

Vatican Mail on the *Graf Zeppelin's* Return from Rome

TEXT BY DANIEL A. PIAZZA—DPIAZZA3@VERIZON.NET

COVERS FROM THE COLLECTION OF REV. EDWARD J. MULLOWNEY, SSJ

On May 29, 1933, Nazi Reichsminister of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda Joseph Goebbels departed for Rome by train. His mission was to cement ties with Mussolini and make overtures toward a concordat between the Holy See and the Reich. Perhaps to ensure that Goebbels' visit captured Italy's attention, the German LZ127—*Graf Zeppelin*—followed him to Rome. Departing Friedrichshafen shortly after midnight on May 29, the *Graf* arrived at Ciampino Airfield at 4:30 in the afternoon. It carried Italian dignitaries and some covers on an aerial tour over Rome (known to collectors as the *volo circolare*), then began the return trip to Germany (the *volo di ritorno*) at about 7:30 p.m.¹

Background of Vatican zeppelin mail

Vatican mail had been accepted on *Graf Zeppelin* flights since 1930. Such covers from 1930 and '31 are almost always triple franked with Vatican stamps to pay the basic letter rate; Italian stamps to pay for airmail service; and German stamps to pay the zeppelin fee (see Fig. 1).²

These rules were in flux during 1932–33. Triple franking ended with the South American flight in March '32, for which airmail and zeppelin fees could both be paid by Italian stamps. Then, starting with the South American flight in April '32, Vatican-only franking was permitted (see Fig. 2). For the Rome flight, mixed frankings of Vatican regular postage and Italian airmail stamps were again required.³

Return leg of the Rome flight

Most Vatican mail carried on the return leg of the Rome



▲ Fig. 2: A lovely Vatican solo franking from the sixth South American flight of 1932. A £10 stamp pays the Vatican letter rate and registration fee; Italian airmail fee; and German zeppelin fee.

Flight carries the large round flight cachet (in varying shades of blue and green) applied by the Italian post office as well as an aqua straightline A FRIEDRICHSHAFEN auxiliary marking applied by the Vatican.

Postmarks used include the standard Vatican circular date stamp (CDS) to cancel Vatican postage; an Italian CDS (two types known) and a machine slogan cancel used to obliterate the Italian airmail stamps; and a round CDS in green, dated 30 May 1933, that indicates receipt in Friedrichshafen. Less commonly encountered is the green machine slogan applied to some covers at Friedrichshafen.

Vatican covers bearing the proper cachet, but franked with the Gardens and Medallions series issued on May 31 and cancelled on that date, were not actually flown. Nor were cacheted covers with a May 30 Italian machine cancel.⁴

Endnotes

¹ The itinerary is given in greater detail in E. Violino, *Catalogo degli Aerogrammi Zeppelin* (Florence, Italy: G. Orlandini, 1971), p. 45.

² The exceptions are foreign flights that had specially-issued stamps to pay both airmail and zeppelin fees, such as the 1931 Liechtenstein flight. These typically do not bear Italian airmail postage.

³ Some philatelists (notably Violino, *op. cit.*) have asserted that these changes proceeded from agreements between the postal administrations involved and the Zeppelin company. However, no one has been able to locate these agreements. In any event, the rules were not strictly enforced. From 1932 onward, technically improper frankings continued to be accepted if the total face value was correct. In short, the Zeppelin company was not picky so long as they got their money.

⁴ Wilcsek, Bob. "Unflown Mail from 1933 Romfahrt." *Zeppelin Post Journal* 2:2 (Summer 2008), pp. 6-17.



▲ Fig. 1: The cover shown above, from the 1930 South American flight of the *Graf Zeppelin*, bears the triple franking typical of early Vatican zeppelin covers. A £2.50 Vatican stamp pays the double letter rate to destinations outside Italy; a £2 Italian stamp pays the airmail fee; and two German stamps pay the 8 reichsmark zeppelin fee. The signature at far left is that of Hugo Eckener.

Vatican Covers from the Return Leg

The Collection of Rev.



Shown at 75%

▲ Fig. 3: Marked for a fictitious mail-drop over Leghorn (Livorno) that was never on the itinerary for the return flight, this card was instead received in Friedrichshafen on May 30, 1933. It is franked at £3.25, which equals the 25 centesimi Vatican postcard rate to Italy plus the £3 fee for dispatch by zeppelin to Europe. A scarce Vatican-only franking for this flight that was technically invalid but accepted anyway.



▲ Fig. 4: This cover was properly franked to pay the £1.25 foreign letter rate plus the Italian zeppelin stamp to pay the zeppelin fee. Shown below the cover are the backstamp and the Italian zeppelin cancel applied on arrival at Friedrichshafen. The circular cancel applied at Rome before dispatch, dated May 29, 1933, and the time slug (5:00-6:00 p.m.) confirm the flight.



Shown at 75%

▲ Fig. 8: Properly franked with Vatican postage totaling £2.25 (to pay the 75 centesimi foreign postcard rate plus the £1.50 foreign registry fee) and the £3 Italian zeppelin stamp to pay the zeppelin fee for postcards addressed to Europe. The zeppelin stamp is cancelled with an Italian *Posta Aerea Zeppelin* CDS rather than the machine slogan cancel.



▲ Fig. 7: The £3 and £5 low values of the April 24, 1933 series of *Posta Aerea Zeppelin* postcards to Europe and letters to Europe, respectively, were valid only for the Rome flight. Usages of the four high value covers each franked with a different value of the series.

g of the *Graf Zeppelin's* Rome Flight: Edward J. Mallowney



Shown at 75%



Shown at 75%

▲ Fig. 5: This postcard was marked for a scheduled mail-drop over Naples that occurred over Nettuno instead. The lack of a Naples receiving mark and the presence of the green CDs indicating receipt in Friedrichshafen indicate that it missed the drop. Like the card in Fig. 1, it is an improper but tolerated Vatican-only franking at the 25 centesimi + £3 rate for Rome flight postcards addressed to Europe. Not pictured is the Italian machine slogan cancel on reverse, identical to the one in Fig. 3, that proves the cover was flown.

with Vatican postage totaling £2.75 (to £1.50 foreign registry fee) and the £5 n fee for letters addressed to Europe. ps: the uncommon green machine slo-shafafen and the black machine slogan The date of this Italian cancel (May 29) n that the cover was actually flown.



1933 Italian airmail set (C42-43) are commonly found *lir's* Rome flight. They paid the zeppelin fees for y. The entire series consisted of six stamps that were values are rare, and only five complete sets of six s, are known.



Shown at 75%

▲ Fig. 6: This postcard was endorsed for a maildrop over Barcelona, Spain during the second South American flight of 1933, which began on June 3. (The A BARCELONA marking is visible between the airmail etiquette and the registry label.) It was carried on the return leg of the Rome flight in a sealed mailbag and so did not receive the customary green arrival postmark at Friedrichshafen or the red cachet for the Barcelona maildrop. It departed with the *Graf Zeppelin* on June 3 and was properly dropped over Barcelona, where it received the black, octagonal Barcelona registered mail marking at upper left.