

# Finally – its Discovery in 1997

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## The 1933 Newfoundland Balbo Airmail First Day Cover

John M. Walsh

Much has been written about General Italo Balbo and his fleet of twenty-four airplanes. The purpose of their ambitious endeavour was to show the Italian flag and promote Italy by flying from Italy to the United States to attend the Chicago Worlds Fair of 1933, "The Century of Progress." In July 1933 the "Armada" as it was called, flew from Italy to Holland, then to Ireland, Iceland, Newfoundland, New Brunswick, Quebec and on to Chicago. The return was *via* New York City to Shediac, New Brunswick, to Shoal Harbour, Newfoundland, then on to the Azores and Italy.

While the Armada was on its way to Newfoundland, the government made a deal with General Balbo to have a special mail carried to Rome, Italy, and a new overprinted stamp for Newfoundland was created. What follows is a search for the date of the first day cover for this flight. A surprise is in store.

The following items are news releases from The St. John's Evening Telegram of July 1933 on the day and from the page indicated. The days and/or dates and other information in parentheses have been added by me to assist the reader.

### **TUESDAY July 18, 1933; St. John's Evening Telegram, pg. 4.**

"Special train to Clarenville. Balbo expected Tuesday next (July 25). Newfoundland Railway to send special train to Clarenville for visitors to meet Italian Armada en route home from Chicago Worlds Fair on or about Tuesday next (July 25). Expected 300 people will avail. More to follow from Railway on Wednesday July 19."

### **WEDNESDAY July 19, 1933; St. John's Evening Telegram, pg. 3.**

"Balbo will probably start return flight from New York to Italy via Azores on Saturday (July 22). Will leave Chicago to go to New York tomorrow (Thursday July 20)."

### **Advertisement placed by Newfoundland Railway pg. 8.**

**NEWFOUNDLAND RAILWAY**

For visitors of Italian Air Fleet - Special train service St. John's to Clarenville July 26 ( Wednesday ). Round trip fare \$ 4.35.

Latest advice indicates Italian Fleet arrival at Clarenville will be Wednesday July 26th. A train will leave St. John's 9 a.m. arrive Clarenville 2 p.m. Leave Clarenville 6 p.m. arrive St. John's 1130 p.m. Booking immediately. No dining car."

### **THURSDAY July 20, 1933; St. John's Evening Telegram, pg. 14.**

#### **Advertisement placed by Newfoundland Railway:**

"July 25 or 26 whichever date Armada arrives Special train leaves St. John's 9 a.m. and arrives Clarenville 2 p.m. Leaves Clarenville 6 p.m. and arrives St. John's 1130 p.m. Price \$4.35 round trip."

**FRIDAY July 21, 1933; St. John's Evening Telegram, pg. 6.**

"Italian yacht *ALICE* arrived Clarenville last night (Thursday July 20) at 850 p.m. She is the supply ship to the Italian Armada."

On pg. 14 the advertisement for Newfoundland Railway was still running.

**SATURDAY July 22, 1933; St. John's Evening Telegram, pg. 4.**

"Provided Italian air planes take off from New York on Monday (July 24) a special train with Government representatives will leave here (St. John's) on the same morning (Monday July 24) at 10 a.m. for Clarenville. The train will be made up of the private car *TERRA NOVA*, two sleeping cars, diner and baggage car. The train for citizens which will be composed of day coaches will leave for Clarenville on Tuesday (July 25). This is dependent on the fleet arriving on Monday (July 24). While on the train the number of meals needed will be relayed to Clarenville in advance of arrival of the citizens train. (i.e., two trains being used).

**Advertisement for Newfoundland Railway pg 14.**

"Providing Balbo arrives Clarenville on Monday evening July 24th, the Railway will operate excursion Tuesday (July 25). Definite advice from Clarenville says rooms and lunches are prepared for any number of visitors."

**MONDAY July 24, 1933; St. John's Evening Telegram, pg. 1.**

a notice:

**NOTICE**

An Air Mail has been arranged by the Italian Fleet on its return to Italy via Shoal Harbor. Special stamps for this Flight are provided and will be on sale at the General Post Office, 930 a.m. Monday July 24th. Price \$ 4.50. Mail will close at 8 p.m. Monday ( July 24 ) but is subject to extension in event of planes being delayed.

**FURTHER NOTICE**

The time for closing mail for dispatch per Italian Flight has been extended from 8 p.m. Monday July 24 to an indefinite time, pending further advice re movement of fleet and may be closed without further notice.

W.C. Winsor  
Minister Posts & Telegraphs  
General Post Office  
July 24th, 1933.

[July 24 1 i ]

**pg 3.**

"New York July 23 it was announced that the Balbo Armada will start return flight at 11 a.m. Monday ( July 24 ) morning. The exact route will be determined when the planes reach Newfoundland."

**pg 4.**

"Through the courtesy of the Anglo, the Evening Telegram learns that the return flight from New York to Italy via Shoal Harbor which was to start today (Monday July 24) had to be delayed owing to weather conditions along Maine seaboard and over Grand Banks. It is possible the squadron may leave this evening (Monday July 24) and proceed as far as Nova Scotia. As a result the Government Special Train and its party which was to leave at 10 a.m. this morning (Monday July 24) for Shoal Harbor was called off.

"The sale of the Italian flight airmail stamps at the General Post Office today (July 24) is not as brisk as anticipated due no doubt to the charge of \$4.50 for each stamp. A large number of the stamps have been sold to foreign dealers. Their orders having been cabled to the department. The reason for the extraordinary charge is that the Italian Government stipulated that if mail was dispatched the cost would be \$3.75 for each stamped cover forwarded.

"The Italian submarines that arrived back in port (St. John's) on Saturday (July 22) and are berthed at Furness Withy pier. Probably will sail in next day or two.

"A letter by a Stamp Collector asks if the remaining stamps used to make the Balbo surcharged stamp will be destroyed so that no counterfeits could occur (this destruction was not done)."

**pg. 10 Advertisement for Newfoundland Railway:**

"Special for Clarenville now scheduled for 9 a.m. Wednesday (July 26). Latest advice indicates arrival Air Fleet tomorrow (Tuesday July 25). Special train will leave St. John's 9 a.m. Wednesday, back to St. John's at 1130 p.m. Wednesday night (July 26)."

**TUESDAY July 25, 1933; St. John's Evening Telegram, pg. 4.**

"Up to noon Tuesday July 25, 5500 of the Italian airmail stamp issue had been sold at the G.P.O. The letters mailed up to noon numbered about 700 but it is expected this will be increased by an extra 300 before the mail closes this evening (July 25). The mail to Shoal Harbor will be forwarded by the Government Train which will leave the station at 11 p.m. tonight (July 25).

"The Evening Telegram was advised by Postal Telegraphs and the Anglo American Telegraph Co. that Balbo had boarded his plane 845 a.m. this morning (Tuesday, July 25) Eastern Standard Time at New York and that everything was in readiness to start for Shediac N.B.

"Commercial Cable Co. gave the Evening Telegram information that the Armada had taken off at 900 a.m. EST or 1130 a.m. Newfoundland time. It is likely that Balbo will decide to remain at Shediac N.B. tonight (Tuesday July 25) and start for Shoal Harbor tomorrow morning (Wednesday July 26).

"Airmail for Italian flight closed this afternoon (Tuesday July 25). The Special Train carrying the Government officials and Editors of the Daily News and Evening Telegram and their wives will be leaving (St. John's) about midnight (Tuesday July 25)."

**pg. 12. Advertisement for Newfoundland Railway**

"The departure of special St. John's to Clarenville definitely deferred until 9 a.m. Thursday (July 27).

**WEDNESDAY July 26, 1933; St. John's Evening Telegram, pg. 3.**

**Received via Reuters New York July 25:**

"Balbo departed New York 9 a.m. EST to hop to Shediac N.B. The fleet was to be in the air (air borne) in 17 minutes. They will remain at Shediac a few days. Balbo then will decide to take northern or southern route over the Atlantic.

**pg 4. PEPYS column .**

July 25 - PEPYS:

"Rose at 6 a.m. and went to Water Street and meeting Capt. Winsor, that is Minister of Posts, to talk with him concerning the mail that will be sent by the Italian air shippes and he tells me how the Italians do ask \$3.60 a letter for each one they take which seems a mighty high price to pay. But there will be a goodly profit for the Post Office being that there are not like to be more than 2000 letters carried and being that there are 8000 special stamps the 6000 that are left will bring \$27000 which is a pretty windfall."

**pg. 4**

"Balbo Armada which as stated in yesterdays (Tuesday July 25) issue left New York at 1135 a.m. Newfoundland time arrived at Shediac 520 p.m. yesterday (Tuesday July 25) and according to schedule will leave Shediac today (Wednesday July 26) for Shoal Harbor.

"A Government Special Train left St. John's 1120 p.m. last night (Tuesday July 25) for Shoal Harbor where an official welcome will be extended to Balbo and the fleet. This special (train) arrived Shoal Harbor at 955 a.m. this morning (Wednesday July 26).

"Arrangements made by Postal Telegraphs Dept. to have all offices report at early hour this morning and remain on continuous duty to give info on progress of the Armada. Flight from Shediac N.B. to Shoal Harbor will take about five hours and the Newfoundland route will be via St. Georges, Grand Lake, Indian Lake, Exploits Valley and Gander Valley.

"The special mail forwarded to Italy by the Armada was despatched to Shoal Harbor by the Special (Government) train last night (Tuesday July 25). Only 890 letters were sent on this historic flight.

**pg 5.**

"Shoal Harbor presents a remarkable scene of animation with hundreds present, including boats. Mooring buoys extend from Shoal Harbor to Clarenville. The *ALICE* lies by the pier. Buzz in air when it was announced that the planes took off at 1010 (a.m. from Shediac). Left Shediac 1025 a.m. due 330 p.m. today (Wednesday July 26).

"According to messages to cable companies the Italian Air Fleet left Shediac for Shoal Harbor 1010 a.m. today Newfoundland time (Wednesday July 26) and is due to arrive Shoal Harbor about 330 p.m. this afternoon ( Wednesday July 26 ).

**pg 8. Advertisement for Newfoundland Railway;**

"Subject to arrival of Air Fleet today, Special (citizens) train to leave St. John's 9 a.m. tomorrow Thursday July 27. Return tomorrow night 1130 p.m.

**THURSDAY July 27, 1933; St. John's Evening Telegram, pg. 4.**

"Balbo Armada landed 2 10 p.m. yesterday (Wednesday July 26). Special train arrived that morning (Wednesday July 26) from St. John's. Just before 2 p.m. planes came into sight. When all moored Balbo came ashore. Will remain at Shoal Harbor on Thursday (July 27) to await last of planes due from PEI in the morning (Thursday July 27). Expected to take off on Friday (July 28) en route to Valentia Ireland. Refuelling began soon after arrival. Imperial Oil supervising. The late plane from PEI arrived Clarenville at 1220 p.m. today. Refuelling of Armada started 130 p.m. today (Thursday July 27).

**FRIDAY July 28, 1933; St. John's Evening Telegram, pg. 4.**

"Heavy Atlantic storm likely to delay Balbo return flight across Atlantic.

**Conclusion:**

With these articles from the St. John's Evening Telegram, the status of the Newfoundland portion of the Balbo Armada flight can be studied to determine the correct date for the Balbo Air Mail issue first day cover. The air mail stamp issue itself was released to the public on Monday, July 24, 1933. It was issued to pay for mail carried by the Italian Armada back to Italy.

As the exact date for the start of this flight from Shoal Harbor, Newfoundland was in doubt, the mail was held in St. John's until a definite date could be determined. From the Evening Telegram for Tuesday July 25 it is known that the Balbo Armada left New York for Shediac, N.B. with arrival in Shoal Harbor, Newfoundland to be on Wednesday July 26. It was also announced that mail closed July 25 in the afternoon and that the Special Train carrying the Government Officials and newspaper editors was leaving St. John's station at 11 p.m. "tonight" (i.e., Tuesday July 25).

The next day (Wednesday July 26) the Evening Telegram states "A Government Special Train left St. John's 1120 p.m. last night Tuesday July 25 for Shoal Harbor . . . and that this special (train) arrived at Shoal Harbor at 955 a.m. this morning (Wednesday July 26)." Furthermore, "The Special mail forwarded to Italy by the Armada was despatched to Shoal Harbor by the Special (Government) train last night (Tuesday July 25)."

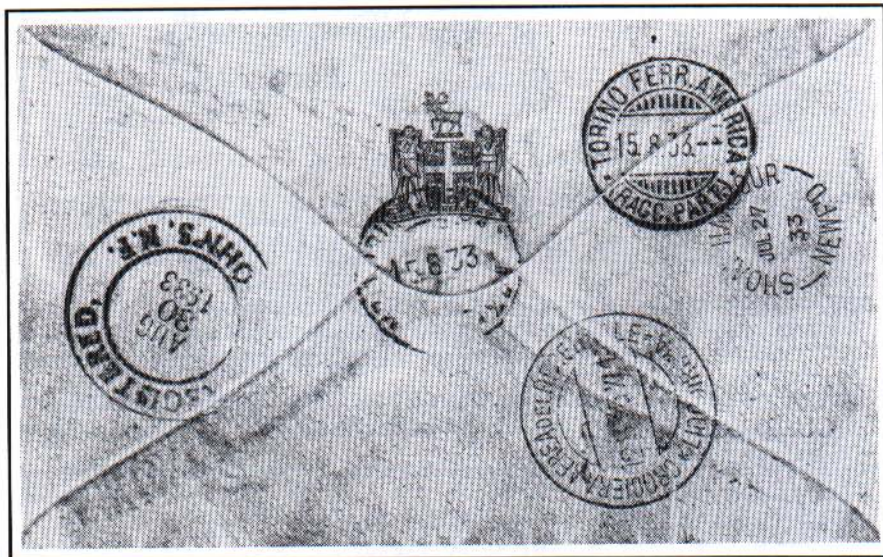
The mail being carried to Shoal Harbor via the Government Special Train was put aboard the train on July 25 for departure at 11:20 p.m. From Figure 1, it can be shown that the train's mail car clerk cancelled mail going west out of St. John's on July 25. From Figure 2 it can be seen that the cancelling device used was the main St. John's post office canceller. However, since the mail was put on the train prior to 11:20 p.m. July 25, the bag of mail being sent to the Armada had to be precancelled at the main post office prior to July 26, 1933. Therefore the correct Balbo Airmail first day cover is July 25, 1933 not July 26 as is reported in the literature.

As with many planned events, changes occurred. The Balbo flight was further delayed until August 8. However, events after July 26 are not germane to this particular study.

Figure 1: Balbo Cover Cancelled July 25, 1933. Front



Back



From these first hand accounts, as recorded and reported by newspaper reporters, from The Evening Telegram of the day, it is shown that the a conflict of information contained in previous reference books can be resolved.

In Boggs [1] the arrival date at Shoal Harbor, Newfoundland is stated as July 28, 1933. Boggs states 7984 correctly printed stamps and 8 inverted and 8 imperforate stamps were issued. This gives a total of 8000 stamps. How any imperforate stamps were made is beyond ones comprehension as the stamp being overprinted was already in use and was perforated.

From Dalwick and Harmer [2] the quantities given are "8040 (2010 blocks) stamps with 40 stamps being defective and were destroyed so that 8000 copies were actually issued." They also report that General Balbo refused to fly any mail at less than \$3.75 per letter. This is contrary to the newspaper report of \$3.60 attributed to Capt. Winsor, Minister of Posts. They further state that after the return of the armada back to Shoal Harbour on July 28, bad weather precluded the departure until August 8. This statement is correct since several attempts were made to leave after July 26. Also stated is that the special mail from Newfoundland was made up, postmarked and each cover numbered on face at St. John's on July 26, while the Shoal Harbour cancellation was added the following day (July 27). The featured cover shows this to be somewhat incorrect.

Figure 2: Balbo Cover Cancelled July 26, 1933



In Lowe [3] the information as to flight arrival is identical to Boggs. However the quantity printed is given as 8040 stamps of which 40 were defective and destroyed. Lowe

reports that 8 stamps were inverted and 8 stamps of the 10¢ 1933 Labrador issue were surcharged. Whether these separately recorded 16 stamps were part of the 40 destroyed is not clearly stated.

The question as to whether July 25 is a true First Day of Issue can be answered in that no July 24 dated cover has surfaced to date. The Post Office didn't cancel the large face value stamp prior to knowing when the Balbo flight would arrive in Newfoundland, and only did so upon learning the arrival date. The Post Office despatched the special mail for the flight *via* a special train to Clarendville. It is known that the cancellation device is as shown in Figure 1, i.e., the rail TPO cancel, while Figure 2 shows the main post office cancel device which had to be applied before the train left at 11:20 p.m., July 25, 1933.

### References

- [1] Boggs, W.S., "The Postage Stamps and Postal History of Newfoundland", Chambers Publishing Company, Kalamazoo, 1942, pg. 157.
- [2] Dalwick, R.E.R. and Harmer, C.H.C., "Newfoundland Air Mails 1919 - 1939", C.F. Hodgson & Son, Ltd., London, 1953, pg. 157.
- [3] Lowe, R., "The Encyclopaedia of British Empire Postage Stamps 1639 - 1952. Volume V, The Empire in North America, Robson Lowe Ltd., London, 1973, pg. 522.



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