal that is usually new to the layman is recorded here. It has been filmed charmingly and Mr. Ford's manner of presenting his material is so orderly and connected that attention is riveted to the screen from the opening shots, describing in a few flashes the history of long distance mail carrying, to the final ones, completing the appointed rounds of the 1932 route.

The dialogue is rich in flying phraseology. The picture shows in simple detail the method of contact between fliers and their home airport by wireless, telephone and other instruments in the small glass-fronted office depicted, so that one may follow clearly the intricate working of the newest system of transportation. Marvelous shots of exhibition flying are shown and more than one graphic view of a crash-up. A hair-raising picture of landing a plane and its take-off on a mountain peak where O'Brien swoops down to rescue a fellow flier is presented with a subsequent shot of the plane falling apart in mid-air O'Brien throws his passenger out to save his life by forcing him to make a parachute landing.

The snowstorm at Christmas at the airport is beautifully done, with glimpses of the ghostly planes outside the frost-covered windows and their later take-offs in the blinding storm. The flares, too, lighting up the night for the fliers, make a spectacular sight.

This is a mere statistical report of a story which has sharp drama in its human relationships and exciting characterizations of the men who fly the mail. Mr. O'Brien is not the only excellent member of the cast. All of them give a fine account of themselves.

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