

MAY 2005

The POST HORN



Up and Away ... to Norway



Consular Fee Stamps and Norwegian Independence

WWW.SCC-ONLINE.ORG

JOURNAL OF THE SCANDINAVIAN COLLECTORS CLUB
MAY 2005

Paris to Norway: The Flight of the “Ville d’Orléans”

By Michael Meadowcroft

The appalling horrors of two world wars within a single generation were the catalyst for the formation of what is now the European Union. It is often forgotten, however, that France and Germany had, in fact, also gone to war just 44 years before the first global cataclysm. Napoleon III’s disastrous declaration of war on Prussia on July 19, 1870, led directly to the siege of Paris, which lasted from September 18, 1870, to January 28, 1871, and produced some of the most famous balloon mail in history. It is sometimes said that three million letters were sent by balloon during the siege, and that five million of them are still around! Certainly philatelists have to be on their guard for forgeries.

Parisians were desperate to get mail out of the city and their

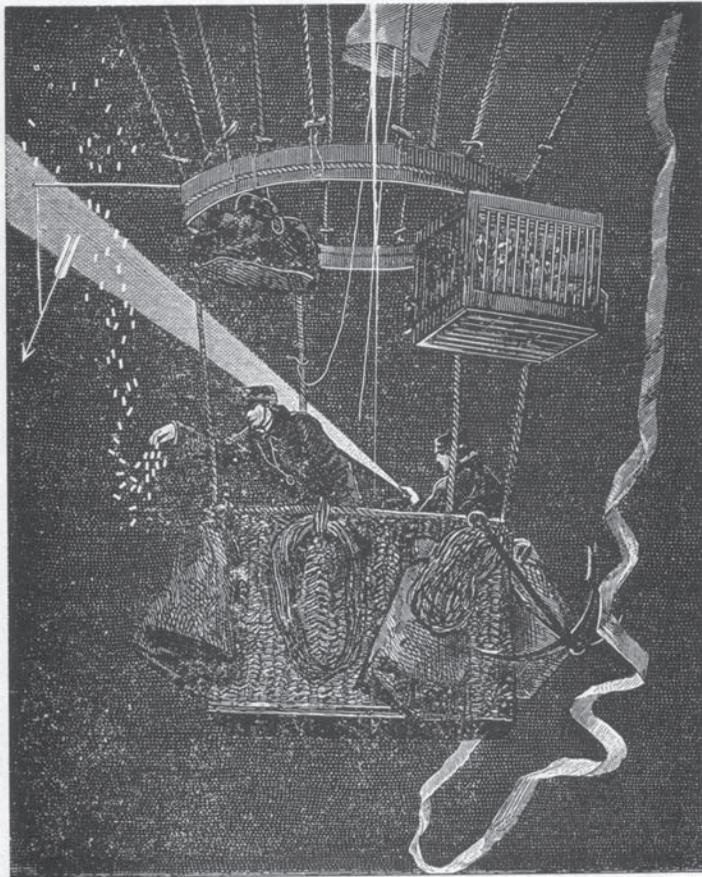
families and business associates were keen to get mail in. Various methods were tried, including the use of pigeons and hiding letters in sacks of rice. A number of diplomats risked carrying non-embassy mail for friends. One ingenious scheme to get letters into Paris involved packing them into special zinc containers complete with ailerons and launching them into the fast flowing river Seine just north of Paris. Not one reached the city during the siege but a number have been found since and mail from these “Boules de Moulins” fetches high prices at auction. (Moulins, incidentally, was the Auvergne town where the company running the scheme had its office and not where the “boules” were put into the Seine.)

Balloon Mail Instituted

The main means of getting mail out of Paris was the manned balloon, or Ballons Montés, which ascended from the city’s center – usually the Gare du Nord – at regular intervals. Specialists in the Franco-Prussian war are able to allocate letters to individual balloons by the date stamps of their acceptance by the post offices. In addition, their arrival date stamps help to identify them. Most of the Ballon Monté mail is on pro-forma entires, printed on thin paper.

By the time the Administration of Telegraphs came to sponsor the 33rd balloon – the 28th to carry mail – on the 67th day of the siege, flights were regarded as routine. The 33rd balloon was named the “Ville d’Orléans” in honor of the town recently liberated by French forces. Orléans was, however, recaptured by the Germans less than two months later.





Contemporary sketch of how the “Ville d’Orléans” might have looked on the night of November 24-25, 1870 as it floated toward a landing in Norway. The pilot is throwing out cigarette paper to see which way the balloon is drifting. The arrow (left) and paper streamer (right) serve the same purpose. Note the mail bags on the basket and the cage for homing pigeons fastened to the ring. (Illustration from *Paris par Moulins: 1870-71*.)

the early hours of November 25, at a height of 2,000 meters, they were enveloped in thick fog, they were unworried, particularly as they thought they could hear the persistent sound of railway trains, which they assumed were crossing northern France and, later, Belgium.

As dawn broke on November 25, the balloon began to drop through the dispersing fog. As they descended, what appeared to be a huge forest covered with melting snow came into view. They still thought they could hear the sound of trains, though, curiously, none of these unseen trains ever sounded a whistle. Then, to their horror, as the balloon descended further, they realized that they were flying over the North Sea. The snow-covered forest trees were, in fact, the crests of waves and the train sounds were the noise of the sea.

They were losing height and to ditch in the sea would be

The captain, or “aerostier,” of the balloon was 26-year-old Paul Rolier, a civil engineer who volunteered and had just completed a short course in how to fly a balloon. Rolier was accompanied by one passenger, Leonard Bezier. Bezier was carrying an important message addressed to Leon Gambetta, the French minister of the interior, who had escaped from Paris by balloon on October 7 and who was now ensconced with the rest of the government in Tours, south of Paris. The message was that General Trochu had that day formulated plans for the Second Army of Paris to break out of the city and to combine with the Army of the Loire.

When the balloon set off just before midnight November 24, 1870, it was carrying four post bags, each containing one day’s mail, with a total weight of around 250 kilos. There was a southerly breeze, which should have enabled the “Ville d’Orléans” to reach northern France or Belgium without problems. However, as would become significant later, the stars were obscured. The balloon rose rapidly and was soon out of range of Prussian guns as the two aerostiers watched the lights of Paris recede into the distance. Even when, in



French semi-postal stamp (Scott SP199, 1955) marks the balloon mail from Paris. (Illustration courtesy of Stan Luft.)



fatal. Desperately they threw ballast, parcels of propaganda leaflets, and newspapers overboard and tried in vain to descend near passing ships. Later, more bags of sand were jettisoned into the sea, along with the largest mailbag. Around mid-day the balloon was observed off the coast of southern Norway, near the town of Mandal, before it disappeared into thick fog.



France air mail issue (Scott AP20, 1971) shows a Paris siege balloon rising from the Gare d'Austerlitz railroad station. (Illustration courtesy of Stan Luft.)

Descent into Norway

Shortly afterward, Rolier decided to descend. Through a break in the fog, he realized that they were over some mountains, but they still had no idea where they were. With difficulty, they managed to bail out of the balloon's basket into the snow at a place called Lifjell, about 100 kilometers southwest of Oslo. They were, however, unable to secure the balloon, which drifted away with the rest of the mail, six carrier pigeons, and their food. They had been in the balloon for 14 hours, 45 minutes, covering almost 1,300 kilometers. Worn out from trying to find help, they passed the night in a forest cabin and at dawn on November 26 they headed for the glimmers of light in the distance. Only when they were found by the Strand brothers in a temporarily empty shack, did Rolier and Bezier realize that they were in Norway.

Following train and sled journeys – punctuated by a rapturous public reception at every stop – they reached the capital, Christiania (modern-day Oslo), on Monday, November 29 and went directly to the French consulate to pass on General Trochu's encoded message for transmission to Minister Gambetta. Although immediately sent on by cable and telegraph, via Great Britain, the dispatch, dated November, 24,

did not reach Gambetta until November 30, two days after Trochu had begun his break from Paris.

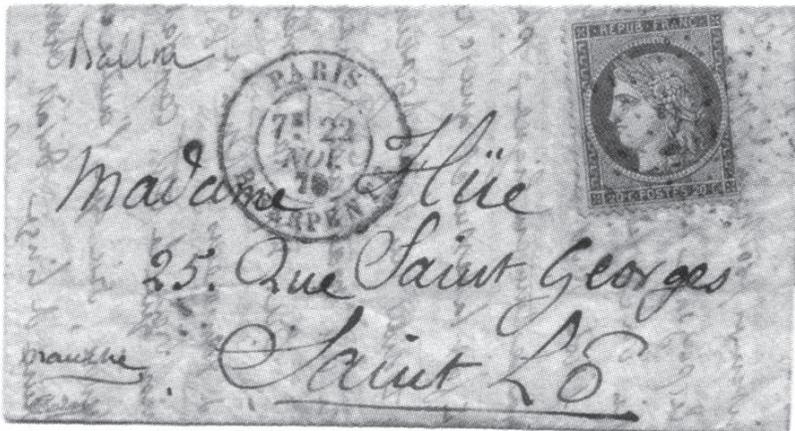
Meanwhile, the large mailbag had been retrieved from the sea on November 27 by fishermen from the Mandal area and, having been dried off with blotting paper from a Mandal bookshop, the French consul in Christiania was informed. He had the mail immediately sent on to him; it was placed on a boat for Scotland on November 28. Thereafter, it was sent on to London where it was distributed after December 2. It is known in philatelic circles as "Mandal Mail."

The balloon itself, with its basket intact, was found on Friday, November 25, on a hillside about 80 kilometers from its first landing, near Tunet farm. The remaining post from this salvaged balloon is known as "Tunet Mail." The balloon was put on display and used for fundraising on behalf of wounded French soldiers. After more enthusiastic receptions, Rolier and Bezier set off for France, reaching Tours on December 8, via London, Southampton, and Saint Malo.

Mail on the Ville d'Orléans

Not surprisingly there is considerable philatelic interest in the material emanating from the "Ville d'Orléans." There is a considerable variety of such items, including editions of the "Lettres-Journaux," that, like the entires, were also printed on especially thin paper. Edition 10 of the "Gazette des Absents" and edition 8 of "La Dépêche-Ballon" were both flown. There were also a number of letters given directly to the captain and which bear the florid cachet of the Company of Aerostiers, some in blue. These "plis consignés" were found only in the sack jettisoned into the sea. Letters to foreign destinations, in Belgium, Germany, Netherlands, Turkey, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom are also known.





Cover carried by the Ville d'Orleans from Paris. The cover sold for SEK 2,200 plus commission at the April 2, 2005 Philippa Auctions.

The curious circumstances of the flight of the “Ville d’Orleans” also produced two categories of items, cataloged separately as “accidenté,” i.e., recovered from the sea, and “non-accidenté,” or normal mail, though it is stretching the latter definition somewhat to include mail recovered from a crashed balloon. Generally, “accidenté” items are cataloged at much higher levels than “non-accidenté” items.

“Ordinary” items, from the sack found in the wreckage of the balloon and with a destination address in France, currently catalog at around €700; similarly, items from the sack recovered from the sea are valued at approximately four times higher. Items that include the “lettres-journaux” are triple the value of the ordinary letters, and the letters given directly to the captain are cataloged at €20,000 to €30,000 by the Marianne catalog of Paris expert Jean-François Brun.

To identify mail from the “Ville d’Orléans,” look for Paris departure date stamps between November 20-24, 1870. Mail from the sack dumped in the sea has an en route 2 December 1870 London date stamp. Items from all the sacks bear arrival date stamps between December 6-23 (apart from items with a final destination of London, which have arrival date stamps between December 2-12).

In the final article before his death in December, 2004, prominent postal historian Ernst Cohn, who had informed and entertained many of us over the years with his series of books and articles on balloon mail, drew attention to the little medals made from parts of Rolier’s lamp and sold to aid wounded French soldiers. Cohn had come across a certificate recently sold for €506, which purports to be personally signed by Rolier and which bears one of the medals. Cohn’s final judgment on the item was that it was suspicious but that he “could find no reason to doubt its authenticity.”

It is perhaps typical of this remarkable story that items related to it turn up on the market 130 years later. The “Ville d’Orléans” is a fascinating link between French and Scandinavian philately and clearly all of us need to be on the look-out for material connected with this unique balloon flight. ■

(The writer, whose specialty is the philately of France, is a former British Member of Parliament and has more than 40 years experience at all levels with the Liberal Party organization in the United Kingdom.)

References:

- Cohn, Ernst M., *The Flight of the Ville d’Orléans*, Collectors Club of Chicago, 1978.
Heyd, Günther, *Paris par Moulins: 1870/71*, A. A. Forlaget A/S, 1969
Lhéritier, Gérard, *Ballons Montes et Boules de Moulins*, Aristophil, Paris, May 2000.
Chaintrier, Louis A., *Balloon Post of the Siege of Paris, 1870-71*, American Air Mail Society, Washington DC, 1976.
Cohn, Ernst M., “Air Mail to Norway—1870,” *The Posthorn*, October, 1954.
Cohn, Ernst M., “The Paris-Norway Mail Flight of 1870,” *The Florida Philatelist*, 1979.
Cohn, Ernst M., and Cappart, Hubert, “Nine Days in the Siege of Paris,” *The Airpost Journal*, May, 1974.